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## The Elite Respondent: Why Going to Focus Groups Is Good for You

by Linda Leeb Duper

**June 3, 2009** —Ten or so IT professionals file into a conference room. One wall of the room is a two-way mirror. A discussion takes place about server software, or email security, or any of the myriad topics that eat up your workday. Except this is not actually part of your workday.

This is a market research focus group: a meeting of carefully selected individuals, called respondents, paid to discuss or possibly test a specific product or service for the benefit of a company that wants to market said product or service. In this case, highly trained and experienced individuals are paid to address highly specialized products and services in information technology.

Some of you have done these studies. Some consider them a waste of your admittedly valuable time and send notices of such events straight to spam purgatory. But you might want to reconsider that. According to some of the country's top IT professionals, there's more to gain than you might think.

As an IT professional or executive, you are part of a limited, elite pool of respondents, in high demand among tech companies performing market research, and they really, really want to hear what you have to say. The product or service may barely even exist yet, but the invisible people behind that mirror are hanging on your every word: they want to know your opinions about what it should do, what it shouldn't do, how it should look, feel, taste, and run. They want to know why you might decide to use it, or why you're not using it, or what else you're using. They are seriously interested. But why should you be?

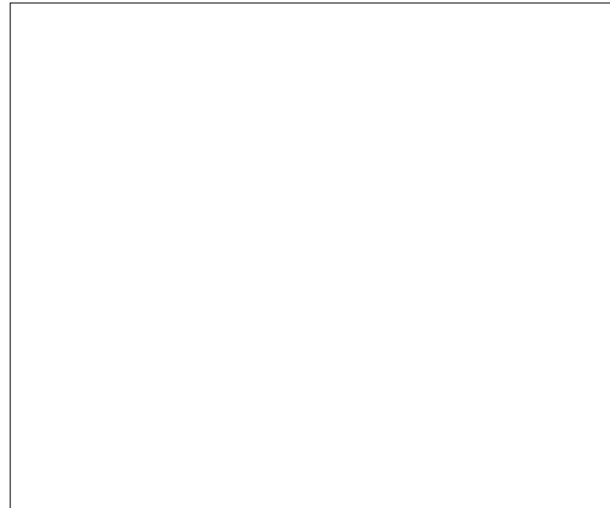
Well, first there's the money. High-tech studies pay respondents between \$100-300, depending on the nature of the study and the time commitment involved. \$200 or more is common for a two-hour focus group of higher-level respondents. Online meetings or telephone interviews are often shorter and more convenient for the respondent, so they might pay \$150 or so.

We can all use a few extra bucks for the next family outing (movie + parking + popcorn + pizza + ice cream X family of 5 = ridiculous), or a nice pair of shoes, or a small dent in that credit-card debt. So when someone is willing to pay you \$200 just to talk about stuff you talk about anyway, it's not a bad deal.

But for most of the people in this hypothetical room, there is more to it than the money. Humphrey (any reputable market research company guarantees its respondents that none of their information will be shared in any way, and all names have been changed in keeping with this principle), IT director for a major national retailer (company names are not specified, but you would recognize many of them), states outright, "I'm in it for the money." But then he goes on to elaborate: "I like it because it can sometimes show me different products or strategic directions," he adds. "It's also good to see what challenges other companies are facing."

"When the honorarium is larger, I am more likely to make time in my day to participate," says Rock, IT manager for an energy company. "When the topic is something I am involved in, the honorarium is less important, as my time is being devoted to that subject anyway." And the odds are very good that he will learn something useful.

The specific topics of a focus group (or interview) vary widely, and what's on the market-research menu du jour may not be directly related to what's on your plate at any given moment, but it's still an opportunity for acquiring



some handy information. "Occasionally something that I am currently researching or implementing is the focus of a survey or study," says Rock. But even if it's not, he says, he still learns something useful. "It's amazing how many times I hear of a company I am not familiar with or an acronym I have to go look up, just from an interviewer's questions." He comes out of these studies knowing more about his field than he did when he went in.

"There was a specific technology I was planning to research and possibly implement," says Cary, an IT chief at an investment firm. "After one of these events, I learned a lot more about some of the implementation challenges, and it significantly enhanced my knowledge and allowed me to make a much better informed decision."

"Because of focus groups," says Clark, IT director at a major global consulting firm, "I got sort of sneak previews on some cutting edge new technologies that are now widespread. We had a chance to take it to the lab, think about how it would work for us, as opposed to being introduced to it by salespeople, so by the time it went online, we already had a good grasp of it and were way ahead of everyone else."

