



Focus Groups vs Usability Studies

Focus Groups vs. User Studies

What's the difference?

The question we at Zanzara are asked more often than any other is, what's the difference between a focus group and a user study?

Here's the short answer: Focus groups tell you what people want; user studies tell you whether something works.



A focus group, also known as a marketing focus group, is a group brainstorming session run by a moderator. The goal of a focus group is to get a rough indication of desire – what people want a product to do for them. The marketing person works to get the group to discuss how a product might make them feel – to guide marketing and advertising decisions – just as much as what the product needs to do.



User studies are one-at-a-time working sessions run by a usability professional. The user actually interacts with a product, or a prototype of a product, and tries to complete some task with it. The usability pro works to find the points where the user feels frustrated in using the product – to guide product development decisions – as well as the points where the user achieves success in completing a task.

How user studies began

Focus groups are used to find out what people want. In a focus group, a dozen or so ordinary people gather together in a room as a moderator guides them in discussion about a product or service. A glass-walled room is used to allow observers to watch the discussion without distracting the focus group participants.

Focus groups are great for generating ideas and for identifying people's opinions of, and depth of feelings about, different aspects of a product or service. Much of the value of a focus group happens on the other side of the glass wall, as product development and marketing people are exposed directly to the raw, uncensored opinions of potential customers.

As focus groups became popular for making product decisions, a related problem became apparent: Customers often had problems using products, often the very products that had been built with focus group input. Some focus groups were then adapted to serve as a group testing ground for products or product prototypes.

However, the confusion resulting from several people trying to interact with a product at once made it hard to identify the exact problems that people were experiencing. It was decided to try testing one user at a time, and to replace the marketing-oriented moderator with a more procedurally-oriented usability specialist. Voilà – the user study was born.

Note: The name “user study” sometimes comes across as being a study of the user. It’s not exactly that – although it does focus on one user at a time. A user study is actually a study of the *interaction* between a user and a product; it could more properly be called a “user-product interaction study.” However, the term “user study” is brief, to the point, widely used and well-understood, so we at Zanzara continue to use it.

What user studies are good for

Focus groups and user studies have several things in common. They both take place in the same kind of special rooms, with a semi-transparent glass wall screening off observers. And both require ordinary people to be recruited, usually by phone, and brought in. Because of these similarities, some companies provide facilities, and recruit customers, for both focus groups and user studies. These similarities sometimes cause focus groups and user studies to be confused with each other.

Also causing confusion is the fact that “focus group” has become a kind of generic term for any process of getting feedback from current or future customers. Executive managers often say “Have you run this through a focus group?” when they really mean, “Have you gotten feedback from customers on this?” Many times, the kind of feedback that’s needed is better provided by a user study than by a marketing focus group.

User studies are different from focus groups in five ways:

- **One user at a time.** User studies involve one user at a time. Where focus groups include many people at once, and are sometimes dominated by one or two opinionated people, each user is heard individually in a user study.
- **Getting tasks done.** In a user study, each user is asked to complete one or more tasks. The steps that users find easy and the steps that they find difficult are each carefully recorded. This focus and precision make the results of a user study much more specific and actionable than the results of a focus group.
- **Making products better.** The purpose of a focus group is usually to decide what kind of product to build. The purpose of a user study is usually to help improve a product and make it work better.
- **Increasing profits.** A focus group is used by a company when deciding what product development efforts to invest in, resulting in large near-term costs in the hope of future profits. A user study is used to make products work better, resulting directly in cost savings, greater sales, and increased profits.
- **Used throughout the development cycle.** A marketing focus group is most appropriate at the very beginning of a product development cycle, when significant investment decisions are being made. A user study is appropriate throughout the development cycle, since it can guide both big-picture and finely-focused product development decisions.

Customers like the idea of participating in a focus group, and they sometimes leave a focus group in a very “up” mood, excited about the ideas they’ve been discussing. But they also sometimes leave the focus group in a state of frustration, feeling that the dynamics of the group limited active discussion to one or two people and that their own ideas weren’t heard.

On the other hand, customers need to be reassured at the start of a user study that it's the product that's being examined for any problems, not them. Once they get a chance to express their frustrations with a product, and to air their ideas for improving it, users get very involved, and leave the study happy about making a difference. Many customers involved in Zanzara's user studies ask us if they can come back for our next study.

	Focus Group	User Study
Usual number of people involved	8-10 customers and a moderator	8 – 10 customers in individual interviews with a usability pro
What happens	The group discusses a concept, product, or potential product	One customer at a time interacts with a product or prototype
Main purpose	Figure out what to build to fulfill customer desires	Figure out how to make products work better
Secondary purpose	Prioritize development decisions so key customer wants get addressed first	Prioritize development decisions so key customer pain points get addressed first
Sales impact	Gives sales force something new to sell	Increases positive "buzz" for a product and makes selling easier
Short-term financial impact	Large costs from new investment	Increased profitability from reduced support costs and increased sales
Added benefits	Group discussions can be fun, and enlightening, to watch	Customers' attempts to complete tasks can be painful, and enlightening, to watch
Points in common	Both take place in a glass-walled room for observation; both bring in direct customer input; both require that customers be recruited from local area	

Focus groups vs. user studies

Why user studies are special

User studies are so special because they focus on **eliminating frustration**. In the busy lives that people lead today, frustration is a major issue. People tend to avoid products or services that make them frustrated. A product that has every function the user might ever need can fall flat if the user can't quickly figure out exactly what it's for and how to use it.

The opposite of frustration is satisfaction. User studies help products move away from causing frustration toward **increasing customer satisfaction**. And satisfied customers buy more of your products and services, and enthusiastically recommend them to others.

A marketing focus group tells you what promises to make to your customers; a user study tells you how to improve your products and services so those promises are kept. Used together, marketing focus groups and user studies can help you build great products and create outstanding service offerings that customers find highly desirable, satisfying, fun to use, and easy to recommend to others.

About Zanzara

Zanzara helps clients reduce development time and increase product sales by tightly targeting their product development efforts to meet core needs of specific user constituencies. Zanzara offers customer research, usability testing, and user interface design for products in the hardware, software, and Internet arenas. Customers include: Adobe, America Online, AT&T, Boeing, Group Health, Hewlett Packard, IBM, Microsoft, Netscape, PalmOne, Charles Schwab, Siebel, Sprint, Sun, Symantec, Yahoo and Xerox. To contact Zanzara call 03 356-0181 in New Zealand, or visit the Zanzara web site at www.zanzara.com.

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