

# Intimate Strangers...

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Making the Connection with Respondents and Musings on What Happens Afterwards

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*"I have always depended on the kindness of strangers"*

– Blanche DuBois' final words in *Tennessee Williams'*

*A Streetcar Named Desire (1947)*

**E**ight strangers walk into a cold, impersonal room, sit down around a table and are told that the proceedings are being recorded. We tell them we want their honest opinions — what they candidly think about a brand or how they go about making purchasing decisions.

Amazing isn't it, that people are willing to give us this precious commodity of their time and (hopefully) their honesty? Of course we do pay them, but imagine if the tables were turned. How willing would you be to reveal your innermost secrets? Your habits, practices and attitudes? How you manage your money? How much fast food you eat? What your sleeping habits are?







I have often felt that the role of moderator is a precious trust. We convene a group of people to talk about issues that may be so deep and so personal that they may have never articulated their thoughts and feelings out loud before. How do we get them to open up to us? And do their lives change afterwards?

While I have wondered about these questions for years, some recent projects have brought them to the forefront for me.

Valerie, a well-educated, professional Chicago woman with Type 2 diabetes said she did not take her condition all that seriously for years. She was sloppy about following her diet, exercise and medication until diabetes got the upper hand, damaging her kidneys so badly that she was forced to go on dialysis. Somehow, she manages to take the thrice-weekly treatments and continue her work and family responsibilities. All eyes were on Valerie as she told her story, and I could see each and every person empathizing with her pain and

reflecting on their own situations. Over the course of the next 90 minutes, several participants pledged out loud to do a better job with their own compliance in order to try to stave off her plight. As respondents picked up their belongings and left the focus room, several reached out to her and wished her well. A few embraced her, and almost every participant came up to me and thanked me for facilitating this important conversation.

Mary and Jack, a middle-aged couple from suburban New Jersey, are absolutely devoted to each other. They talk and touch in a delightful way, like teenagers in love. But they have a problem in the relationship that they have not dealt with before. Mary has a very hard time sleeping, and Jack's snoring and staying up late to watch TV in the bedroom are interfering with her ability to get the rest she needs for her physically demanding job as a kindergarten teacher. We researchers sit in the kitchen as she tells us the story from her perspective, and then

we walk through the living room, bathroom and into the bedroom as both she and Jack show us how they prepare for bed. No, they don't undress before us, but they role-play every activity. At the end of three very intimate hours with them, Mary declares that she feels relieved, as though she has talked to her priest confessor, because she has never been able to say these things to her husband before.

Cindy, a working mom of three, talks about mealtime dynamics in her household. She is overworked and overstressed, and she invariably gives in to what the kids want when dinnertime comes around. A sad expression steals over her face as she leans into the group and begins to speak almost in a whisper: "I know I'm really a bad mother because I just don't have the time or energy to cook for my kids, and we end up eating out or getting take-out five to six times a week."

Newlywed Sherri participates in an in-home use test for a new cooking tool. In the follow-up focus group, she tells us that she is a pretty inexperienced cook, but she likes the product and listens closely to the other women's stories about the food they prepared and the creative recipes they tried. We run a second, more extended home-use test and invite the women back to discuss their experiences. Sherri is enthusiastic as she recounts her summer cooking experiments and how pleased her husband was with her results. She begs for the product to be brought to market soon because it is so much better than other ways of cooking.

I will probably never know what has happened to Cindy, Mary and Jack, Valerie, Sherri or any of the others in my



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I have been reminded over and over at how people surprise me... macho young men who gobble fast food all the time were also tender-hearted dads caring about their kid's health and nutrition; a stiletto-heeled, gum-chewing tattooed woman was a brilliant contributor on telecommunications products; a leather-outfitted, Hells Angel-looking young man was clear and insightful in talking about his struggles with sinus headaches.

research, but I would like to think that some people's lives are changed for the better because they have been invited to talk honestly and we have listened fully.

We researchers know that there is artificiality in the focus room. Bringing people together in a group to talk about a topic can be fraught with potential distortions of memory, groupthink and a desire to please the moderator. Add to that the dynamics of more aggressive or articulate personalities in the same room as more reticent ones. And, of course, we and our clients bring biases,

assumptions and prejudices to the process, whether we recognize them or not. Even ethnographic studies may suffer from the observer effect. It is a tall order to get the stories and ferret out the "fact" from the interpretation. While volumes have been written about all these challenges, I will focus this article on how to "get" the stories in the first place.

I have no magic formula, but from 25 years of facilitating group discussions, I offer these seven tips to making a strong connection with respondents and to listening deeply to hear what they have to say.

