

# Three Hurdles in Front of the Glass

By Michael Carlon

## **F**inding Employment

I knew that I wanted to be a moderator from the time I witnessed my first focus group in the mid/late 90s. My road to moderating was a long journey with many impediments along the way.

Quite possibly, the biggest hurdle I had to clear was finding a research supplier who would hire me as a moderator. As the father of three children living in a one-income household, the prospect of becoming an independent moderator was not appealing.

To jump this first hurdle, I self funded some training at RIVA while I worked the client side at Unilever. Afterwards, I actively sought out opportunities to moderate groups for Unilever brands that did not have large enough budgets to support qualitative programs. Eventually, through networking, I was able to find an organization willing to invest in my continuing development and provide the opportunity to work on



world-class brands.

Hundreds of groups and thousands of consumer interactions later, I realize that the sport of moderating has to be looked at as a marathon and not a sprint. Even when you establish yourself as a moderator, there are two additional hurdles to be aware of that carry the potential to wreak havoc on our fragile egos; clients don't readily take risks on moderators who are "new" to them and not all clients will appreciate your style.

### The Innovative Paradox

Many marketing research buyers will tell you that they are constantly looking for new ways to uncover insights from consumers, but attitudes don't always match up with behavior. The biggest barrier you will face after you have landed that supplier-side moderating job you have always dreamed of is a simple fact; marketing research managers do not readily take on moderators who are "new" to them. Most have a "stable" of moderators they have to choose from and place each in a "pecking order." As an example, there are eight other moderators who work in my firm and if I am not available for one of my clients, more often than not, that client will choose another moderator from their "stable" vs. working with one of my colleagues.

I understand this mindset because I spent 10 years on the "buyer" side of the business before becoming a full-time moderator. Barriers to bringing on a new moderator are divided between those which are rational and those that are personal. On a rational basis I would question whether or not a prospective moderator had the right tools in their toolbox to uncover the insight needed to meet project objectives. Additionally, I would wonder whether or not they could write well, stick to a timeline, stick to the budget, and deal with last minute changes.

On a personal level, however, I would question whether or not I could spend six hours on an airplane sitting next to this individual. I would also question whether or not they would be a good fit for my team; given that qualitative research is highly interpersonal, if the moderator's personality does not fit with that of my team, the team may walk away from the experience with a poor taste in their mouths regardless of the quality of insight received. This would, of course, reflect poorly on me, and as such, I would tend to stick with known

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commodities vs. taking a chance on a moderator who was new to me.

In order to jump this second hurdle, I tend to start off new business presentations by showing empathy for a prospective client vs. jumping into capabilities. Showing a client that you understand the situation, and mapping your strengths to their fears, is an effective way to build rapport and raise their interest in what you have to say.

### The Ego Setback

Good moderators will start to build up a client following and will gain confidence that will help win future business. Then, one day, it will happen; you will receive a call/e-mail from a client or perhaps some feedback from a client manager at your company to the effect of, "We (they) liked your insights, but we (they) feel as if you are not a good fit for future

projects." This hurts the most when you feel as if a project went great and were pleased with the insights you crafted for them. Your first reaction is to think that the client is crazy, particularly when you have started to develop a loyal following of clients who tell you how wonderful you are.

This happened to me recently when I was conducting some groups for a major pharmaceutical client. I tend to practice what I call "moderating with spirit." In my sessions there is a lot of laughter, movement, and frankly, fun. I have participants stand up, move seats and work in "breakout" groups. I use my personality to make people feel comfortable, particularly when discussing highly

(Continued on page 22)

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(Continued from page 21)

sensitive topics and my style, apparently, was too much for our client to handle. In between the first and second group I was intercepted by one of our account managers who warned me to “take it down a few notches.” This client was very stoic and was used to moderators who were also very unemotional, as such, I was clearly not a good fit for him.

When this hurdle is placed in front of you, view it as a blessing rather than a curse. First off, such an experience will make you feel more human and give you an opportunity to evaluate whether or not your behavior needs to evolve to better suit your client’s needs. In short, it could be a great growth opportunity. If you are happy with your approach to moderating and it works for most of your other clients, you can then rejoice in the fact that you have just differentiated yourself from other moderators. Just as brands have strategies and a brand cannot be all things to all people, you as a moderator can’t be consumed with trying to make every client like you. By doing so, you will water down your abilities and won’t differentiate yourself from the thousands of other moderators out there.

#### **Like a Marriage**

Becoming a moderator is a lot like getting married; since most moderators are married to our jobs, this metaphor may

not be too far off! Consider that landing a job as a moderator is like a wedding day. It may have taken awhile to get there but it is a tremendous accomplishment. Further, a wedding is not the end of something, but rather the beginning of a journey with hurdles to be cleared along the way. As a moderator, you will also face hurdles even after you have established yourself as competent and talented. I hope that this article has given you some tips and tricks for how to clear those hurdles as you continue on your

moderating journey.

*Disclaimer: This article does not reflect the opinions or positions of the Marketing Research Association.*



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