

# Focus group research for small wineries – an Internet example

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COMPETITION in the Australian wine industry has never been more intense, especially in the small and medium sized winery sector. The survey 'Winning Strategies in the Wine Industry—Benchmarking for Success', which examined the financial performance of Australian wineries in 2002, paints a bleak picture indeed for small wineries. Conducted by Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu, the survey found that the sector containing the smallest wineries recorded trading losses, with overall earnings before tax for the sector being negative (Anonymous 2003). Although all wineries are currently finding the going tough, those achieving less than \$5 million in annual revenue are finding conditions particularly difficult.

Against this backdrop, the question is how a winery can get ahead of the pack. The answer lies in knowledge—knowledge of the wine product, knowledge of the consumer and knowledge of the market. Arguably, the most important of these is consumer knowledge. It is critical that those running small-to-medium sized wineries have an understanding of why consumers behave the way they do, and of the tools used to gain this knowledge, i.e. consumer research. Understanding consumer behaviour through consumer research will allow the winery to plan for the future, anticipate growth and identify new market opportunities (Brown 2000).

Consumer research often involves surveys in which questionnaires are the main research instrument, but consumer research need not be confined to this type of methodology. Qualitative research, where information is typically gained from relatively long and interactive processes such as focus groups and in-depth interviews, may in fact be the more appropriate research tool where (as in the case of the small-to-medium sized winery) there is a need to delve into consumer responses more deeply, or where responses are required to image-based variables or creative material (Brown 2000).

## THE FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW

Qualitative research has become almost synonymous with the focus group interview. The use of focus groups is estimated to exceed 200,000 interviews per annum in the US alone (Bristol and Fern 2003). Greenbaum (1998:247) defines the focus group interview as:

*'A qualitative market research technique in which a group of eight to 10 participants of common demographics, attitudes or purchase patterns are led through a (usually) two-hour discussion of a particular topic by a trained moderator.'*

Focus groups are commonly used for idea generation, new

product concept testing, advertising/promotion evaluations, positioning studies, packaging assessments and attitude and usage studies (Edmunds 1999, Greenbaum 1998 and Kreuger 1988). In common with all research methodologies, the technique has its limitations. Focus groups cannot be used to answer questions such as 'how many?' or 'how much?'—the results of focus groups are not quantifiable. They cannot therefore be appropriately used to predict sales of a product, or determine the level of recall that an advertising campaign may have generated (Greenbaum 1998). As a qualitative methodology, focus groups are not intended to provide definitive answers to questions, but rather to provide insight and understanding of the target market's perspectives and opinions.

The focus group is led by a moderator often making use of an interview guide to assist in conducting the discussion. The interview guide sets the agenda for the session and stems directly from the research questions that are the impetus for the research (Stewart and Shamdasani 1990). Interview guides vary in style and content. A well-written guide identifies the topics/questions that will be covered and the approximate emphasis given to each (Greenbaum 1998). Asking the right questions is critical in focus group interviewing, and they should be asked in a conversational manner. Effective and powerful questions (partly taken and adapted from Kreuger 1998a:7) include:

- Assume this product (e.g. a wine brand) could talk. What would it say about itself?
- If this product received an award, what would it be for?
- What would you expect to pay for this product?
- Who do you see as the target market for this product?
- What one aspect of the packaging do you like the best? The least?
- If you could change one thing about this product, what would you change, and what is the main reason that one thing needs changing?
- If you were responsible for selling 10,000 cases of this product, what key point would you stress in its promotion?
- What is your first impression of these promotional materials?
- What one thing do you like the best about these materials?
- What one thing do you like the least? What changes would you recommend?
- What would you expect to find on the company's website?

Apart from having superior communication and listening skills, the focus group moderator should possess personal qualities of curiosity, friendliness, openness to new ideas,

flexibility, time management skills and the ability to learn quickly (Edmunds 1999 and Kreuger 1998b). These are qualities that are well within the scope of an astute winemaker, marketer or other winery staff member. It is a myth, in fact, that focus groups require professional moderators, or special facilities (Morgan 1998a). Winery personnel will have greater industry and category experience than most professional moderators, and in this regard they are likely to produce better data.

