



Laurie Tema-Lyn  
Practical Imagination Enterprises  
18 Losey Road, Ringoes, NJ 08551  
Office: 908-237-2246; Mobile: 908-399-9460  
[laurie@practical-imagination.com](mailto:laurie@practical-imagination.com)  
[www.practical-imagination.com](http://www.practical-imagination.com)  
Blog: <http://latema.wordpress.com>

**September 15, 2009**

## **Why Gen X & Y women don't cook...and why the guys do!**

### **Background**

An offhand comment from my 25-year old niece a few weeks ago was the inspiration for me to initiate my own research project. She proudly proclaimed that she “never cooks, doesn't want to learn, and there's no need to anymore.”

As one who thoroughly enjoys cooking and views it as much a creative experience as a necessary one for my health and wellness, I was distressed by her statement. Serendipitously, that week I had been in contact with Jennifer Dale of InsideHeads who was launching a new on-line, text-based focus group platform called **My Virtual Focus Room Facility<sup>SM</sup>**. Jennifer graciously offered me the opportunity to demo the platform without charge; my only out-of-pocket expenses would be for participants' incentives. I jumped at the offer to conduct two on-line focus groups with Jennifer's coaching and support.

Online focus groups offer a number of advantages, including fast turnaround, lower costs, geographic dispersion, candid and uninhibited discussion, more active participation (respondents do not need to "wait their turn"), and a transcript that is instantly available. Another key advantage is the ability of an unlimited number of staff to observe them, from anywhere in the world. Travel expenses are completely eliminated.

I was fascinated by the content and process learnings, details of which are below.

### **My Objectives:**

- To explore my hunch that many Gen X & Y women don't cook; however, many of their male counterparts do cook.
- To experiment with a new platform to evaluate whether I would recommend using it with clients.

## **Method**

- Five, 30-minute telephone IDI's (in depth interviews)—3 with women “non cooks” and 2 with men who cook
- Two, 80-minute on-line focus groups using *My Virtual Focus Group Facility*<sup>SM</sup> a web application from InsideHeads, branded with my name and company
- Group 1, with female non-cooks was conducted on Wednesday, August 26, 2009 at 7pm
- Group 2, male cooks, was conducted at 9pm that day
- Participants received an honorarium for their time

## **Participants**

- Represented a slice of Gen X& Y; all were born between 1973 & 1989
- They were a mix of singles living independently or with roommates, singles living with parents, and those who were married or living with a significant other
- There was a mix of those employed full-time, some were employed part-time, and others were students, some of which worked part time as well.
- There was geographic diversity across the US
- For recruiting purposes, “cooks” were defined as those who prepared a dinner and/ or lunch at home at least 3 times a week using a heat source beyond the microwave, e.g. the stovetop, oven or grill.

## **Discussion included**

- Warm up, introductions and, for the on-line groups, orientation to the platform
- A broad discussion about food regimens, typical patterns of eating at home, at restaurants or take out consumed at home
- A more focused discussion about cooking experiences, activities, responsibilities, attractions and barriers to cooking
- Family culture, traditions and learnings from childhood
- How cooks get ideas, what sources and media they pay attention to
- Perceptions and attitudes toward gender roles related to cooking and meal preparation
- Self-assessment of cooking skills and interest in learning and doing more cooking

## **Content Learnings**

### **Overall**

No surprise that everyone is busy, though the fact that this research was conducted during the end of summer reflected a more relaxed schedule for some participants. The participants were busy with work, school, taking care of their families--some had children, going to the gym or playing sports, spending time with friends and many more activities. The Gen X and Gen Y participants seemed more similar than dissimilar in their responses, with the exception that

the youngest participants—particularly those still in school—had more limited budgets. A few reported being on diets, several mentioned trying to eat healthy, and several said they pretty much eat whatever they want.

**The two biggest drivers for cooking at home (or wanting to learn to do more cooking): wanting to eat healthier and wanting to save money.**

For some this was a broad desire to eat healthy, balanced meals. A few try to minimize processed foods or avoid ingredients like high fructose corn syrup, or to avoid food allergens, like nuts.

A handful of participants have friends who are vegans or vegetarians so it's much easier for them to control what they eat by cooking for themselves. And cost concerns were certainly present: "The price of going out to eat is what drove me to learn how to cook."

**Emotionally, what does cooking do for the cook? There were several benefits beyond health and cost control, in their words...**

- "It gives you peace and harmony"
- "Takes you away from stresses"
- "I enjoy trying new flavors and tastes"
- "I like pushing my skill level to new heights"
- "There's a sense of accomplishment"
- "...A satisfaction of enjoying something I prepared, serving others and using creativity"
- From a male: "The opposite sex likes it!" And there was agreement that a male who cooks is even more attractive to female prospects!

