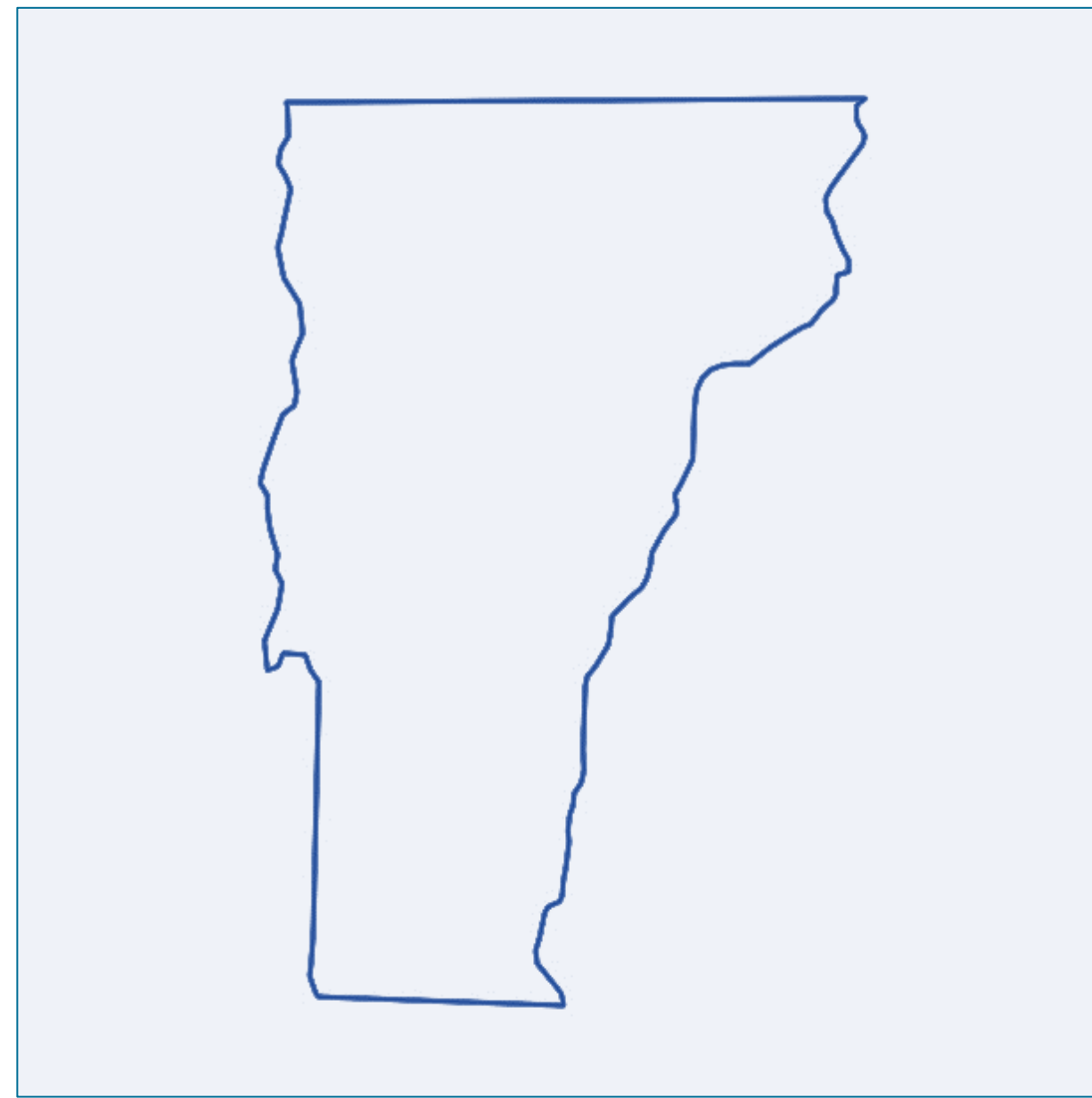


The Question

How can qualitative researchers build stronger rapport, establish trust, and gather in-depth information on sensitive topics, such as healthcare and health insurance, during a focus group?



The Project and Methodology

Market Decisions Research (MDR) worked with the Vermont National Education Association (Vermont-NEA) on qualitative research with their union members. The goal of the project was to better understand issues with healthcare affordability, barriers within benefits plans, ways to improve healthcare, and what may have a positive effect on the healthcare system overall.

MDR worked with VT NEA on a unique approach to the focus groups. They were interested in learning about multiple perspectives and from different populations including those with diabetes, cancer, chronic pain, mental health struggles, and the general population. In order to accomplish this, **MDR assigned each focus group to a subpopulation instead of randomizing and mixing up participation.**

While creating the discussion guides, MDR focused on writing one consistent guide in order to compare results among different groups and interviews. The only difference was a separate section in each guide written specifically for each subpopulation.

Creating a Space for Vulnerability and Shared Experience

Conducting Focus Groups Among Vermont Teacher's Union Members about Healthcare and Health Insurance

By Allison Tippery and Frances Tarbell



"Why do we have to, all of us, wonder, 'Should I go? Are we going to max out our limit if my family member goes?' Those are not fair questions that we should have to be asking ourselves, knowing that there could be a different system." (Mental Health, Participant 6)

"I have had things like that from both male and female medical providers tell me that I'm lying, that it cannot be the way I've described it, that it's not what I'm seeing, that I don't know what I'm looking at." (Mental Health, Participant 4)



You're living in fear. You don't know what the outcome of that's going to be and then all of a sudden now you got to deal with these monstrous bills. It's always daunting, and it's always anxiety provoking." (General, Participant 3)



Focus Group Category	# of Participants
1 – General Group	8
2 – Mental Health Group	7
3 – Diabetes Group	4
4 – Cancer Group	5
5 – Chronic Pain Group	7



"I think there needs to be better oversight or just control of what the insurance companies are allowed to do and not do." (General, Participant 6)

The Answer

This approach to focus groups and interviews proved to be successful. Not only was MDR able to hear the healthcare experiences from many different perspectives, **but the participants felt more comfortable to communicate their story with others who shared their experiences.** This provided MDR with powerful qualitative data and offered the participants a safe space to express vulnerability. **This methodology is highly recommended for similar research projects in the future.**