Using Cross-Cultural Focus Groups as a Tool for Communication Campaign Design: An Example from Russia's Forest Project

Eric A. Abbott, Kate Gouverniuk, Ludmila Liamets, Tatyana Ukhanova

Abstract

Focus groups can be a useful tool when working on a cross-cultural communication project in which the communication specialist may have a very different cultural background than that of the target audience. Ten focus groups were used as a part of a large cross-cultural project to design a forest fire public awareness campaign for Russia's Far East and Siberia. Three of the focus groups were used to gain an in-depth understanding of forest behaviors that might pose a risk for forest fires. These groups also probed what members of the target audience believe would be reasonably safe behaviors. The remaining seven focus groups were used to test prototype campaign materials. This article offers practical advice on effective use of focus groups for any communicator involved in cross-cultural communication activities.

Introduction

Identifying key knowledge, attitudes and behaviors that will be understood by and effective with target audiences is a problem in all communication campaigns, but it is a special problem when working cross-culturally. In these cases, the knowledge, perceptions and behaviors of the communicator may be very different from those of the target group. Beginning in October 2000, the U.S. Agency for International Development began implementation of a five-year forest fire prevention campaign in Russia's Far East and Siberia. As a part of preparation for the campaign, baseline surveys were conducted, one in February 2001 of 1,000 residents in Khabarovsk of Russia's Far East, and a second in March 2002 in Krasnoyarsk (Siberia) to

provide general information about knowledge and attitudes relating to forest fires and the use of mass media in the region. However, such surveys are not adequate in providing an in-depth understanding of how people understand the causes and solutions for forest fires. For this reason, over a period of two years, 10 focus groups were used to better understand forest visitors' knowledge and attitudes about forest fires, and to pre-test campaign materials. The first three focus groups were designed to help the communication team learn how each of three target groups understand the problem of forest fires and their possible solutions. The remaining seven focus groups were used to evaluate specific graphic images and prototype messages. The goal was to use these focus groups as a key tool in improving cross-cultural understanding so that campaign messages would match the mental maps and behaviors of target audiences.

Use of Focus Groups in Cross-Cultural Settings

A focus group is a scientifically based research approach that seeks to obtain in-depth information from a group of 6-12 individuals on a very specific topic. As noted by Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) and Goldman (1962), focus groups are differentiated from other techniques by use of a group (a number of interacting individuals having a community of interest), depth (seeking information that is more profound than is usually accessible at the level of inter-personal relationships), interview (implying the presence of a moderator who uses the group as a device for eliciting information), and focus (implying that the session is limited to a small number of issues).

Morgan's 1996 review of focus groups found that they have been frequently used in communication campaigns involving specific cultural groups and international applications in developing countries (Morgan, 1996). Examples include American Indians (Shively, 1992), African American women (Jarrett, 1994), HIV/AIDS (Folch-Lyon, de la Maccorra, and Schearer, 1981; Joseph, Emmons, Kessler, Wortman, and O'Brien, 1984), fertility (Wolff, Knodel, and Sittitrai, 1993) and comparisons of black workers and white managers in South Africa (Harari and Beaty, 1991).

Focus groups are increasingly being used as a means of better understanding survey data also obtained from communication campaign projects (Schearer, 1981; Ward, Betrand, and Brown, 1991; Fern, 1982; Kitzinger, 1995; Borra and Earl, 2000). Morgan (1996) found that in 60 percent of cases where focus groups were used, they supplemented a survey or other research data. Morgan (1996) concludes: "The real strength of focus groups is not simply in exploring what people have to say, but in providing insights into the sources of complex behaviors and motivations."

Russia's forest fire prevention campaign fits these criteria for using focus groups very well. It was clear from the outset that the "Smokey the Bear" approach judged to be a success in the United States might include aspects useful in Russia, but that a wholesale translation of Smokey into Russian was very unlikely to be successful due to vastly different cultural, mass media, political and economic factors. For example, most Americans visit the nation's forests as a recreational activity, while in Russia, visits to the forest are often for the direct purpose of gathering berries, mushrooms, fish or meat to eat or sell. While the image of Smokey in a forest service uniform is seen as a friendly and authoritative source of information, Russia's population now has a much lower respect for authority and centralized messages. Finally, there are linguistic and cultural problems in translation and use of such statements as "Only YOU can prevent forest fires." Cleverly worded statements in English become clumsy and meaningless sentences in Russian. They also do not tap rich poetic and philosophical traditions that have been widely used in Russia.