### 1. Welcome participants to the "campfire."

The first minute is crucial in establishing rapport, comfort and safety. In my mind, I reframe the impersonal quality of the focus room and imagine that I have invited the group to sit around a campfire or a dinner table with me to have a conversation. I will often tell the respondents that that's just how I am visualizing the space we are occupying.

### 2. A conversation, not a quiz...

In my experience, the most powerful learning comes when we engage participants in a dialogue. Of course, it is directed so that we focus on the content that we are there to study, but it does not feel like a relentless list of questions. There's a more comfortable rhythm. We remind group members that we are here to learn from them and that all their responses are "right answers." If we are genuinely interested and curious about human nature and particularly the folks in front of us, they in turn are more likely to talk freely with us.



**3. It's not just the words...**

From the moment participants enter the focus room, I welcome them with my eye contact, gestures and tone of voice. And when I am working at a facility where I can greet them in the waiting room, I make a practice of going out to say hello. From their body language and willingness to engage me in eye contact, I can scope out right away how open people are likely to be in the group. Those folks who keep their noses buried in magazines are the ones I am more likely to "de-select" from seating. Ralph Waldo Emerson said it well: "The glance is natural magic. The mysterious communication established across a house between two entire strangers moves all the springs of wonder. It is the bodily symbol of identity with nature. We look into the eyes to know if this other form is another self, and the eyes will not lie but make a faithful confession what inhabitant is there."

**4. Set the bar high.**

I absolutely, positively expect the best from participants, and I will do everything in my power to set up the project and the environment to meet those expectations of success. I expect respondents to be fully engaged, to work, to learn from each other and to have some fun in the process. I tell them that from the get-go. I expect that each group will add another dimension to the learning that ultimately will bring value to my client in the decision-making process.

**5. Listen with an open mind and open heart.**

People have walked into groups who looked vastly different from what I thought I would see for a given topic. And



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some participants favor a style, a set of attitudes or behaviors, that are very different from my own. I have been reminded over and over at how people surprise me... macho young men who gobble fast food all the time were also tender-hearted dads caring about their kid's health and nutrition; a stiletto-heeled, gum-chewing tattooed woman was a brilliant contributor on telecommunications products; a leather-outfitted, Hells Angel-looking young man was clear and insightful in talking about his struggles with sinus headaches.

I am not saying it is easy to cast aside personal biases, but in this business, it is essential to try to be aware of them and not let them impinge on your "objective" role. I will admit that when a young automotive do-it-yourselfer nonchalantly mentioned that when she changes the oil in her car she just disposes of the old stuff down the drain, I wanted to thoroughly shake her and chastise her reckless actions. But I bit my tongue, took a breath and asked her to elaborate on why she does that, nodding my head and taking notes as she spoke, to signal my listening, and I invited the rest of the group to comment on their oil-disposal

practices. The client got some useful insights and ideas for product improvement, and the young woman may have learned from others that hers was not an environmentally acceptable practice.

### **6. Teach clients to practice this non-judgmental, empathetic listening.**

No matter how many focus groups a client has seen, it bears reminding people of their role as listeners and observers. We discuss listening tips and strategies in the briefing session before the first group begins, and we create a variety of exercises to help the client team stay engaged and get the most value from the groups. For some clients, that means having a "no laptop listening" rule and asking them to record their observations, insights, confirmations, surprises, implications, ideas or other such categories on individual colored post-its, which we put on flip charts and discuss in the client team debriefs. Another favorite exercise is to assign each team member a seat number ahead of time and have them "become one" with the person in that seat for at least 20 minutes of the group.

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### 7. Expect to be surprised.

Before the first group and at other junctures throughout a series, I reflect and ask my client team what they expect to hear from these participants. The act of “downloading” these expectations and assumptions is a freeing process that enables my clients and me to be better listeners, and it also helps later in pulling together the whole story of the research journey. We can see more clearly where our assumptions and expectations were “right on” and where we were off target.

We are often surprised and humbled by what we hear. Consumer reactions to a series of qualitative efforts for a new cooking product met with unexpected, off-the-charts enthusiasm. But a restaurant client who thought they had a firmly established platform of menu innovation got a sobering lesson. Participants in group after group told us that competitors held the leading edge in product newness and that the client’s brand was just about interchangeable with a number of others easily available to them.

As I bring a group discussion to conclusion, I thank participants once again for their time, their participation, their stories and their listening. And I would like to thank you, dear reader, for the same. 📧

*“It is when we try to grapple with another man’s intimate need that we perceive how incomprehensible, wavering, and misty are the beings that share with us the sight of the stars and the warmth of the sun.”*

– Joseph Conrad  
(1857–1924),  
novelist

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