The question of whether the winery should conduct its own focus group research will hinge upon the relative importance of factors such as cost and confidentiality on the one hand and expertise, professionalism and objectivity on the other. Of these, the factor of objectivity is perhaps the most critical in the case of small and medium sized wineries. Unless the winery-sourced moderator is well attuned to the possibility, bias can easily creep into group proceedings. There is significant potential for an internal moderator to word questions in a way that leads participants to support the moderator's views regarding the discussion topic (Edmunds 1999). For example, a winery's marketing manager may unwittingly sway participants to favour a given label design or advertising strategy. Even without overt influence on the moderator's part, participants may nevertheless feel pressured to adopt a particular stance in order to 'please' the moderator.

The issue, therefore, is how participants will perceive the

moderator (Morgan 1998b). Will they perceive an internal (winery) moderator as having a hidden agenda? Will they withhold criticism or alternatively turn the focus group into a gripe session? Faced with a lack of moderator neutrality, the winery may find it necessary to engage an external moderator. However, there is another way to tackle this problem — through the use of a focus group methodology known as the 'Nominal Group Technique'.

**THE NOMINAL GROUP TECHNIQUE**

The Nominal Group Technique (NGT) is particularly well suited to the needs of the small-to-medium sized winery because of the method's structured nature. The NGT process, originally developed by Delbecq, Van de Ven and Gustafson (1975) as an organisational decision-making technique, combines both verbal and non-verbal stages in four basic steps:

1. Generating ideas—each participant silently generates ideas in writing;
2. Recording ideas—the moderator concisely records each participant's ideas in a round-robin fashion;
3. Discussing ideas—the group discusses each recorded idea in turn to obtain clarification and evaluation; and
4. Voting on ideas—participants vote privately on the priority of the recorded ideas, with the overall group decision being derived from these ratings.

Because NGT groups are more structured than the usual

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**Table 1. Group segmentation.**

<b>Group 1</b>	Regular wine buyers (two or more bottles per week on average) aged under 40 years.
<b>Group 2</b>	Regular wine buyers (two or more bottles per week on average) aged over 40 years.
<b>Group 3</b>	People who have purchased goods or services over the Internet, aged under 40 years.
<b>Group 4</b>	People who have purchased goods or services over the Internet, aged over 40 years.
<b>Group 5</b>	People interested in buying wine over the Internet, aged under 40 years.
<b>Group 6</b>	People interested in buying wine over the Internet, aged over 40 years.

focus group format, moderator training needs will tend to be lower (Claxton, Ritchie and Zaichkowsky 1980, Katrichis 1987). Moderation becomes less of an art. The NGT process allows the role of focus group moderation to fall within the scope of the 'non-specialist'—the winemaker or other member of staff for example. Importantly, the NGT process has the potential to reduce biases on the part of the researchers and group participants (Langford 1994). With conventional discussion groups, the pressure for conformity often constrains the freedom felt by group members to express their ideas openly, inhibiting the group's creative potential (Delbecq et al. 1975). The pressure for conformity can stem from a number of factors, for example from status differences between participants (boss/employee) and from dominant personality types. NGT minimises many of these conforming influences due to its in-built 'non-conformance' characteristics, that is, the *individual* generation of ideas in writing, the *round-robin* method of presenting and recording ideas, and the *individual* voting on priority of ideas. NGT therefore fosters the generation of minority or conflicting opinions and ideas, while minimising the operation of 'hidden agendas'.

The uses of NGT are similar to those of focus groups in general. However, nominal groups have been found to be significantly superior to normal focus groups in new idea generation and the identification of priorities in a list of ideas and/or attributes (Delbecq et al. 1975, De Ruyter 1996). NGT groups commonly produce a large number of ideas relevant to a situation or issue. For example, Claxton et al. (1980) reported the identification of 17 ideas on average per issue. In a wine marketing context, questions that might be asked in a NGT session include: 'What issues do you consider when selecting a winery to visit?' or 'What problems have you had when buying wine over the Internet?'