Procedure and Background

The first three focus groups were conducted in August 2001. One focus group was run for each of the three major users of forests (berry pickers, hunters/fishermen, party/picnickers), and the results were compared to see if behaviors and attitudes of each group were similar or different. If they were very different in their use, attitudes, and understandings of the forest, a communication campaign would have to address each audience separately. If they were similar, a common campaign could be designed.

Participants consisted of both men and women who were recruited by a professional polling firms in Khabarovsk and Krasnoyarsk. Although the groups did not include those who live in rural areas of the region, the general survey conducted earlier indicated that the great majority of residents of even the largest city in the region visit the forest frequently. Since much of the campaign will be targeted to urban residents who travel to the forest, it was felt that these individuals would be appropriate. Participants were told that they would be attending a special meeting where they would be asked their opinions about forest fires and forest fire prevention. The berry picker/mushroom gatherer group consisted of three men and seven women ranging in age from 33 to 69. The hunter/fisherman group had seven men and two women 19 to 70 years old. The young picnic party group had five men and four women 18 to 24 years old. Each session was approximately 2.5 hours long, and was run by a Russian moderator trained by project staff. For these focus groups, participants were not aware that United States researchers were involved.

Professional Development

Following advice of Joseph, Griffin, and Sullivan, (2000), sessions were videotaped, and the camera and operator were openly shown to participants. They were not told that a group of researchers were viewing the session from an adjoining room. In addition to the videotapes, detailed notes were taken by the researcher during the sessions, and copies of the videotapes were made available afterward. In addition, participants filled out a questionnaire with demographic information, and also filled out several forms during the session to ensure that their ideas would not be influenced by others sitting around them.

In addition to the moderator, who was the director of the local polling company, each focus group was viewed by: the American research director (Eric Abbott), the project communicator (Ludmila Liamets), a career Forest Service employee who could provide perspective on forest practices (Vera Harberger) and a Ministry of Agriculture employee who has training in psychology and has worked in communication campaigns in Russia (Tatyana Ukhanova). The team discussed the results of each focus group immediately after each session, and a special meeting was held the next day with the moderator to review results. Later, the research director reviewed the videotapes with Russian research assistant Kate Gouverniuk, noting both verbal and nonverbal themes, and rechecking earlier conclusions. There was no attempt to transcribe and code at the level of specific words. Rather, the goal was to understand the knowledge, perceptions, and ideas of the forest visitors well enough that an educational campaign could be devised that would meet their needs.

Results for the First Three Groups (Berry Pickers, Hunters/Fishermen, Party/Picnic)

Results of the first three focus groups showed that the three different groups using the forest had very similar attitudes about the causes of forest fires and what could be done about them. This enabled the communication team to develop a general set of forest fire prevention messages. Results also provided valuable information about how forest visitors view specific causes of forest fires and what to do about them. Four specific examples of useful information coming from these focus groups will illustrate their value to communicators:

Selection of campfires as the primary communication message rather than cigarette smoking. Cigarette smoking is a known cause of forest fires, and campaign designers had initially planned a major focus in this area. However, results of the focus groups showed that the participants in general do not believe that smoking causes very many forest fires, although most

believe this is possible. Several described specific instances in which smoking in a tent or shelter had resulted in a fire, but they did not believe that many forest fires start in this manner. This means that antismoking communication messages will be less effective since visitors do not believe they cause fires. On the other hand, all participants believed that campfires could be a cause of forest fires, and they were receptive to messages about how to build a safer campfire. For this reason, the team decided to place a major emphasis on campfire safety as opposed to cigarette safety.

Refocusing campaign to take advantage of traditional assignment of responsibility for campfires. It was agreed by all groups that a single individual is usually selected who has overall responsibility for the campfire. This person, usually a male, instructs and supervises others who gather wood, place stones around the fire, or clear the area. In general, all groups agreed that this individual should supervise the fire at all times, day or night. Although participants noted that this system does not always work, the fact that someone is usually designated as responsible is of great importance for a communication campaign. Thus, campaign materials were designed to focus on and support this responsible individual.

Cross-Group perception that others are to blame. In general, there is a strong "third-person" effect–that is, a strong tendency for members of one focus group to blame those in another. Hunters/fishermen, for example, unanimously believed that they were safe in the forest, while they said young people partying in the forest were not safe. Young people said they often picnicked near water so they would have a supply of water to use for extinguishing the fire. They also stay overnight less frequently. So they believed the hunters and fishermen were more likely to cause fires. Since visitors seldom see a direct linkage between the fire itself and their behavior, this third person effect constituted an important problem for the campaign to overcome. Messages had to emphasize specific instances in which each group may engage in behavior that would result in a forest fire.

