

Using Hypnosis in Focus Groups

Hal Goldberg explains the history of hypnosis and the benefits of using it in focus groups.

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Hypnosis is usually described as an altered state of consciousness, similar to sleep but more like daydreaming. As in sleep, the conscious mind recedes and the subconscious gains control. Hypnosis is also characterized by relaxed muscle tone, reduced blood pressure, slowed breathing rate, enhanced receptivity to suggestions, and increased access to subconscious feelings, ideas, and memories. To induce hypnosis, the subject is instructed to relax and concentrate on the hypnotist's voice, usually followed by closing their eyes and following the suggestions made by the hypnotist.

In hypnosis focus groups respondents will share their true emotions and feelings in connection with their beliefs and actions. We can also dig down beneath their emotional reactions to discover underlying premises.



Hypnosis was used by ancient peoples under the guise of sleep suggestions to help cure ills. Shamans and medicine men used it for purposes of control. The modern history of hypnosis can be traced to Friedrich Anton Mesmer, who presented his ideas in Vienna in 1776. Mesmer thought illnesses were caused by the bad distribution of “magnetic fluids” and that this could be “rebalanced” by magnetic forces. His patients would form a circle, hold hands, feel overpowered by what Mesmer considered “magnetism,” and undergo an intensive “corrective emotional experience” in a trance state. In France, a commission (that, interestingly enough, included Benjamin Franklin) could not find any basis for the foundations of Mesmer’s theories of magnetism, but they did find the results of his study to be related to imagination and suggestibility on the part of the patients.

The use of hypnosis gained ground in the early 19th century when John Elliotson, a surgeon in London, performed painless surgery after putting patients into a trance. In 1841, James Braid, a Scottish physician, found that the ability to go into a trance was within the subject, not the hypnotist. By the end of the 19th century, the French doctor Hippolyte Bernheim had treated more than 12,000 patients using hypnosis. The connection between hypnosis and memory was established in 1914 by Pierre Janet when he demonstrated that during the hypnotic state subjects could recall things they could not while awake.

Freud, a student of Bernheim, abandoned its use in the early 1900s in favor of his own form of psychoanalysis. The reason for this is now felt to be his misconceptions about hypnosis, as well as his own negative experiences using it with his patients. This put a pall over the use of hypnosis for the next 50 years. The use of hypnosis as a therapeutic technique, however, resurged mid-century as a result of the Korean War. Shell-shocked soldiers were treated using hypnosis by doctors who were looking for short-cut therapies. In 1958, the American Medical Association approved hypnosis as a medical technique. From then on, hypnosis has been used by doctors and dentists to reduce pain and by hypnotherapists to help people stop smoking, lose weight, and for many other reasons.

Introducing Hypnosis to Focus Groups

I began using hypnosis in focus groups in 1972. I had been moderating groups for about 10 years but found it difficult to overcome some problems in the focus group setting that still exist for many traditional focus groups. First, there was a problem with dominant respondents, who perhaps had strong opinions and could bully other respondents to their point of view. In the face of this, many shy respondents would hold back their own conflicting points of view. Secondly, respondents were not always able to remember key information, such as what they bought on their last shopping trip or the circumstances surrounding the first time they bought a particular brand. A third dilemma I faced was that, for whatever reason, respondents did not always seem to share their true opinions or feelings. Fourth, respondents always seemed to provide rational answers to questions and very little emotional content would surface in the groups. Lastly, I found that respondents were usually not able to come up with creative ideas or to brainstorm in a productive manner.

I had always been interested in hypnosis, and it struck me that perhaps by hypnotizing respondents I could solve some or all of the problems I encountered in focus groups. I completed a course in hypnosis and began experimenting with the technique.

Using Hypnosis in Focus Groups

We recruit respondents for the groups in the same manner as for traditional groups, using all the major focus group facilities around the country. Normally, the facilities will recruit from their own database, but they may also need to use a client-supplied list. During the screening interview we ask the respondents if they would be willing to participate in a focus group where they will be hypnotized. While many potential respondents are familiar with hypnosis, many other respondents may have questions about our reasons for using it. For this purpose we provide the recruiters with a list of FAQs about hypnosis and train them to answer respondents’ questions. On average, about 70% of the respondents who qualify for a study and who are told about the hypnosis agree to participate in a hypnosis focus group session.