The disadvantages of NGT are that the method lacks flexibility and requires extended advance preparation (Brahm & Kleiner 1996). The disadvantages are related to the structured nature of the technique, and in this sense, Claxton et al. (1980) regard nominal groups as occupying the 'middle ground' between focus groups and structured survey methods, and argue that when depth of understanding is desired and extrapolation to a broad population base is not critical, multiple NGT sessions based on segmented samples, can be a fruitful research alternative.

An example of NGT research is provided next to illustrate the theoretical concepts, and to take the reader through some of the practicalities of conducting NGT sessions.

#### THE NOMINAL GROUP TECHNIQUE IN PRACTICE

In November 2003, a series of six NGT groups moderated by the author were held in Adelaide to explore the beliefs held by consumers with respect to wine purchase over the Internet. The research represented the initial phase of a wider quantitative survey. Participants were recruited via a market research agency and were segmented according to age and Internet purchasing habits (see Table 1).

Segmentation is a strategy that supports homogeneity within each separate group (to encourage positive group dynamics) while creating diversity across the full set of groups (to uncover potentially distinct perspectives). Groups may be segmented on the basis of age, gender, location, occupation, attitudes, preferences, product usage, rate of adoption and so on (Morgan 1998b).

The primary objective of the focus groups was to determine the considerations that would be important to consumers in their decision to buy (or not buy) wine over the Internet within a 12-month timeframe. The desired outcome was a rank ordering for each group of the five most important negative consequences, the five most important positive consequences and the five most important relevant others (referents) in relation to wine purchase over the Internet. There were also secondary research objectives.

Each NGT group was conducted along identical lines. Groups were asked to respond to each of the following three statements:

**Statement One:** *'Please list any negative consequences of buying wine over the Internet (in the next 12 months).'*

**Statement Two:** *'Please list any positive consequences of buying wine over the Internet (in the next 12 months).'*

**Statement Three:** *'Please list any individual or group likely to influence your thinking or behaviour regarding buying wine over the Internet (in the next 12 months).'*

For each of these three statements, groups were asked to respond in an identical pattern consisting of four stages: a listing stage; a recording stage; a discussion stage; and a ranking/voting stage. The overall length of each session was approximately 90 minutes.

The listing stage was completed for all three statements at the outset of the session. The recording, discussion and ranking/voting stages for each statement were then con-



**Table 2. Salient beliefs and referents in relation to wine purchase over the Internet.**

**Statement One: Negative consequences of buying wine over the Internet.**

<b>Group 1 (7 participants)</b>	<b>Group 2 (10 participants)</b>	<b>Group 3 (9 participants)</b>
Can't taste before buying (17)	Credit card fraud (39)	Can't taste before buying (24)
Credit card fraud (14)	Unknown quality (19)	Not at home when delivered (23)
Delivery condition (13)	Incorrect or non-delivery (16)	Personal information security (20)
Unknown company (12)	Can't taste before buying (14)	Time for delivery (14)
Unknown cellaring conditions (10)	Unwanted advertising material (12)	Minimum buy quantity (12)
<b>Group 4 (10 participants)</b>	<b>Group 5 (8 participants)</b>	<b>Group 6 (8 participants)</b>
Credit card fraud (32)	Credit card fraud (21)	Credit card fraud (35)
Minimum buy quantity (31)	Expensive (16)	Difficulty of refunds (16)
Time for delivery (19)	Damage to wine in transit (14)	Can't taste before buying (12)
Lack of enjoyment in process (15)	Limited choice (13)	No physical contact with wine (10)
Can't taste before buying (12)	Shipping costs (12)	Not at home when delivered (8)

