

# Understanding Your Membership

*Research techniques to give you a better grasp of your association members' capabilities and needs.*

Like other professionals, REALTORS® in your association expect service and value for their membership dues. Increasingly, they expect their association to reflect the composition of the marketplace. Market research offers powerful tools to discover how to bring your association in line with your market.

## **Which Market Research Tool Should I Use?**

There are basically two types of research in this area: quantitative research, such as a survey, from which you can get data that has statistical significance; and qualitative research, such as a focus group, which generates descriptive data about perceptions, opinions, and attitudes, and leads to a greater understanding of differing points of view. Both offer important information and, if your budget allows, are best used in conjunction with one another.

■ From orientation sessions, the Santa Clara County Association of Realtors® had anecdotal evidence that its new membership increasingly reflected the diverse demographics of the area's population overall. A subsequent online survey confirmed that one-half of the Association's new members speak a primary language other than English, and the survey results had a direct impact on the implementation of mentoring and outreach programs in the represented languages.

Professionalism matters. Your findings are only as good as the construction, implementation, and analysis of your research. Whether you are using research collected by others or research you collect yourself, you need to understand how it was gathered, from whom, under what circumstances, and with what instruments.

## **Where Do I Start?**

What is it you want to know? From whom do you want to know it? Are you trying to predict behavior or gather background information? Two key steps in effective research are establishing your goals and determining who will be your research subjects. The computer motto "garbage in, garbage out" applies to market research as well. Your results will be helpful only if you have asked the right people the right questions to elicit helpful answers.



## **What Does NAR Have To Offer?**

Working with local and state associations, the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® (NAR) offers a variety of services with more reasonable fees than those of outside consulting firms. Services include project development, qualitative research, questionnaire design, data analysis, and report writing. The Association also offers moderator guidelines for focus groups and a computerized mapping technique—geographic information systems (GIS)—that allows you to look at geographic distributions of member data and at a profile of your market.

- In 2002, NAR worked with the Denver Board of Realtors® to carry out a membership study focusing on membership demographics, experiences, and attitudes toward DBR and NAR, diversity, and inclusion. DBR's Diversity Task Force hired outside consultants as well.
- As a tool to understanding a diverse membership, NAR has conducted an extensive study using focus groups of African American members in Baltimore, Hispanic members in Houston, as well as Asian American members in the Washington, D.C., area and in San Francisco. Information on the content and process techniques of this study is available through NAR.

NAR's Research Division has teamed up with survey companies that are particularly proficient in real estate research. By working through NAR, associations are able to take advantage of NAR's experience with established survey and interview techniques and related research technologies. Information on the services offered through NAR's Research Division is available over the Web ([www.realtor.org](http://www.realtor.org)), by e-mail ([eresearch@realtors.org](mailto:eresearch@realtors.org)), or by telephone (202/383-7518).

## **How Much Does Market Research Cost?**

A simple well designed survey is perhaps the least costly tool to use. Fees for survey design and analysis usually increase in proportion with the number of questions asked and vary depending on the means of communication. A survey with as few as five questions could cost \$2,000. In general, surveys conducted by fax, mail, or e-mail cost less than telephone surveys and personal interviews using a standardized questionnaire. A simple, Web-based survey might cost several hundred dollars, while a more elaborate telephone surveys would cost several thousand.

- The Seattle King County Association of Realtors® sent out a survey to its members through Zoomerang, a Web-based research group, at [www.zoomerang.com](http://www.zoomerang.com). Their expenses were minimal and results satisfactory.

Some state REALTOR® associations have incorporated limited surveys into new member registration procedures, sparing themselves the cost of design and coding, but yielding valuable information on their emerging member base.

- The Williamson County Association of Realtors® asks new members when signing up about their language skills and will use this information to plan education programs to expose all members to different cultures.

In general, focus groups cost more than surveys. Discuss fees candidly with prospective moderators, and ask for references. Additional costs of focus groups will include meals or snacks for participants, room rental, and reportage fees—taping and note taking—to capture information from the focus group.

### **What Are the Key Points in Designing a Survey?**

The most useful surveys are those that provide objective choices, are evaluated objectively, and reflect a substantial portion of your membership.

Short questionnaires yield the highest response rate. Limit a mail and Web-based survey to about five pages, a telephone survey to about 10 minutes, and a fax survey to about two pages.

**Questions should be framed so that they offer clear, mutually exclusive responses.** The most successful surveys generally use questions that are closed-ended, such as multiple choice, yes or no, choose one response, or indicate on a scale of 1 to 5 your agreement or disagreement with a particular statement. Include “N/A” (not applicable, meaning the respondent has no experience on which to base a response). Analyzing this kind of data can help you identify a majority opinion or a trend, although you will have to look elsewhere for the underlying reasons.

