

Focus Groups vs. Quantitative Surveys

Should the Board rely on the supposed conclusions of 42 people to make policy decisions?

Should we ignore the results of a survey to which over 400 people responded if they contradict the conclusions of the focus groups?

Instead of focus groups, should we use data from well-designed quantitative surveys to make policy decisions?

(Yes, this is a little long, but I think (and hope) you will find it worth the time.....)

Under the purview of the Long Range Plan Committee, its chairman (Doug Frey) arranged for several focus groups to be held this past July. Over 180 invitations were sent to randomly selected individuals. Of those, 42 chose to attend. The group sessions were held and a report published on the web site. Several months ago, I suggested that people read the report, and I still recommend doing so. It can be found here: [Focus Group Report](#)

Subsequently, the Community Activities Committee was formed on August 29th and was *“invited by the POA Board to expand its horizons to promote community wide activities”*.

The minutes of its August 29th meeting stated; *“The idea sprang from the Focus Groups where the Comments included the desire to have more opportunities to meet other neighbors via community wide activities”*.

Now, let me explain why this statement raised questions in my mind.

The Focus Group Report does not necessarily come to this clear conclusion. I could find only one reference to this “desire” for more opportunities to meet neighbors, and it was in a long list of desires which included access to pools, parks, playgrounds, sidewalks and a community garden. Specifically, it said the following: *“There was also the desire to have the POA hold regular events for residents, including welcoming events for newcomers to the community.*

However, the report also covered the idea of “sense of community” and cited numerous positive and negative comments; along with reasons why it might be difficult to achieve a strong sense of community outside of our multiple, internal villages. The report concluded the following: *“The majority felt that it would be “pointless” to try to develop an overall community spirit.”*

I saw an obvious, stark conflict between those two conclusions. Between that and the fact that we were dealing with only 42 people, it led me to question the Focus Group process itself. So, I spoke with three people who have extensive working experience with market research and surveys. What I learned was somewhat eye-opening.

Everybody to whom I spoke said nobody should rely on focus groups to determine the prevalence of opinions or discern trends in a larger population. There are too many problems inherent in getting

people to talk in front of one another in a group setting. Among these problems, the three most significant were:

- A tendency to experience “groupthink”: In a group situation, people tend to think as a group; which, in turn, tends to blur individual opinions. Some participants might give a different opinion when privately polled on an individual basis. In addition, groupthink may tend to make people reluctant to express opinions for fear of going against what is perceived as “the group”.
- A tendency for dominant personalities to control and direct the group: Those with the biggest axes to grind can often take over the session, and others will refrain from disagreeing simply to avoid confrontation. The moderator will then assume that the entire group is in agreement and form erroneous conclusions. I spoke to a person in one of the three focus groups who said they were quite convinced that this happened several times in their group. Several forceful people with agendas tended to dominate the conversation while others mostly held back.
- Participant bias: When participants can choose to attend, there is a greater chance that more of them will have something to get off their chests in the way of complaints. Those that don’t attend (in this case, over 140 invitees) may have no complaints; but the moderator will never know. For example, I spoke to another focus group participant and was told of several participants who claimed they were misled by the original developer into believing they would have access to amenities such as playgrounds, pools and athletic facilities. They seemed to believe that their feeling of being misled was a problem that should be addressed by having the POA build or otherwise obtain access to amenities.

Rather than use focus groups, it appears that a large, individualized, quantitative survey is the best way to determine whether a view or opinion is widespread within a community. In other words, is the issue mentioned by enough people to warrant labeling the opinion as pervasive?

Once an issue has been identified as pervasive, focus groups can be used to delve into it more deeply and to obtain reactions to specific, potential programs designed to address the issue. In other words, correctly identify the problem first, and then use a focus group to see if a potential program might solve the problem. Alternatively, one person suggested that focus groups can be used to identify potential issues, but that this will only give an indication; which must then be further explored with quantitative survey methodologies to determine if it is pervasive within the larger community.

It appears our focus groups should not be used to determine the prevailing attitude of the entire community on any given issue. Quantitative surveys should be used for that purpose.

But what is most interesting is the fact that the POA actually did a quantitative survey earlier this year; but this seems to have been ignored. And looking at one aspect of that survey would seem to clearly illustrate why focus groups can be misleading.

