

How to use video for focus groups

The complexities of video for market research can be very confusing. Communication between clients needing services, facilities providing them, and subcontractors hired to deliver them can present confusing choices costing you both time and money. In order to pre-empt such confusion we have created this guide.

Determining Your Needs

Sometimes all you need is a VHS copy of a focus group taken from a fixed camera mounted in the ceiling or on a tripod in the back of the room. The facility records it, and along with your audio tapes it is handed to you at the end of your focus group and that's all there is to it. The audio tapes are transcribed later. Those left behind at the office who need to can view the videos.

But sometimes things become more complex. For example; You've got twelve cities and twenty four tapes recorded from a series of focus groups in various cities. Your client wants a compilation tape made for a final presentation. Choosing a video tape format that's right for the job is essential.

Here are some of the most common video formats: VHS, Hi8, S-VHS, 3/4 inch & 3/4 SP, Beta & Beta SP, MII, 1 Inch, DV, DVCAM, DVC-Pro, and digital S. This alphabet soup of formats exists not only due to competing formats but because some are better at specific applications.

Most market research is recorded on simple VHS. For documentation common VHS works great. Things get more complex when you need to edit various source tapes into a final product. You can stick

with VHS provided by the facility or upgrade to a higher video format.

Knowing when to change to higher quality is often based on the budget and how the finished video will be used. If you are trying to make an impression on a client or someone in management, the look of your finished video can be greatly enhanced by choosing a higher quality video format.

What constitutes a higher quality video format? Video, like still camera film, has different **resolutions**. Simply put, the higher the resolution the better the image. In video, it's specifically measured in "lines of horizontal resolution" or the horizontal lines, running from top to bottom, on your TV set. Normal VHS has 240 lines of resolution. It looks kind of fuzzy. Professional formats (those other than VHS) **begin** at 500 lines of resolution. What does all this matter? In order to have a final product which looks more like the crisp images you see on broadcast television, you'll need to record the video in a higher resolution video format and edit it on a professional higher quality format equipment.

This may immediately effect your budget. So unless your company has in-house editing facilities you can count on spending more money to aquire and edit your finished product. Knowing all this you can choose your video format.

Where to begin

VHS

If the edited footage is simply being distributed departmentally for informational purposes, it's pretty safe to stay with VHS. It's the most common format out there and can normally be viewed almost anywhere. It is not, however, meant to be used for making multiple copies or as a source tape for editing. VHS is just fine for its limited purpose. But if video is an important part of what your client and others will see you very well may want to use higher quality.

S-VHS and 3/4 inch

Unless you have large budget or require exceptionally professional results, S-VHS and 3/4 inch will suit your needs well. Although your company may have Betacam or Betacam SP editing equipment, it is very expensive to hire a video operator with equipment in multiple locations in this format. Recording in S-VHS or 3/4 inch and transferring to Beta may be less expensive alternative. It is worth your time to evaluate your company's video resources (both in access to equipment and personnel) before video recording.

Super VHS, which looks just like a normal home VHS tape, is a versatile and inexpensive format for market research. It offers higher resolution too. Often, many facilities will have a Super VHS camera on hand and recording on Super VHS will only mean a small tape stock charge. These cameras may be the same cameras recording your focus group, but simply be recording in VHS mode. You'll need to ask someone who understands the A/V setup at the facility.

Many companies already have 3/4 inch editing and playback machines in house. Especially in advertising companies. So recording for them on 3/4", is efficient and provides great results. Tape is cheap. 3/4 SP is higher quality in terms of resolution but may not be necessary unless your project requires it.

NOTE: Most focus group facilities have standard VHS cameras, either on a tripod or mounted in the ceiling. In order to upgrade to higher format you'll need to either specify to the facility - that you want to use a higher quality format.

Camera operators & equipment

In order to further enhance your video recording, based on your determination of your needs, you may want to use a professional video camera person.

Normally, focus groups are recorded with the camera set up on a wide angle view. This records the entire scene and all participants. By using a camera operator you can get close ups of individual respondents. This will greatly enhance the viewer's experience and put them "up close" to the subject. Points made by participants will have more impact and, if used in any later presentation, will look far better than the locked down wide angle view.

You'll need to expand your request to the facility now: "I would like the groups recorded on S-VHS with a camera operator.

Be aware that many facilities will use available personnel from their own staff to do this recording. Some facilities may even use a remote control camera operated by a staff member watch-

ing a monitor at the front desk. For the best results, this may not be advisable.