Contributing effects of alcohol. As a part of the focus groups, participants were asked to select among five possible reasons why people cause forest fires: (1) Lack of understanding; (2) Being stubborn/traditional and not wanting to adopt safe practices; (3) Profit: people are causing forest fires to clear pasture, improve fern/berry production, etc.; (4) Anger/vandalism; (5) Influence of alcohol. Results showed that 100 percent of the individuals in all three focus groups believe that alcohol consumption is an important factor in human-caused forest fires. This led to campaign messages to address this issue.

Professional Development

Results of Focus Groups to Pre-Test Campaign Materials

The remaining seven focus groups were used to test prototype materials. For example, the fourth and fifth groups included general representative adult residents up to 70 years of age who visit the forests of the region. The fourth group was shown a series of 21 animal characters that were being considered for the project logo and for materials in posters. The fifth group was asked to respond to two TV public service prototype announcements and a sample radio spot.

These focus groups yielded important advice that shaped campaign materials. For example, participants in the fourth focus group examined 21 animal logos being considered for possible project use. Some were drawn by project artists. Others came from the Ministry of Natural Resources. One, which showed a bear in an official uniform, had been specifically developed by the World Wildlife Fund for possible use in a national forest fire prevention campaign in Russia. Participants rated each image on two rating scales, one for "interest" and the second for "good to give advice about forest fire prevention." Following their individual ratings, there was a detailed discussion of each logo by the group.

Figure 1 shows a bear and a tiger/cub that were rated positively along the two 7-point dimensions. A "1" was the lowest possible score, and a "7" was the highest score. On the other hand, the official-looking bear in uniform was rejected by a number of participants because they thought it represented a central authority telling them what to do. Results showed there was no single favorite logo among participants, but there were several that were acceptable. These were integrated into subsequent campaign design materials. It was also found that participants associated the animals with ideas contained in fairy tales they had learned as children. A pig, for example, was seen as a silly animal whose advice could not be respected.

A second example demonstrates how a focus group can help evaluate cross-cultural materials. Participants in focus groups 6-9 examined specific campaign prototype materials. Groups 6 and 7 consisted of teenagers

Figure 1. Bear and tiger/cub.

and adults in Khabarovsk (the Far East) and two similar groups (8 and 9) in Krasnoyarsk (Siberia). One of the most important items tested in groups 6-9 was a four-step diagram (Figure 2) showing how to put out a campfire properly. Adapted from experience with the Smokey the Bear campaign in the United States, it recommended: (1) Pouring water on the fire; (2) Stirring the fire; (3) Pouring more water; (4) Placing the hand on the fire to ensure that it is out.
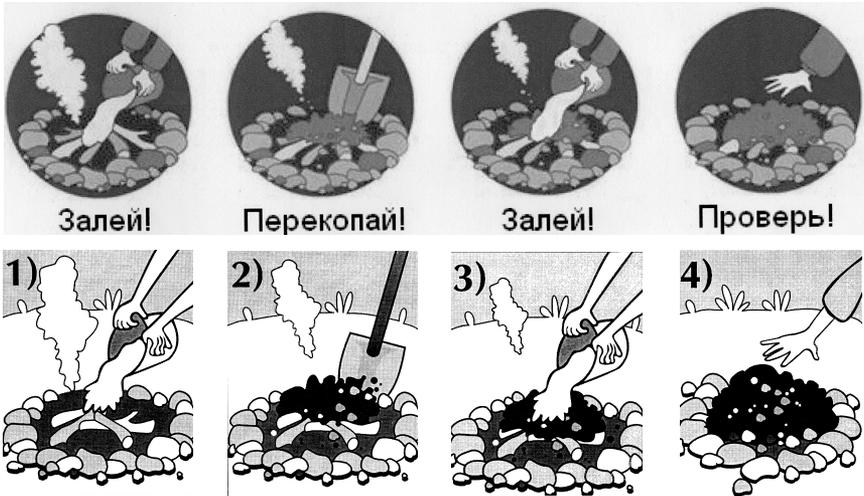

Figure 2. How to put out a fire properly.

Results showed some important cross-cultural differences. The four visuals were seen by many participants as alternative ways to put out a fire rather than a series of steps to be followed. Participants thought one could either pour on water or mix in earth or sand rather than doing both. The last visual was especially perplexing to them. Several thought that the hand was throwing more sand or dirt on the fire. Others thought that the hand was being held over the fire. Many simply didn't understand.