**And there are significant barriers to cooking: lack of time, lack of knowledge, not pre-planning and having the right ingredients on hand, and lack of confidence were most commonly mentioned. In their words...**

- "Time, time, time!"
- "I just don't have the time or the patience!"
- "Just too exhausted after coming home from work"
- "More thinking than I'd like to do, especially when I'm tired."
- "The prep work"
- "Having the right ingredients on hand"
- "A lack of creativity"
- Having had dinner failures has led to a cycle of self-punishment and one woman was particularly hard on herself, "It's like a running joke in the family...it never comes out the way I wanted..."
- "I'm just not willing to make the effort to plan"
- "I'm bad with timing and get easily frustrated when things don't come out right."
- A woman respondent, "It's too much effort to make something worthwhile so I just head for the Frosted Flakes"

- Lacking in confidence showed up, more so among the women, and notably in areas like grilling (with the exception of the George Foreman grill.)
- “I can just go to Whole Foods or McCaffreys and bring home a great home-cooked meal”
- “Because of all the convenience foods and the places like Applebee’s or Chili’s it’s relatively easy to get a decent, inexpensive meal without having to cook at home.”

Given these barriers, dinners out at restaurants or from take-out were common among the women, and less so among the men. Dining out was driven primarily by not having groceries on hand or being too tired to cook.

But dining out is not just in response to a void, but a benefit as well. Gen X & Y are social beings, and dining out is often part of an evening with friends, especially during weekends. It’s also an opportunity to eat foods that are not cooked at home because they are too difficult to make, like ethnic foods. Favorite foods carried out were pizza, Chinese and Mexican food. Favorite foods enjoyed in sit-down restaurants were often foods that weren’t cooked at home like Sushi, seafood, and steak, although “All American”, casual restaurants and burger places were also mentioned as dining favorites. Eating out at quick, casual restaurants was done more frequently than sit-down and relax restaurants. For some, cost was prohibitive, so eating out was an infrequent luxury.

**For those who share the household with others, almost all have a process for sharing the work related to meal preparation.**

More often than not, the one who cooks is not the one who cleans up. Sometimes different components of a meal are assigned to different members of the household. Those who get to cook with others seemed to get more pleasure from the process. Two of the women interviewed were married to men who enjoyed cooking and were responsible for the lion’s-share of meal related tasks. These guys also looked at their roles as helping to broaden the palates of their spouses. The wives appreciated their good fortune (“my husband’s cooking is better and cheaper than going out to eat!”) and the men appreciated having receptive audiences for their creations.

**Where do Gen X & Y learn about cooking and get meal ideas?**

Rachel Ray was the hands down favorite, watched by several of the males and females. Interesting to note that while some were inspired by Rachel, they rarely implemented her recipes saying they went too fast to write them down and they aren’t posted on the website. Alton Brown, the Iron Chef and the Food Network were also mentioned, but without the same passion.

For specific recipe ideas, most go to the Internet, and just Google the type of food they are interested in eating that night. Others had favorite sites that they

turn to including food.com. Few participants could name any specific recipe books or magazines that they consulted with for food prep ideas. Friends, mom, and grand-mom played a role in giving pointers and recipes. One male respondent spoke at length of learning how to cook from his college days during which he and his dorm-mates took turns preparing food and learning from each other. There was a friendly competitive aspect to it.

Most everyone in the groups and IDIs said they had good models growing up. Mom was generally the more frequent cook, but Dad would have his turn as well. Some clearly learned how to cook pretty well from parents and carry forth family traditions and specific recipes. A few others were kept out of the kitchen -- the parent didn't want the kids around. Some of the participants had their own kids and were trying to teach them about eating well and participating in meal preparation.

### **Gender**

In this research more males than females were cooks, which was partly a function of the recruit. Of those who shared the household with women, most indicated that cooking was done by whoever had the time or inclination and it didn't seem to matter much if it was the male or female of the household. While there is not much of a stigma associated with a woman who doesn't cook or doesn't like to cook, a few of the women thought they would be perceived as lazy, and some males thought she would be seen as selfish unless she was a career woman. Even the females who fit into this category responded that it would be important to be able to do some cooking if they had children. Yet, "it's much less of a big deal now who does the cooking than in previous generations."

In these conversations it appeared that the guys were more into showing off their cooking skills and impressing others, but when the women cooked it was just to put a meal on the table for themselves or their family, and there was less a sense of pride or accomplishment.

