

On the other hand, if the competition is less than receptive to you or your business, you may want to begin your own detective work to obtain the information you need. Sometimes just brainstorming with friends and family, can open up several good ideas to start putting together your marketing plan.

### Focus Groups and Mastermind Groups

In 1937 in his groundbreaking book, Napoleon Hill introduced the concept of mastermind groups. Even though he did get the idea from steel magnate and friend, Andrew Carnegie, Dr. Hill later redefined it and expanded to be something any group could put together. Mastermind groups didn't just have to be used by steel executives! We will explore that further, but for now let's first look at focus groups.

If you really want to go into depth with your marketing and viability of your service or product, consider putting together a focus group. Similar to a mastermind group, a focus group will consist of a group of people gathered together to "focus" on or test an idea or service.

The focus group can be a random mixture of friends, family, colleagues or industry experts gathered together to determine whether a product or service will or can be used by a prospective audience or market. With a focus group, you will receive a wider range of opinion, since you are allowing for both those in the industry and out of the industry. Many times this wider range of opinion will allow for both spontaneous and objective, non-biased input.

Even in this age of the "apps-savvy" cell phone user, companies are still organizing focus groups to test new products and services. There are private research and marketing companies that do nothing but put together focus groups around the country to set up testing sites at grocery stores, malls, and street corners.

Once you organize your own focus group, you will want to present them with your proposed business idea, samples of your product, and a questionnaire calling for specific answers. Take your time to create a good questionnaire. Your questionnaire should allow your focus group to mention a similar service or product that they have used in the past, what they liked about the service or product, what they found to be unsatisfactory, how they feel it could have be improved, and whether they would try using the product or service on a continual basis. Also, try to capture their age, income, education, profession, and hobbies as a way to begin looking for any marketing trends.

Decide how often you want to meet with your focus group – either online, offline or both. Preferably both as you are able to gather enough people. Use

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Basecamp or simply set up an AIM chat room or even do a Skype conference call. More on organizing your focus group later.

As for your questionnaire, say you were starting a catering service, the questions might include a breakdown of the top three events that people would use a catering service for – a wedding, a graduation or a 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. Ask them what types of foods they would like to see on a menu as well as how many people would they would invite to the event. You may also want to know if they have any special dietary needs or food allergies.

### Study Your Questionnaire and Look for Trends

Look over all of your responses, and see if there is anything that stands out and gives you that "ah-ha" or never-knew-that moment. Also, see if there is a trend or a response that seems to be repeating itself.

For example, if you always wanted to start a catering business in a small town where there are already over 20 different catering businesses, you might want to consider ways to promote on a broader scale (online products). You also may want to set up a joint venture with a local restaurant whose menu would be complimentary to but not in direct competition with yours.

Buy a notebook and keep track of all of your findings. Doing your research now will save you expensive mistakes later. Keep a list of other categories of businesses you might be interested in starting. You can always branch out into other businesses in the future, but for now, find one and get it up and running. More importantly, get it turning a profit.

Update your information with each focus group session. Hand out information or samples for your focus group to hand out to their families. Be willing – in the beginning – to work for free or hand out complimentary samples at large community events. It isn't difficult to find special events. Most newspapers – both online and offline – have weekend events.

Spend as much time as you need getting comfortable talking about your product or service. Practice in front of a mirror. Also, get your focus group to come up with a list of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) and anticipate being asked those the most. Once you are clear on your product or service and what to name it, you will want to have an online presence with a blog or web site. More on that later.

The important thing to remember is to study your research and work with your focus group. The two are there to provide you with enough concrete information as to who your potential customers are and how to reach them. As