The POA did a quantitative survey in January of this year; to which over 400 property owners responded. It asked the following question: “*Should additional amenities be considered if there would be additional costs involved?*” **Over 56% of the respondents answered “No”.**

Of those that answered “Yes” the majority expressed significant interest only in walking trails. In fact, using the two highest “importance levels” in the survey, the actual percentage of respondents interested in specific amenities was as follows:

Walking Trails:	36%
Swimming Pools:	18%
Fitness Facility:	17%
Playgrounds:	12%
Basketball Courts:	6%
Tennis Courts:	6%

And these low percentages were before any actual costs were considered.

The results of this survey were extremely clear. There was simply no prevailing opinion indicating a desire for amenities.

Now, at that point, one might logically conclude that, since there was no community wide demand for common area amenities, there would be no point in discussing amenities in focus groups.

However, our Focus Group Report repeatedly mentioned the desire for amenities such as parks, pools and playgrounds. More importantly, it concluded that the POA should look into providing such amenities. But there was no indication in the quantitative survey that amenities were desired or that the subject of amenities even warranted mention in a focus group.

This example seems to show why it is dangerous to rely on focus groups to quantify the prevalence of opinion on any given issue. Every experienced person to whom I spoke said it would be a mistake to use conclusions from focus groups in this manner.

And therein lies the problem. This Focus Group Report appears to have had a great impact on the Board, and it appears the Board has accepted its conclusions at face value. It’s almost as if the report is being cited as scientific support for the Board’s actions. It certainly appears to be the driving force behind the creation and funding of the new Community Activities Committee.

Here is another example. In responding to a resident’s concerns about the allocation of \$4,400 to this committee (and to help justify the expenditure), one director wrote the following: **“As a Board member I’m concerned about some of the feedback we received from recent focus group participants about friction between club members and non-club members.”**

That is an interesting point. Not only did the Focus Group Report refer to this friction, it boldly stated the following two conclusions:

“There was also consensus that there is “friction” between (country) club members and non-members that is detrimental to the overall goodwill and community spirit of Governors Club.”

“It was strongly recommended that the POA Board develop a long term solution to the issue to address the “animosity” that is currently festering.”

So, not only did the focus group moderator declare that there was a “consensus” on this point, there was a blanket statement that this issue needed to be addressed by the Board.

“Consensus” is a very strong term which, in this context, implies overwhelming agreement. The dangers of drawing any community “consensus” from group situations have already been made clear; which is why experienced market researchers will apparently not use such groups to form conclusions about community opinions.

Therefore, it seems strange that the Board would place so much emphasis and make decisions based on 42 people being polled in less than ideal circumstances.

At this point, what might make more sense is to take the themes revealed in the focus groups, such as the supposed friction between club members and non-club members, and do an anonymous, quantitative survey of the entire community to see if the opinion is widespread. You will get far more accurate and honest answers from an anonymous survey than you will in face-to-face group sessions.

For example, this survey could determine how many non-club members actually feel animosity towards club members; and vice versa. It is one thing for a person to acknowledge animosity exists in the community. It is quite another for that person to say they actually feel it. Knowing how many people feel the animosity is the more important figure. It might be a very small percentage within the community; but we won't know until we do a proper survey. That would be step one.

Then, assuming the percentage is significant, just as important would be determining the reasons why people might feel this animosity. Because understanding the “why” will help determine whether or not the POA is even capable of addressing the problem. And this is where the focus groups might be helpful. Assuming the number of affected people is significant (which would not be known without a quantitative survey), focus groups might be useful in obtaining opinions on what programs might work to address the issue. You never know. The results might be surprising. For example, it might be the case that only access to amenities will address the friction and that community wide social events will have little effect.

Bottom line, it seems that the information coming from these focus groups should be considered more carefully and not necessarily be used to justify policies and decisions. It is perfectly fair if Board members feel there is friction between club members and non-club members. Everybody is entitled to their opinion. But it does not seem appropriate to use the supposed “findings” of the Focus Group Report as scientific evidence to back up this view.

Frankly, I believe there are many people who feel that this is by no means a “pervasive” problem and who also believe that social events will do nothing to change those who claim to have these feelings of animosity. Perhaps we should have proper surveys done to determine if the supposed problem is large enough to warrant the Board's attention.