The hypnosis process: During the first 30 minutes of the focus group, we discuss our

reasons again for using hypnosis and offer a chance for Q&A. Respondents then go through the hypnosis process as a group, which is basically a series of relaxation and deepening techniques. We want respondents to get in touch with their subconscious where their memories and emotions are stored. Respondents will usually have their eyes closed for most of the session, unless there is a need to have them open their eyes to watch a commercial or read an ad, for example. However, even when their eyes are open, they will remain hypnotized.

Eliminating dominant respondents: Even the most skilled moderator can have difficulties with a dominant respondent. The effort of trying to neutralize such a person can often send negative signals to others in the group. In a hypnosis focus group, the respondents have given the moderator permission to control the flow and content of the discussion. Therefore, even if the moderator cuts off a respondent's answer, no one is alienated or upset, and even the shyest respondent in the group will provide information and join the discussion.

Hypnosis as "truth serum": When respondents are hypnotized, their first instruction is to tell the truth because we only want completely honest answers. They are instructed not to tell

us things just because they think it might make us feel good, impress us, or enable them to look good in front of the other respondents. These instructions are similar to the ground rules that moderators use in traditional focus groups. However, the information to elicit is coming directly from their subconscious and we tell their conscious mind not to filter it. We also tell them that if they hear something from another respondent with which they agree or disagree, we want them to share that with us. In hypnosis focus groups there is no yea-saying.

Age regression, memory, and "imprinting": One of the most useful hypnosis techniques in focus groups is age regression. Age regression is a process whereby the respondent is able to return to an earlier event in their life and recall it. The reason this is possible is that our subconscious is like a computer hard drive that has stored information about every event, person, and thing we have experienced in our lives. When we are conscious, our minds prevent us from accessing all but the most important parts of our subconscious memory bank. In hypnosis, however, respondents can be directed to specific areas of their subconscious mind and retrieve hidden information. As an example, we may ask respondents to just go back to the last time they were shopping for a product, and then tell us what they were doing and why they were buying a particular brand. Some respondents may actually be able to relive the experience while others may only be able to provide enhanced recall of the events.

Perhaps one of the most important uses of age regression in hypnosis focus groups is to uncover product and brand imprints. Konrad Lorenz, an Austrian ethologist, invented the science of imprinting as it related to animal behavior. He found that for many animals their first experiences could create imprinted behavior that lasted for the remainder of their lives. Later research has demonstrated that humans have a sensitive period during which they are predisposed to learn a particular thing, and these first experiences can establish the pattern that may control our future behavior. As a result, respondents can be asked to tell us about the very first time they experienced a particular product or brand so we can learn about these impressions. Once we know the imprints, we can take them into account and build better design product and communication strategies.



Hypnosis and emotions: Respondents in traditional focus groups can be resistant to sharing emotional content during the discussion. This is not surprising considering they don't know the moderator, the other respondents, or the people observing behind the mirror. Respondents also want to appear rational and logical in their answers to questions. The idea of political correctness can affect their responses as well. From a brain function standpoint, this means respondents will tend to use their left brains more in focus groups, even if it is not their usual way of thinking or approaching a question. (The left brain is believed to be the center of language and objectivity: logic and reasoning. The right brain is usually thought of as the center of non-verbal activity and subjectivity: emotions, feelings, underlying beliefs, motivations, and intuitions.)

In hypnosis focus groups, respondents are, in essence, bypassing their analytic side. In the hypnotic state people can access their right brain functions more intensively, especially their ability to get in touch with their subconscious where emotions are stored. In hypnosis focus groups respondents will share their true emotions and feelings in connection with their beliefs and actions. We

can also dig down beneath their emotional reactions to find the premises underlying them.

Hypnosis and creativity: Hypnosis can help respondents generate truly creative ideas. The reason is that hypnosis reduces people's normal senses of reality and they become less inhibited. Respondents can be given instructions to brainstorm and come up with their most wild and crazy ideas without worrying about how others will respond. As a result, many more unconventional ideas will develop in hypnosis focus groups.

Hypnosis As a New Tool for Your Practice

The use of hypnosis in focus groups is now well-accepted by market researchers and account planners at many major companies and advertising agencies. Courses of instruction in hypnosis can be taken at many hypnosis training centers around the country. For course schedules, contact the National Guild of Hypnotists at (603) 429-9438, or the American Board of Hypnotherapy at (714) 261-6400.

Using hypnotism in focus groups can truly bring out a deeper level of understanding, with results that certainly lead to new and exciting ways to approach products and brands. 