

## The Challenge

Conducting focus groups presents unique challenges when tackling sensitive subjects such as tobacco use. If handled poorly, moderators can trigger uncomfortable emotions or memories, create unwillingness to share, or discourage participation. This can result in bad data outcomes and a lack of trust in the researcher or organization.



## The Project

Market Decisions Research (MDR) worked with Vermont Department of Health, and Rinck Advertising to conduct focus groups with Vermont residents aged 26-64 who were current or former tobacco users. Each session ran approximately 90 minutes and were facilitated using Zoom.

### **The discussions covered:**

- ✓ Attitudes and experiences on tobacco use
- ✓ Message testing using perceived effectiveness scores
- ✓ Ideas to inform the development of new tobacco prevention campaigns

# SPARKING CONNECTION

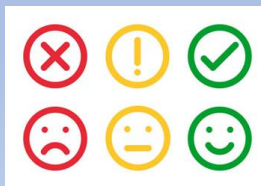
## Navigating Sensitive Discussions on Tobacco Use in Focus Group Projects



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### This Case Study Explores:

- Challenges of moderating focus groups when discussions turn sensitive
- Concrete methods for developing warm, professional, and responsive rapport during recruiting and interview stages
- Next steps



## Our Approach

### *Starting at the recruiting stage...*

- ✓ Develop rapport and set the tone
- ✓ Be flexible and informative

### *Throughout the group sessions...*

- ✓ Encourage free-flowing discussion
- ✓ Stay curious and non-judgmental
- ✓ Stay observant and present
- ✓ Balance empathy with neutrality
- ✓ Allow space for silence
- ✓ Use affirming language if the conversation causes participants to feel vulnerable
- ✓ Always give participants a choice

### *During follow-up...*

- ✓ Thank each person for participating
- ✓ Ensure participants have the proper contacts if they have further questions

## The Results

Throughout the focus groups participants had in-depth discussions, sharing sensitive experiences with tobacco use and addiction. Free-flowing discussion generated insightful responses to questions and messaging. A supportive environment was fostered in each group. This resulted in high-quality data and final reports that were engaging and satisfied our clients goals.

*Participants from every group went out of their way to express how impactful and positive the discussions were.*

## Our Conclusions

MDR's method of conducting qualitative research led to a successful project. This approach is founded on the idea that good focus group moderation starts from the outset of the data collection and continues after it's completed.