**Statement Two: Positive consequences of buying wine over the Internet.**

<b>Group 1</b>	<b>Group 2</b>	<b>Group 3</b>
Cheaper wines/specials (19)	Able to shop from home (35)	Able to shop from home (27)
Access to wide range (16)	Cheaper wine (29)	Home delivery (18)
Able to shop at any time (14)	Home delivery (27)	Cheaper wine/specials (18)
Home delivery (14)	Able to shop at any time (19)	Access to rare wine (17)
Access to quality wine (8)	Access to new releases (12)	Able to shop at any time (13)
<b>Group 4</b>	<b>Group 5</b>	<b>Group 6</b>
Able to shop from home (38)	Home delivery (26)	Able to shop from home (34)
Able to shop at any time (31)	Ability to buy globally (22)	Access to new releases (17)
Home delivery (21)	Use as gift service (17)	Access to specials (17)
Ability to find specific wines (13)	Able to shop at any time (15)	Can purchase after wine review (15)
Browse for best price (11)	Speed of purchase (11)	Access to variety of wines (7)

**Statement Three: Individuals or groups likely to influence thinking or behaviour regarding buying wine over the Internet.**

<b>Group 1</b>	<b>Group 2</b>	<b>Group 3</b>
Friends (25)	Friends (36)	Work colleagues (33)
Retailer staff (15)	Wine critics (24)	Family (31)
Restaurant staff (12)	Winery/cellar door staff (19)	Friends (23)
Family (8)	Wine clubs (17)	Winery/cellar door staff (17)
Winery/cellar door staff (7)	Work colleagues (15)	Journalists (16)
<b>Group 4</b>	<b>Group 5</b>	<b>Group 6</b>
Friends (32)	Friends (34)	Friends and family (40)
Retail tastings (27)	Winery/cellar door staff (17)	Bankers (23)
Family (26)	Clubs (15)	Winery/cellar door staff (19)
Winery/cellar door staff (17)	Wine critics (12)	Wine critics (12)
Wine critics (17)	Celebrity endorsements (3)	Retailer staff (2)

NB: Scores are directly comparable only within groups and between groups with the same number of participants.

ducted one statement at a time. For the listing stage, participants were given a single A4 sheet with the first statement (similarly for subsequent statements) printed clearly at the top, and were asked to write down their responses to the statement. Participants were requested to make their responses as concise as possible. They were also requested

not to discuss the statement or their responses with others until told to do so at a later stage. Responses were therefore listed anonymously and independently. Participants retained all three sheets at this point, with each sheet collected in turn at the end of the ranking/voting stage for that particular statement.

For the recording stage, participants were asked for their responses to the first statement in a round-robin fashion. That is, one idea from each person in turn was recorded onto a flipchart or whiteboard until the ideas were exhausted. Discussion and debate was still discouraged at this stage. Each idea was recorded as rapidly as possible, and in the exact words used by the participant, but concisely. The moderator numbered each idea as listed.

Every now and then, the listing of ideas on the flipchart caused a participant to think of a completely new idea. When this happened, the participant simply added this idea to his/her A4 sheet and presented it to the group when his/her turn came again.

The ideas listed on the flipchart in response to each of the statements were then discussed in turn, with the moderator seeking clarification if necessary, and probing for shared understanding. The discussion stage provided an opportunity to present the logic behind an idea, or to disagree.

Finally, the participants were asked to rank the ideas listed on the flipchart in order of priority. Participants voted privately. They were provided with five index cards and asked to select the five most important ideas from those listed on the flipchart and place each one of the selected ideas (with its corresponding number) on a separate card. Once they had filled in their five cards, participants were asked to rank their five cards in order of importance by placing the number 1

through to 5 at the bottom of the card. The most important idea was awarded 5, the least most important 1, the second most important 4, and so on. Scoring sheets may be used instead of index cards to simplify this procedure.

Following data collection, the scores received for each idea were tabulated and summed, thereby providing the overall ranking of ideas for each group. The item with the highest score represented that group's highest-ranking idea. The findings from the six Nominal Groups are displayed in Table 2.

**DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

Although the findings displayed in Table 2 arise out of qualitative research (and hence cannot be projected to the total population) the findings nevertheless provide a solid identification of consumers' salient beliefs with respect to Internet wine purchase, and will provide useful inputs into a subsequent empirical study.