Explain up front what the survey is about and who is being asked to respond, with questions that will help you analyze results, such as the respondent’s membership status, years in the organization, and possibly demographic characteristics.

**Always pretest** all your survey questions with a small sample of your target audience. This helps you catch ambiguous or problematic questions and guarantees more reliable results.

If you plan to conduct a survey by telephone interview, minimize interviewer bias by training interviewers not to embroider or elaborate on the meaning of the questions, not to offer examples unless the same examples are offered to all respondents, and not to answer respondents’ questions. Interviewers should always let respondents know they can stop the survey at any point.

## How Many Members Should I Survey?

This depends on how much you can afford to spend, the value of the information to be obtained, and how precisely it must represent the entire group under consideration. Do you need to be 99 percent sure that your results are representative, or would you settle for less certainty if you cannot afford to sample so many members? Research professionals at NAR or a survey organization can help you make that decision.

Here is an example of how you might calculate sample size. NAR mail surveys usually yield a 5–10 percent response rate. If you plan to conduct a mail survey and want to have 300 responses, calculate the number of surveys to mail as follows, assuming a 5 percent response rate:

Number to send = responses wanted / response rate

$N = 300 / .05$

$N = 6,000$  surveys

Conversely, if your association is relatively small, say 500 members, then sending a survey to all your members might yield a response from only 25 of them (5 percent of 500).

- The Santa Clara County Association of Realtors® promoted its survey by enrolling respondents in a prize drawing for a Palm Pilot, thereby boosting the survey's response rate.

## How Do I Analyze Survey Responses?

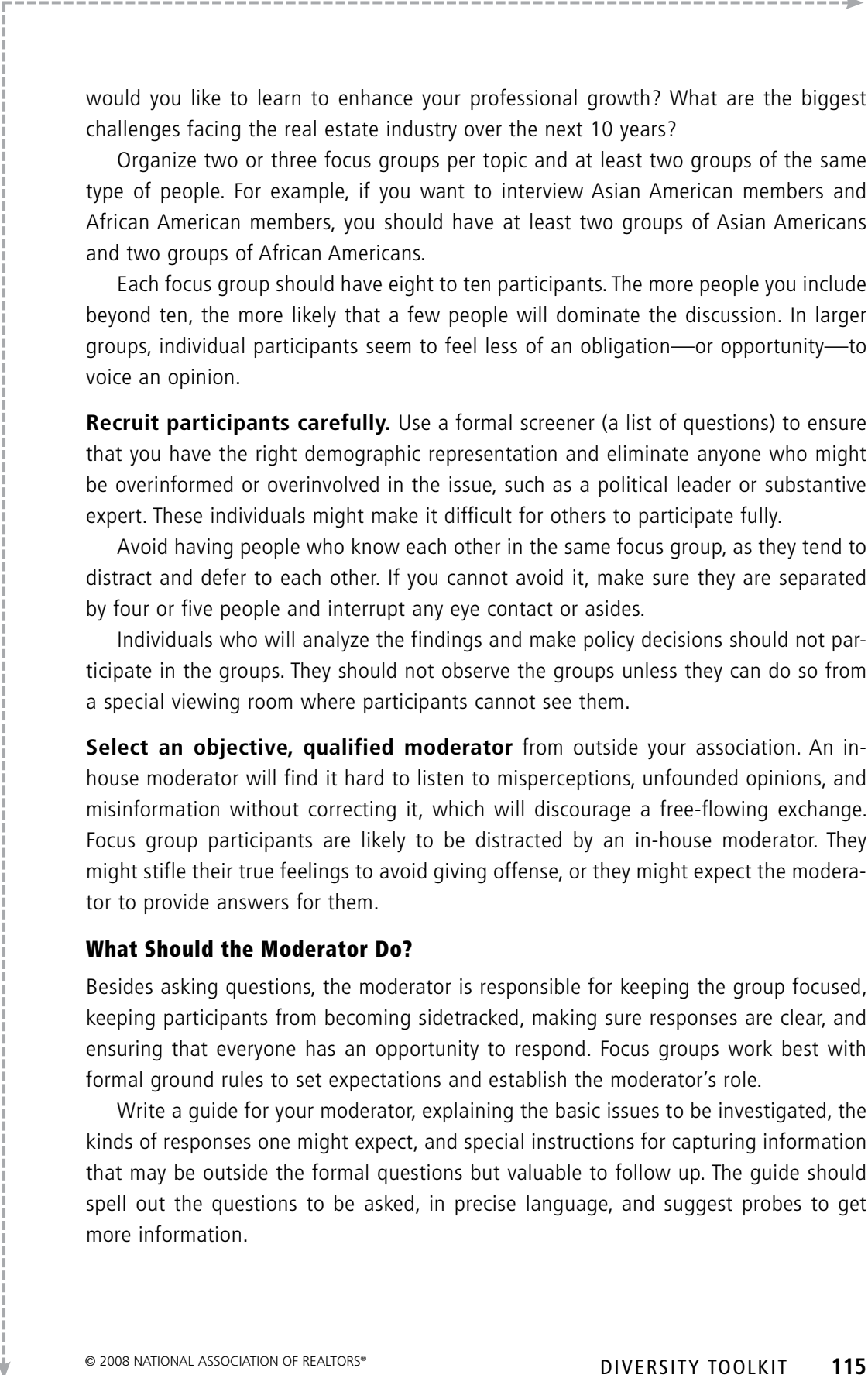
Here again, NAR research professionals or a survey organization can help. In general, code the responses with a formal coding guide that explains how to enter the information for quick statistical analysis. Set up in advance a series of cross tabs that compare information along two axes (for example, age and response to Q10, marital status and response to Q15, how many people answered yes to both Q4 and Q20 and what they have in common).