If grilling is still more of a male domain, and seemingly enjoyed throughout most of the year, baking had the slight edge for women, although one male participant chafed at this since he loves to bake desserts. In general the men who were part of this study seemed experimental and liked to put their own spin on dishes even when following a recipe.

### **In asking participants to sum up their take on cooking these days, males and females agreed:**

- "This generation seems all about the fastest and easiest way to cook."  
"It's more about convenience."
- "People try to fit too much into their days now, so cooking is just less of a priority."

## **Net Out/ Possible Implications from the Research**

As a small study these results are only directional in nature. But this research confirms stories and comments that I've heard in food groups in the past several years. It seems that men are an important, and perhaps underappreciated, part of the food prep and cooking process. I'm struck with the fact that most every client I work with on food and cooking related products still targets the "Female head of household" as the primary recipient of advertising and communications. My bet is that some of companies are missing the boat if they don't reach out to learn more from and target the guys. Playing up that the man who cooks appeals to the opposite sex can make for some distinctive and fun ads!

Additionally there is clearly a need for more education that would help Gen X & Y—males and females—gain more mastery over the whole cooking process—including planning, shopping, preparing, cooking and cleaning up and help them utilize limited time more effectively, creatively and efficiently. Several participants said they craved knowing how to make "easy, healthy meals to prepare in under thirty minutes". I believe there is great potential here to be mined.

## **Process Learnings**

*My Virtual Focus Facility*<sup>SM</sup> from InsideHeads is fairly moderator friendly. With a bit of coaching, I was able to monitor the recruit (screened and selected from the InsideHeads Online Research Panel) and create and upload my discussion guide. Uploading my white board visuals was a bit trickier, but resolved in time. As I've moderated hundreds (if not thousands) of group discussions, this was relatively easy to do--a matter of releasing the questions from my preloaded guide at the appropriate time. There is a bit of a learning curve about how much time to allow for responses since the moderator lacks the visual cues as to whether a participant is actively thinking or typing responses. I was able to deviate from my guide, as group comments suggested different probes, or when I wanted to follow up on a participant's comments.

While this was all relatively easy to do, as one who is admittedly biased in favor of high touch, face-to-face research, there were aspects of the process that were less satisfying.

On-line groups are not a linear process. It's like being at a big family dinner party with everyone talking at once. Though I could scroll through and read all the comments (and then later review in the immediate transcripts), participants responded primarily to my probes and rarely reacted to or built on what other participants offered which would have been a natural part of a face-to-face exchange.

As with any qualitative research study the value of the data collected lies largely in the quality of the recruit. There were important learnings on the recruit process here. To keep costs down, recruiting efforts were limited to a small database, and resulted in inviting fewer than the recommended 25 to each group. The female

group had several unique problems. A male incorrectly entered our all-female group, and a woman from India joined because we had forgotten to specifically screen out international. We also had a person drop out of the discussion and one enter fairly late into the game. Jennifer took on the role of group administrator and was able to manage both situations privately while I continued moderating. Most of these problems could be avoided with more time built into the process between recruiting and conducting the group.

For example, I had placed reminder calls the afternoon of the group but I ended up mostly leaving messages. I was told to expect a 50% show-rate and approximately half did arrive on-time to participate. Next time I would make sure that the reconfirmation process took place two days ahead of time so that the likelihood of making verbal contact and personal commitment would have been increased. Additionally I would use the reminder calls as an opportunity to conduct a 'pre-interview' to further confirm screener qualifications and establish a rapport.

The actual experience of moderating was a bit jarring at first as it lacked the warmth and spontaneity that I experience during in-person research. As the discussion continued and I got more comfortable with the platform, I added more quick comments and new probes and departed somewhat from my pre-loaded discussion guide. Additionally the relative small number of people who were recruited and hence participated made for a slower rhythm than I would have expected, as I waited for respondents to answer my queries. I can now appreciate that a group of 15 would have been more dynamic and better suited to this method than a group of 8.

After the discussions were complete it was easy to download the list of participants, take care of incentive payments and pull the transcripts. I was pleasantly surprised as I found the transcripts to be more robust than my experience of the conversations during the process. It was easy to pull out lots of quotes.

My process net-out from the experience is that this approach has a place in a qualitative researcher's toolbox and will be more or less suited depending on the client, the topic, and the geographic diversity of desired respondents.

For more information on this study or our other work, please contact Laurie Tema-Lyn at 908-237-2246 or [laurie@practical-imagination.com](mailto:laurie@practical-imagination.com)