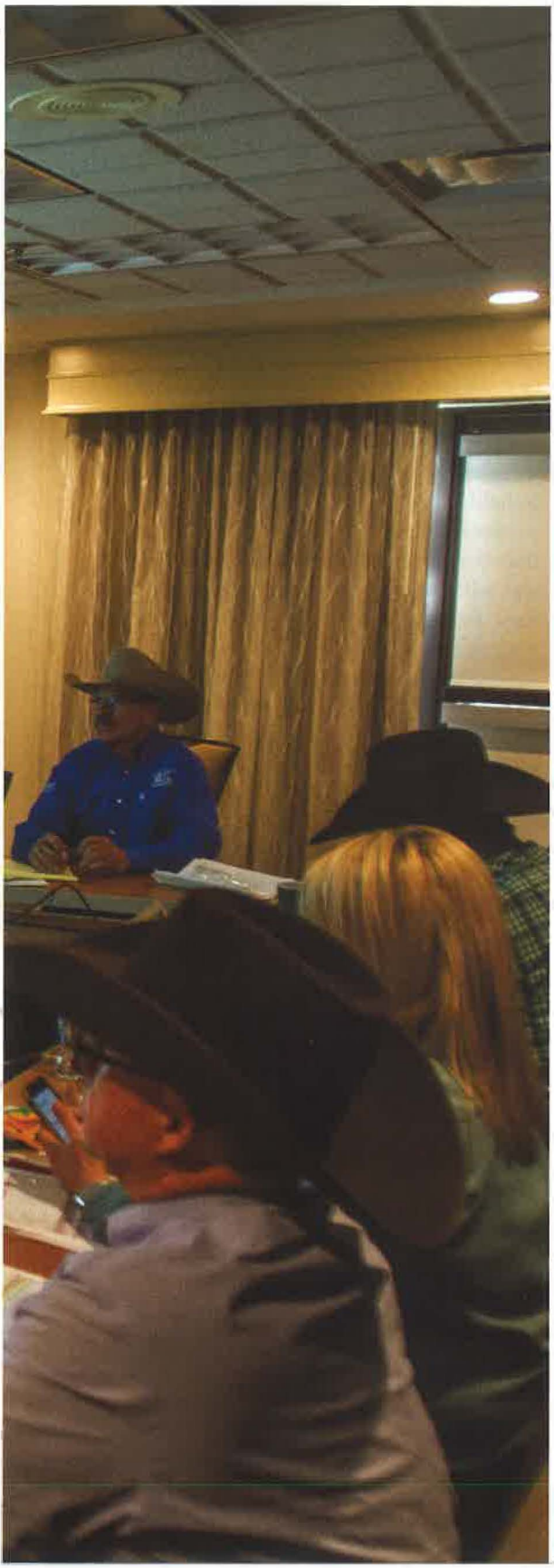
Hiring a professional moderator can help streamline questions and discussions for an effective focus group session.



Listen to Your Customers

Focus groups can offer valuable insight into what motivates your customers.

By KATIE NAVARRA

Photography by ROSS HECOX

HAVE YOU EVER WISHED FOR PSYCHIC POWERS so you could know what a customer is thinking? You don't need supernatural abilities to gain insight into customers' thought processes. You need a focus group.

When used strategically, interactions through a focus group can provide valuable information about what motivates consumers' buying decisions. No one knows this better than Dan Costa, founder of Noble Outfitters. The company's best-selling products—such as its Best Dang Boot Socks, the Viper utility knife (in pink) and even the company's name—have emerged from focus groups.

"People love talking about what they think is the best way to do something," Costa says. "That's especially true with horse people."

Focus groups can help identify new products and services, and assist with a re-branding or re-positioning of existing products and services, explains Rob Ristango, a digital marketing expert and CEO of The Sterling Woods Group, LLC, a Massachusetts marketing agency.

Well executed focus groups also help determine what it's going to take to offer world-class customer service, which in turn leads to higher retention and lifetime value, Ristango adds.

Focus groups nurture a dynamic that only happens in person. That interaction can't be replaced by an online survey, a phone call or other forms of market research. Gathering in-person feedback can be time-consuming, but the investment is worth the return.

During one focus group, Costa could see in the participants' eyes that something was bothering them. At first participants couldn't articulate what was "off." Through discussion it turned out that the company's original name—Noble Equine—didn't resonate. Costa sensed something wasn't right and facilitated a conversation that led to changing the company's name to Noble Outfitters.

"We never would have gotten that from an online survey," he says.

To help you organize a focus group, Costa and Ristango offer five tips for planning and executing an effective discussion.

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Focus groups nurture conversations that only happen in person.

to flow naturally. Reassure participants that what you record will be confidential, and that it's only so you don't miss their valued input.

Ristango encourages organizers to use a professional moderator.

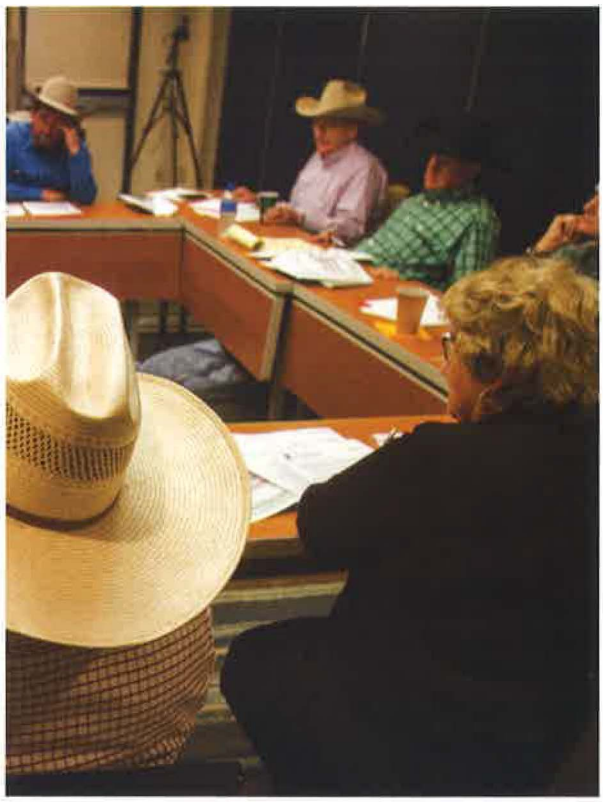
"It looks easy from behind the mirror, but moderating is really a skill that needs to be learned through training and practice," he says.

Make the activity worth their time to attend. Costa gives participants a snack, lunch, or wine and cheese if it's an evening activity. And he gives them product samples to try.

5 FOLLOW THROUGH.

The information gleaned through focus groups is only helpful when it's put into use. It's impractical to adopt every suggestion, but find the ones that resonate for your company and run with the idea.

"Ask your designers, developers and sales people what they think were the good gems



that came out of the conversation," Costa says. "Filter those 'gems' to the top and take that one thing that's the strongest and go for it."

Retailers and manufacturers talk about listening to their customers, but is that what they're really doing? Costa has learned to make a living by listening. Everything that his company has produced has come from its product development process, which relies heavily on customer input. Focus groups nurture a dynamic that only happens in person.

"The most successful companies fall in love with their customers, not their products," says Ristango. "Part of falling in love with your customers requires truly understanding their wants, needs, fears—just like a real relationship." ●

KATIE NAVARRA is a freelance writer based in New York.