QUALITATIVE CONSUMER RESEARCH METHODS

The decision to use a focus group or some other research tool must be based on the appropriateness of the method for obtaining answers for specific research questions. It has been noted before that to a man with a hammer, everything is a nail. . . . Focus groups are useful for particular purposes and specific situations—for exploring the way particular groups of individuals think and talk about a phenomenon, for generating ideas and for generating diagnostic information. For these purposes, focus groups represent a rigorous scientific method of inquiry.”—Stewart and Shamdasani (1990, p. 140)

INTRODUCTION

A number of techniques can be used to probe consumer responses to new products in addition to the traditional mode of inquiry using questionnaires and large statistical samples. Exploratory research methods often use small numbers of participants but allow for greater interaction and deeper probing of attitudes and opinions (Chambers and Smith, 1991). As a class of methods, they are referred to as qualitative techniques to distinguish them from quantitative survey work that stresses statistical treatment of numerical data and representative projectable sampling. This chapter reviews the principles and application of qualitative research methods. Very little experimentation has been conducted on this form of consumer re-
search from the perspective of sensory evaluation. For this reason, the chapter is written as a summary of the authors' experience, drawing heavily from the overviews of the area by Casey and Krueger (1994), Krueger (1994), Chambers and Smith (1991), Stewart and Shamdasani (1990), and Goldman and McDonald (1987).

The most common form of qualitative research is the group depth interview or focused group discussion, which has come to be known simply as "focus groups." This typically involves about 10 consumers sitting around a table and discussing a product or idea with the seemingly loose direction of a professional moderator. The interview is focused in the sense that certain issues are on the agenda for discussion, so the flow is not entirely unstructured but rather centered on a product, advertisement, concept, or promotional materials. The method has been widely used for over 50 years by social science researchers, government policymakers, and business decision makers.

Historically, the focused group discussion grew from R. K. Merton's use of group interviews to assess audience reactions to radio programs in the 1940s, and later his use of the same techniques for analysis of Army training films (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). Currently, the methods are widely used in marketing research for probing of product concepts and advertising research concerning product presentation and promotion. Recently, sensory evaluation departments have added these techniques to their repertoire. In 1987, Marlow stated that many sensory evaluation groups in industry were already using these techniques to support new product development, and that there was growing interest in professional organizations such as ASTM in these methods. This interest was generated by the realization that the methods could be used to develop insights and direction for sensory evaluation issues in early stages of new product development. This activity would primarily serve product development clients, just as a marketing research department would probe consumer reactions to product concepts and potential advertising or promotions for their marketing clients. The main difference in the two approaches is that a sensory evaluation group is more likely to focus on product attributes, functional consumer needs, and perceptions of product performance, while a concept study done by marketing research addresses more of the ideas underlying a new product opportunity and consumer reactions to a specific conceptualization. Obviously, there is often overlap. For example, both approaches usually involve probing of consumer attitudes toward the product category based on experience.

In general, qualitative methods are best suited for clarification of problems and consumer perspectives, identifying opportunities, and generating ideas and hypotheses (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). For example, a recent qualitative study of consumer attitudes toward irradiated poultry suggested directions for consumer education and label design (Hashim et al.,