

# Assignment 2.1

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## Argue for Online Focus Groups

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# Market Research via Online Focus Groups

## ***The Lay Of The Land***

In developing the new online dating system HookUp.com, Funky Internet Business (FIB) has identified a need to refine its design and interaction model to improve end-users' interactions with the service. HookUp.com provides users with a paid, community-based environment that allows them to find other like-minded people, interacting via video, audio and text-based methods to get to know one-another. FIB hopes to generate revenue through continued subscriptions to the HookUp.com service, by providing a service which users continue to return to and use on a long-term basis.

There are a number of competing services already secured in the market, such as [www.anywebcam.com](http://www.anywebcam.com), [www.adultfriendfinder.com](http://www.adultfriendfinder.com) and [www.date.com](http://www.date.com); FIB aims to differentiate HookUp.com by providing a technically superior and more usable/intuitive system which users feel more comfortable with. To this end, we propose that FIB undertakes market research into the perceptions and opinions of potential users in regards to the current beta-version system. Through this research, FIB will aim to identify any key issues which may affect the usability or general perceptions of the system for its users. From this information, changes will be made, if required, before the system goes public, ensuring that it remains at the forefront of the field from inception.

## ***What Do We Need?***

At this point, FIB has an operational beta-version of the system running on internal test servers. Initial user consultation has taken place to aid in the design of the system, while competitor analysis helped determine a base set of functionality from which to begin development. HookUp.com now requires fine-tuning to meet the expectations of its users, and to ensure that it is met with positive feedback, where possible, on all fronts. Research at this stage would be aiming to elicit opinions and emotions from users, based on the beta-version of the system, along with possible revisions to be made and additional functionality to be added to meet their expectations. Given the nature of the information required, we propose that the research conducted is in the form of a small

number of **online focus groups**. This method has a relatively **low cost** and can gain **valuable insights** into the opinions and emotions of users.

From the research performed, it is hoped that we may discover:

- Perceptions (positive and negative) about the current system
- Potential avenues for improving either the interface, or the operation/task-flow of the system
- Perceptions of online dating in general from respondents

## ***How Do We Get It?***

“The main purpose of focus group research is to draw upon respondents’ attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions”<sup>1</sup>, so they provide an excellent method for obtaining information relating to the reactions of group members to the HookUp.com system. Other research methods aim more towards gathering data which may be analyzed quantitatively, which is less appropriate for the stated aim, since the research is really about discovering emotional-level reactions to the system at this stage. Jakob Nielsen discusses how “[i]n interactive systems development, the proper role of focus groups is ... to discover what users want from the system”<sup>2</sup>; exactly the purpose of this research. Given the nature of the system, we believe that an online version of the traditional focus group would be the best option because it would:

- Allow respondents to participate from a wider geographic area to participate
- Ensure that participants have a certain level of technical skill (important to the value of their perceptions)
- Make all interactions, comments etc available immediately in recorded, electronic format (via chat logs etc)
- Allow video/audio interactions to be recorded directly and thus be available for review

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<sup>1</sup> According to Dr Anita Gibbs, a Research Officer at the Probation Studies Unit, Centre for Criminological Research, Oxford University (<http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/sru/SRU19.html>).

<sup>2</sup> Discussed in his article titled “The Use and Misuse of Focus Groups”, 1997 (<http://www.useit.com/papers/focusgroups.html>)

- Allow users to be “more open and less guarded”<sup>3</sup> due to the anonymity of being online.

It is suggested that a number of online focus groups are performed, allowing some sort of ‘sanity-checking’ to take place across the different results. Possible groups to work with include:

- Heterosexual Male Users
- Heterosexual Female Users
- Gay Male Users
- Gay Female Users
- Bisexual Users
- Different age-groups (i.e. Late teen – mid-20s, 30-40, 40+)

From each group, we will provide:

1. Complete logs of discussions and transcript of audio
2. Recordings of audio and video interactions
3. Written report summarizing outcomes of that group, general perceptions of the system, recommendations based on comments and opinions, and any perceived deficiencies in HookUp.com
4. Demographic information of all participants

Based on this information, FIB will be well-placed to make any required modifications to the HookUp.com system before the public release, ensuring that at the public opening, it is a superior technical product which users are comfortable and confident in using. After all, “[t]here is ample evidence that sound research practices drive businesses success”.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Suggested on page 7 of “What Are Focus Groups”, a small 1997 publication from the American Statistical Association (online at <http://www.amstat.org/sections/srms/brochures/focusgroups.pdf>).

<sup>4</sup> Robert Walker, in *Working with marketing research: a message to marketers*, at [http://www.quirks.com/articles/article\\_print.asp?arg\\_articleid=712](http://www.quirks.com/articles/article_print.asp?arg_articleid=712), in Quirk’s Market Research