## What Do Focus Groups Offer?

Focus groups are a popular technique for needs assessment using small groups to discuss specific issues in a lightly structured framework. Focus groups are useful for exploring communications, marketing, program development, and content issues. They provide efficient data collection, fast turnaround time, unfiltered comments, and group interactions.

## What Are the Key Points in Conducting Focus Groups?

**Open-ended questions are helpful** in generating useful information, including questions such as: What kinds of services should an association provide? What skills



would you like to learn to enhance your professional growth? What are the biggest challenges facing the real estate industry over the next 10 years?

Organize two or three focus groups per topic and at least two groups of the same type of people. For example, if you want to interview Asian American members and African American members, you should have at least two groups of Asian Americans and two groups of African Americans.

Each focus group should have eight to ten participants. The more people you include beyond ten, the more likely that a few people will dominate the discussion. In larger groups, individual participants seem to feel less of an obligation—or opportunity—to voice an opinion.

**Recruit participants carefully.** Use a formal screener (a list of questions) to ensure that you have the right demographic representation and eliminate anyone who might be overinformed or overinvolved in the issue, such as a political leader or substantive expert. These individuals might make it difficult for others to participate fully.

Avoid having people who know each other in the same focus group, as they tend to distract and defer to each other. If you cannot avoid it, make sure they are separated by four or five people and interrupt any eye contact or asides.

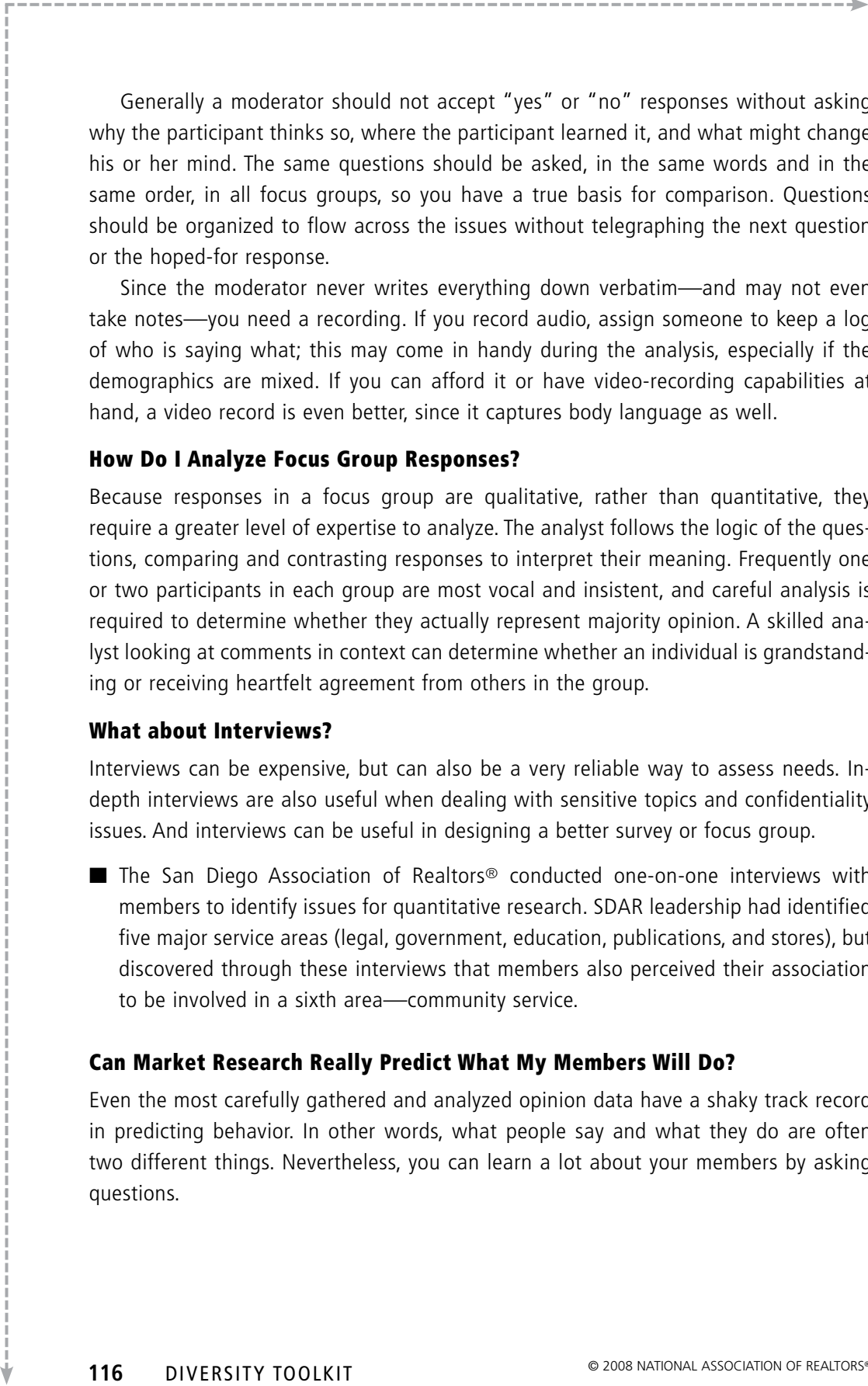
Individuals who will analyze the findings and make policy decisions should not participate in the groups. They should not observe the groups unless they can do so from a special viewing room where participants cannot see them.