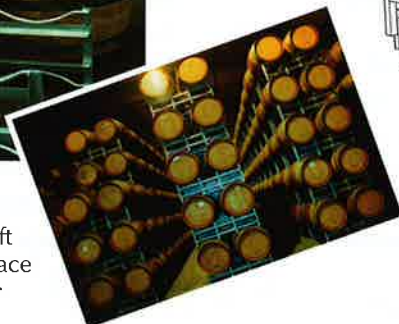
With respect to the perceived negative consequences of Internet wine purchase, group participants clearly ranked credit card fraud as their major concern. This finding is in keeping with previous research (e.g. Forsythe and Shi 2003, Miyazaki and Fernandez 2001, Quinton and Harridge-March 2003) citing credit card fraud as a major obstacle to Internet sales. Other factors that participants rated highly as perceived inhibitors were issues related to delivery, and the inability to taste the wine prior to purchase. In one

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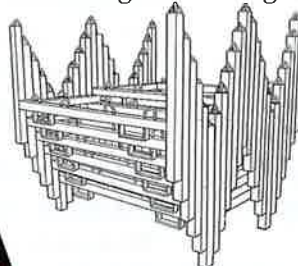
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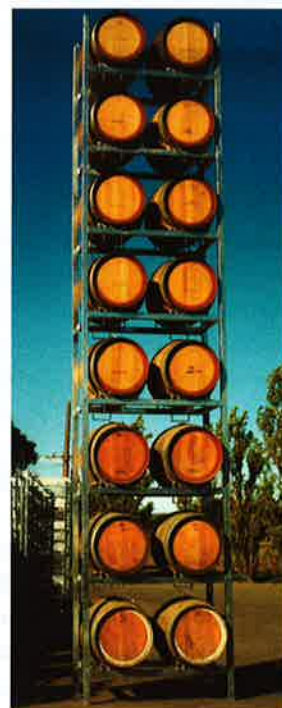
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sense, wine purchase over the Internet is no different to purchase in traditional wine store settings, where consumers rarely taste wine before buying. Unlike wine store settings, however, this restriction on the Internet is accompanied by the inability also to touch, hold and/or inspect the wine bottle, perhaps exacerbating the perceived taste deprivation. The Internet can realistically only reproduce two of the five senses, namely sight and sound, and this limitation will restrict the kinds of product saleable via the medium. For many consumers, touching and trying the product is an essential element of the purchasing process (Croft 1998, Phau and Poon 2000). Research by Citrin et al. (2003) demonstrates the importance of providing tactile experiences for specific product categories, and the authors suggest that it is vital for Internet retailers to maintain some kind of physical trial possibility for those products that require multi-sensory inputs in their evaluation.

In terms of the perceived positive consequences of Internet wine purchase, it is not surprising that convenience factors (ability to shop from home, and home delivery) rated highly among the group participants. Many authors (e.g. Aplin 1999, Fenech and O'Cass 2001, Forsythe and Shi 2003) have likewise cited convenience as being the major factor inducing purchases on the Internet. De Kare-Silver (2001) puts it succinctly when he suggests that the retail catchcry of 'location, location, location' should be replaced in the Internet environment with 'convenience, convenience, convenience'.

Finally, with respect to the salient referents in the decision to purchase wine over the Internet, family and friends were perceived as the most influential. Interestingly, winery/cellar-door personnel were also seen as influential. This is a key finding from this qualitative phase of the research, and highlights the need for wine producers to proactively promote their websites and Internet sales facilities to consumers, particularly those who make the effort to visit their establishments in person. Richardson (2002) makes the point that winery visitors, having viewed the facilities and tasted the wine, would be more willing to purchase the company's wine subsequently over the Internet. Winery staff have a key role to play in this 'Internet education' and they shouldn't leave the process to chance. Winery visitors should be made aware of the existence of the company's website, be shown (perhaps with a take-away guide) how to go about ordering wine from the site, and be assured of the winery's privacy and security safeguards.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper highlighted the fact that with careful preparation and attention to detail, consumer research is well within the scope of the small and medium sized winery. The Nominal Group Technique was presented and its use demonstrated through a description of the six NGT groups conducted by the author on the question of wine purchase over the Internet. A key insight provided by this research

relates to the finding that winery cellar door staff appear to represent significant referents in a consumer's decision to buy wine on-line. This and other outcomes will be tested empirically in a follow-up survey.

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