After the four diagrams were explained, participants were asked whether or not they agreed with the steps, and whether they would actually follow them in the forest. There was an extended discussion in all four groups about this issue. First, it became clear that pouring water on a fire, or mixing in dirt or sand, were seen as acceptable things to do to put out a fire. However, few people thought that all four steps should be followed. Most thought that either of the first two steps, but not both, would be sufficient. More important was the fact that frequently another method–a traditional approach–is used that involves the men urinating on the fire. This is used

because very often there is no ready source of water, and often the soils contain peat, which burns. Finally, participants almost unanimously agreed that they would never follow the fourth step–touching the fire with their hand to make sure it is out. If it isn't out, they noted, they could get burned. They would never teach their children to do this. And most important, they didn't think it was necessary.

While it is possible that a communication campaign might convince Russians in the Far East and Siberia to adopt the four-step approach, this seems highly unlikely given the responses in the focus groups. These results were discussed in detail with the video animation production team that was developing materials for 2003. As a result, animations were developed showing traditional practices that were likely to be accepted, and they did not emphasize all four of the steps.

Conclusions and Implications

Focus groups can be an effective tool for gaining an in-depth knowledge of target groups, and in generating ideas that can be used in communication campaign materials. They also can help to pre-test specific campaign materials before they are launched. In the Russia's forest fire prevention campaign, significant changes to the campaign materials resulted from their use.

Focus groups can also help resolve or clarify differences across team members. The American and Russian communication team members had different ideas about what might constitute an effective message. Focus groups provided a means of testing some of these ideas. Rather than an impression that the team would have to use an "American" approach or a "Russian" one, focus groups allowed ideas of both groups to be tested. As a result of their experience with these groups, the Russian team continued its use of focus groups as a pre-testing tool (focus group 10) even when American counterparts were no longer present.

The experience also demonstrated that both Russian and American communicators need to be involved in the focus groups and their analysis. In a number of cases, the Russian and American communicators interpreted participant statements differently, and in some cases a lengthy discussion was necessary to reach agreement on what participants were really saying. Russian colleagues, for example, were sensitive to the verbal and nonverbal cues contained in messages, and the nuances of the Russian language, which relies for meaning much more than English on the way in which things are emphasized and constructed. The strength of the American participant was experience in focus groups and a conceptual understanding of the key communication issues involved in the project. The forest service expert served as

a reality check on recommended procedures and practices in the forest, indicating whether or not these things were in fact already being done, and assessing how realistic or frequent some of the behaviors might be. Thus, the three layers of expertise–cultural, conceptual, and forest experience–were essential in the evaluation of the focus group data.

References

Borra, S., & Earl, R. (2000, March). The art and science of health promotion. Nutrition Today 35(2) 47+.

Folch-Lyon, E.; de la Maccorra, L.; Schearer, S. (1981). Focus group and survey research on family planning in Mexico. Studies in Family Planning 12,409-32.

Goldman, A.E. (1962). The group depth interview. Journal of Marketing 26:61-68.

Harari, O. & Beaty, D. (1990). On the folly of relying solely on a questionnaire methodology in cross-cultural research. Journal of Management Issues 2:267-81.

Jarrett, R. (1994). Living poor: Family life among single parent, African-American women. Social Problems 41, 30-49.

Joseph, D., Griffin, M., & Sullivan, E. (2000, Jan.-March). Videotaped focus groups: Transforming a therapeutic strategy into a research tool. Nursing Forum. 35, 15+.

Joseph, J.; Emmons, C.; Kessler, R.; Wortman, C.; O'Brien, K. (1984). Coping with the threat of AIDS: an approach to psychosocial assessment. American Psychologist 39:1297-302.

Kitzinger, J. (1995, July 29). Qualitative Research: Introducing focus groups. British Medical Journal 311:299-302.

Morgan, D.L. (1996). Focus groups. Annual Review of Sociology 22(4),129.

Schearer. S. (1981). The value of focus group research for social action programs. Studies in Family Planning 12, 407-8.

Shively, J. (1992). Cowboys and Indians: Perceptions of Western films among American Indians and Anglos. American Sociological Review 57, 725-34.

Stewart, D. & Shamdasani, P. (1990). Focus groups: Theory and practice. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Ward, V., Bertrand, J. & Brown, L. (1991). The comparability of focus group and survey results. Evaluation Review 15, 266-83.

Professional Development

Wolff, B., Knodel, J. & Sittitrai, W. (1993). Focus groups and surveys as complementary research methods: A case example. In Morgan, D. (Ed.), Successful focus groups: Advancing the state of the art. (pp. 118-136). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.