For some respondents, it's like being paid to network. "There are definitely professional advantages to doing these groups," says Cary. "I learn about new products and technologies, plus I meet and socialize with industry pros."

"At these meetings, I'm networking with some great people," says Clark. He's even hired staff from referrals he's gotten at focus groups. "It got me some great resumes."

"I'm amazed that more of my colleagues aren't doing this," he adds. "It's a great source of information, very relevant to what I'm dealing with. It's like a knowledge group that pays you for attending."

It's also like an inside track on what's in the news. "I get the inside track on industry scuttlebutt," says Clark. "For example, there had been an item in the news about [a major city] government's IT office; it was in all the papers. I was in a group with the city's CIO and got the real information, which was totally different from what was being reported."

Free professional advice is another perk. "It's like getting an expert, in-person consult right from the horse's mouth, and they're paying me for it instead of me paying them," says Cary.

Taking part in market research studies can give you a significant competitive or information edge, providing that extra bit of knowledge that may otherwise have eluded you but which may prove valuable in many ways, including saving you that most precious of all commodities, time.

"I get to speak directly to tech companies I'm constantly dealing with," says Clark. "In one case, we'd been going back and forth with this one company for ages, it was really frustrating, but a market research project basically got me direct access to the company, and the issue got straightened out immediately."

If you have ever thought, "I'd really like to tell Company X exactly what I want from them," this is the game for you. Those invisible executives on the other side of the glass are so interested in what you have to say that they have come from thousands of miles away and are not only listening intently, they're paying you cash money just to hear your opinions on their product.

Some of the other rewards of taking part in these studies are less tangible, but just as real. The IT world is a community, after all, and anything that helps us connect with, learn from, and benefit our communities is a good thing. The kinds of people you meet in focus groups tend to be upstanding and outstanding members of your community.

"In my personal and professional projects," says Rock, "the goal is the same: to give real, useful knowledge to the community, so that people can benefit from what I have learned. It is not just about solving problems and implementing projects, it is about bettering the situation for those who are in the same game as I am."

Some companies are wary of having their staff take part in market research studies because of confidentiality concerns. Ironically, most companies that harbor such concerns, sometimes in explicit policies discouraging employee participation in such projects, conduct vigorous market research studies of their own, begging the question: if it's so risky, why do it?

The fact is, it's not a risk, and these concerns are baseless. Respondents are never asked to reveal anything confidential or proprietary. Those conducting the study are interested in individual professional opinions and experiences; they do not expect people to "represent" their companies, nor do they have any nefarious means of compelling you to reveal any company secrets. No water-boarding is involved.

"I control what data I give out," says Rock. Humphrey expresses the confidence of experience in matters of privacy: "Over the years, I've not seen any evidence of broken confidentiality." It is interesting, one market researcher noted, that people will give their credit-card information to a dozen strangers a week, but have misgivings about providing sometimes publicly available data to a professional researcher whose livelihood depends on wise and strategic use of information.

During the screening process to make sure respondents are a good fit for any given group, specific information

may be requested by the agency (known as a recruiter) contracted to locate and invite individuals who meet specific criteria. For example, the study's sponsor may be interested in hearing from professionals who use a certain kind of software on certain kinds of hardware. Basic information about respondents (name, company, title, etc.) is kept in the recruiter's files, which are never, ever shared with anyone. Such information as brands of software being deployed changes so often that it is not worth compiling, and any such information gleaned for a specific project is discarded upon completion of the project. "The groups are professional and the screeners are discrete," says Clark.

Some folks are skeptical that focus groups and the like are just a ruse for a sales pitch, another baseless concern. The invisible executives may use what they hear from you to devise a sales pitch, but at a focus group, no one is out to sell you anything, nor does any kind of sales pitch ever ensue as a result of participation in these studies. Market researchers are not in sales, and it is in their interest to ensure that respondents are treated well--especially highly sought-after ones. We are talking, after all, about an elite.

Of course, this kind of thing is not for everyone, but those who do participate genuinely enjoy doing these projects, and why not? They get paid for giving their opinions to influential people, they get to meet their colleagues in other companies, they get advance information on new products, they help make products and services more responsive to customer needs and wishes, and they usually have a good time. The sponsoring company gets valuable information, and so do you--plus some cash, some new contacts, and a well justified sense of your own worth.

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