

## **Research Bias in Focus Groups**

In his book “The End of Marketing as We Know It”, Sergio Zyman highlights an interesting market research situation he was involved in.

By way of background, Sergio was the Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) at Coca-Cola during the 1980s and 1990s, where he was responsible for the highly successful launch of Diet Coke and the not so successful launch of New Coke. After leaving Coca-Cola, Sergio went on to establish a highly successful marketing consulting firm – which is where he encountered this situation.

Sergio’s firm was undertaking a major qualitative market research study, using focus groups, for a major beer brand. When the results were returned, the consultancy and the brand itself were concerned about some of the findings and some of the consumer perceptions of the brand.

As a result, Sergio’s firm decided to re-run the same focus groups with a different market research firm. BUT... this time they indicated to the research firm that their beer client was a DIFFERENT beer brand. This second market research company conducted the same focus group study, which explored brand perceptions.

Surprisingly the results were quite different. Sergio suggested in his book that the difference in the research findings occurred because the researchers were influenced by the beer client and their own perceptions, as well as what they thought the brand wanted to hear.

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### **Student Discussion Questions**

1. Do you think that it is possible to replicate focus group studies, in the same way that surveys can generally be replicated?
2. In your view, what would mainly influence the differences in the findings – the differing approach of the market research firm – the different collection of consumers in the focus groups – or the “client bias” effect as suggested by Sergio?
3. Given the challenges highlighted in Question 2, how can firms and researchers minimize the risk of unreliable or misleading market research findings?