Video production and event recording is a specialized activity. At this level, it is best to use a professional for the best results. Most market research firms have a video services company they subcontract with for this purpose.

One advantage of using of using a professional camera operator is that they will bring professional equipment. This equipment will (1) make your video look and (2) sound better and (3) make it easier to work with the hours of recorded footage you'll have accumulated on tape.

Professional level video cameras give noticeably better results. Not only do they feature much higher quality lenses they often have three photo sensitive electronic chips behind the lens. Each of these

chips is dedicated to a color. These colors RED, BLUE, & GREEN are combined to create the video image. Simple video cameras such as those normally found in a facility have only one chip dedicated to all three colors. Once again, it's a matter of resolution. A designated chip for each color gives a crisper, more life-like picture with a greater range of color values.

Professional cameras have better audio controls than less complex and less expensive cameras and VCR's. This means your sound will sound better.

Your request to the facility may sound like this: "I would like the groups recorded on Super VHS by a professional operator with a 3 chip camera."

Understanding Time Code, Using Time Code and Time Code Dubs

Video Time Code. It can be confusing but its key value is that it can save you an enormous amount of time and trouble.

This requires a bit of explanation: Professional cameras and video recorders are equipped with time code generators and readers. Quite simply this means they have the ability to place numbers representing time, like a stop watch, embedded in each second of video tape and play them back. These numbers appear along the bottom of the video monitor in a small window .

They run chronologically in hours, minutes, seconds and something called video frames. So each moment has it's own assigned time designation.

On the tape itself the time code looks like this: 01:45:10:12. The first two numbers are for hours lapsed, the second two for minutes, the third for seconds and the final set of two numbers are reserved for video frames.

For instance, let's say an interview subject responds to a question at a certain moment on tape. We can find the person on tape responding to the question at one hour, forty-five minutes, ten seconds and twelve frames on the tape. (Video frames are similar to movie film, consecutive images generate the illusion of time passing. Thirty frames of still video are equal to one second on tape. It is probably a good idea to ignore these last two numbers, unless you are an EXTREMELY precise person or a video editor.) Since those numbers are imbedded in the tape itself, they provide a useful means of notation and indexing extended discussions.

Anyone ever assigned the task of logging these video tapes will immediately recognize the value of this system. Without using time code many mistakes are possible. One of the most common is

logging the footage from the VCR numerical counter. Sometimes it reads out in time elapsed (01:23:10), but most often in numbers reaching approximately 6000. The problem with logging using the simple read out (on a typical consumer machine as you would have in your home) is that the numbers have no relationship to the material on the tape. 5600 on one machine is 5836 on another. So your carefully logged tape, on which you spent interminable hours, is only accurate if you play it from the machine you logged it on. And only if you rewind the tape and begin at zero.

If you are lucky enough to have a machine which counts tape from the start at 00:00:00 you are in better shape (but it can still be significantly inaccurate when attempting to log precise in and out points in a rapid conversation.)

The way around this is to create ordinary VHS dubs showing time code at the bottom of each of your tapes. On the original tapes this information is invisibly embedded in the video image. You would need access to special expensive machines to “read” it. By creating “time code window dubs” from your original tapes you can save the expense of using those machines and create an accurate log of your focus groups for speedy editing using a common VHS or 3/4 inch machine. Renting video editing time from a facility is often expensive, but coming prepared with an accurate list of the pieces you want and the sequence you want them in will greatly reduce costs. In the video world it’s called an “edit decision list” or sometimes referred to as a “paper cut”.

Using “time code window dubs” you can take the tape back to your home or office, and using a tape logging sheet (see sample) create a accurate log of comments from multiple tapes. The short example below shows you how it’s done:

Tape#	Comment begins @	In@	Out@
3	Starts at: “Flea Powder... ends at: .. Dogs love it!	01:45:07	01:46:21
2	Starts at: “If only cats.... Ends at: ..the little darlings.”	00:23:10	00:24:01
1	Starts at: “Brand x doesn’t .. Ends at: “kill those fleas!”	00:57:29	00:59:27

Using this simple method the video editor can take your list and rapidly assemble the three comments from the three different tapes. Time code gives us the exact place of each of the tapes where these comments are located.

While the tapes you originally made (the camera originals) remain without the time code permanently burned into the video image, the time code remains hidden on them and your VHS copy give you working access to them.

Your request to the facility might sound like this: “I’d like an operator with a three chip professional camera, shooting on S-VHS. Please make time code window dubs of all the “originals” we record.”

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