**Select an objective, qualified moderator** from outside your association. An in-house moderator will find it hard to listen to misperceptions, unfounded opinions, and misinformation without correcting it, which will discourage a free-flowing exchange. Focus group participants are likely to be distracted by an in-house moderator. They might stifle their true feelings to avoid giving offense, or they might expect the moderator to provide answers for them.

### **What Should the Moderator Do?**

Besides asking questions, the moderator is responsible for keeping the group focused, keeping participants from becoming sidetracked, making sure responses are clear, and ensuring that everyone has an opportunity to respond. Focus groups work best with formal ground rules to set expectations and establish the moderator's role.

Write a guide for your moderator, explaining the basic issues to be investigated, the kinds of responses one might expect, and special instructions for capturing information that may be outside the formal questions but valuable to follow up. The guide should spell out the questions to be asked, in precise language, and suggest probes to get more information.



Generally a moderator should not accept “yes” or “no” responses without asking why the participant thinks so, where the participant learned it, and what might change his or her mind. The same questions should be asked, in the same words and in the same order, in all focus groups, so you have a true basis for comparison. Questions should be organized to flow across the issues without telegraphing the next question or the hoped-for response.

Since the moderator never writes everything down verbatim—and may not even take notes—you need a recording. If you record audio, assign someone to keep a log of who is saying what; this may come in handy during the analysis, especially if the demographics are mixed. If you can afford it or have video-recording capabilities at hand, a video record is even better, since it captures body language as well.

### **How Do I Analyze Focus Group Responses?**

Because responses in a focus group are qualitative, rather than quantitative, they require a greater level of expertise to analyze. The analyst follows the logic of the questions, comparing and contrasting responses to interpret their meaning. Frequently one or two participants in each group are most vocal and insistent, and careful analysis is required to determine whether they actually represent majority opinion. A skilled analyst looking at comments in context can determine whether an individual is grandstanding or receiving heartfelt agreement from others in the group.

### **What about Interviews?**

Interviews can be expensive, but can also be a very reliable way to assess needs. In-depth interviews are also useful when dealing with sensitive topics and confidentiality issues. And interviews can be useful in designing a better survey or focus group.

- The San Diego Association of Realtors® conducted one-on-one interviews with members to identify issues for quantitative research. SDAR leadership had identified five major service areas (legal, government, education, publications, and stores), but discovered through these interviews that members also perceived their association to be involved in a sixth area—community service.

### **Can Market Research Really Predict What My Members Will Do?**

Even the most carefully gathered and analyzed opinion data have a shaky track record in predicting behavior. In other words, what people say and what they do are often two different things. Nevertheless, you can learn a lot about your members by asking questions.