

# ASYNCHRONOUS ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS: Qualitative Research on Reduced-Risk Nicotine Products with Underserved or Hard-to-Reach Populations

Cheryl K. Olson, M.P.H., Sc.D.<sup>1</sup>; Neil Sherwood, Ph.D.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>McKinney Regulatory Science Advisors, LLC, Henrico, VA, USA; <sup>2</sup>Neil Sherwood Consulting, Nyon, Vaud, Switzerland

## INTRODUCTION

FDA encourages “using both qualitative and quantitative methods when conducting TPPI [Tobacco Product Perception and Intention] research.” [1]

- Qualitative research:**
- Sheds light on factors that encourage or discourage adults who smoke to trial, use and completely switch to reduced risk alternatives.
  - Provides detailed descriptions in people’s own words of why and how they switched, and how they view products, their use and folk who use them.

During the COVID-19 epidemic, holding in-person focus groups were not possible. Asynchronous online focus groups can be an effective, lower cost, more efficient solution. Here we illustrate the use of this method with two studies of alternative nicotine products.

## GOALS AND METHOD

### Asynchronous online focus groups:

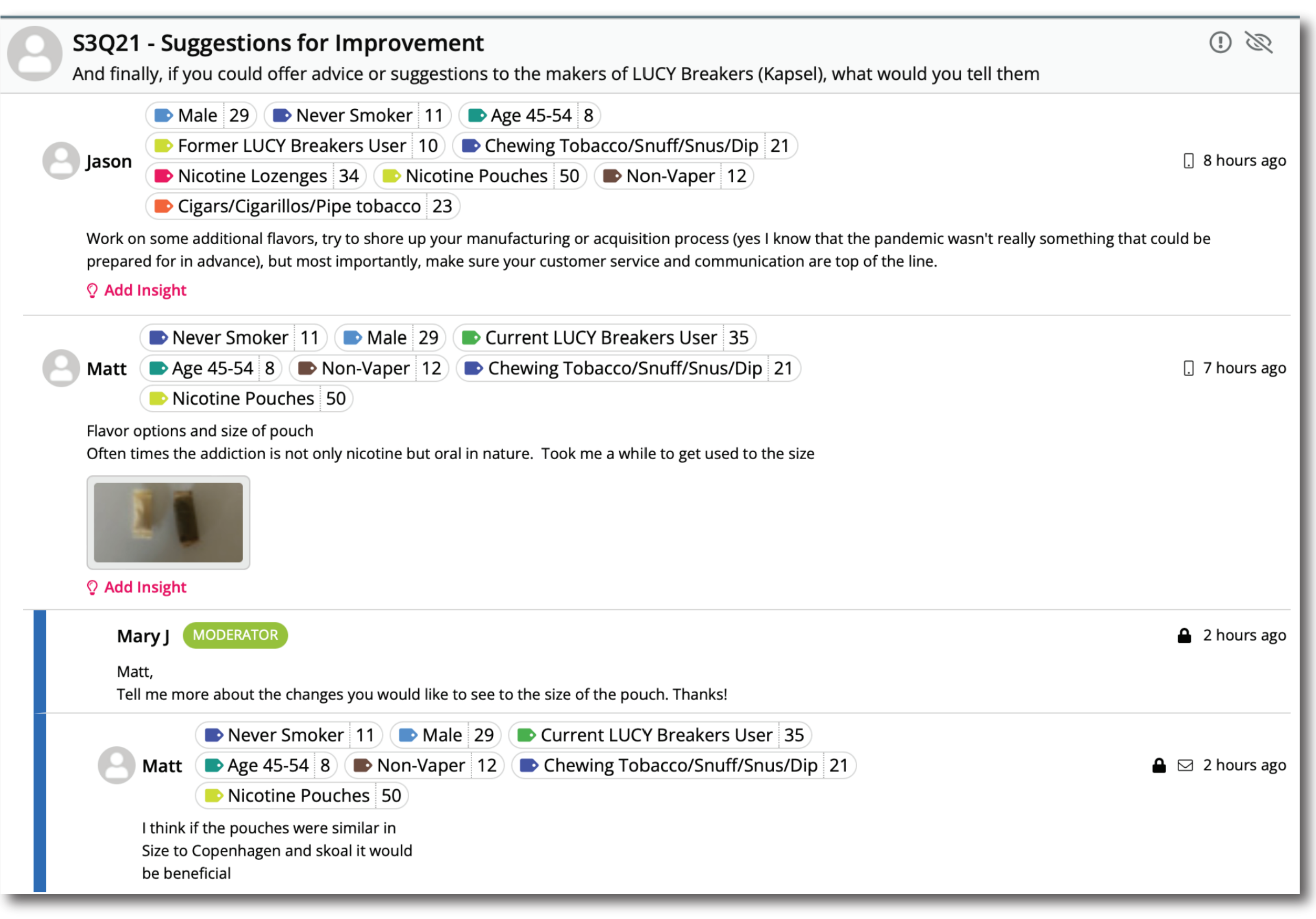
- Are an advanced variation of “bulletin board” focus groups [2].
- Involve a series of postings from moderators and participants, who follow a sequence or path designed by an investigator.
- Are appropriate for subjects who have been prescreened for comfort with and access to computers or tablets (products studied here were sold online).
- Collect a larger volume of in-depth information from each subject about their experiences, compared to traditional focus groups.
- Allow participants time to reflect on each topic before responding.
- Allows a diverse subject pool to be recruited, beyond the urban areas where focus group facilities are located, without regard to physical, financial or travel limitations.
- Facilitate a large enough sample size to collect preliminary data on actual use behaviors for bridging to published research.

We describe the utility of this method for gaining understanding of factors that attract or deter nicotine product trial; continuing or stopping use; complete switching and quitting combustible cigarettes; and quitting all nicotine use.

### Recruitment and data collection:

- Were initiated via emails sent to a random selection of legal-age customers who had opted-in to receive company communications.
- Were conducted by Vocci, LLC, a market research service provider experienced with qualitative methods but not in nicotine product research.
- Followed a discussion guide with questions and suggested probes developed by McKinney Regulatory Science Advisors, LLC (McKinney RSA).
- Separation of tasks preserved subject privacy and reduced the risk of bias from moderator knowledge of hypothesized findings.
- Used QualBoard®, an online qualitative platform from Sago.
- Involved screened subjects logging into an online “chatroom” at their convenience to type responses to questions and interact with moderators.
- Disallowed interaction between participants to maintain confidentiality and avoid influencing of responses.
- Occurred over three days to limit subjects’ daily time burden to 15-20 minutes.
- Facilitated varying questions according to participant characteristics (e.g., product use history and behavioral intentions).
- Allowed presentation of stimuli, such as photos or videos; subjects could also upload images or videos.
- Were observed by members of the McKinney RSA research team, who could see subjects’ responses and post requests to moderators via a chat feature, e.g., to ask subjects for more detail or to clarify ambiguous responses.
- Allowed moderators to make note of unexpected themes and patterns as they emerged.
- Identified participants by first name only and labeled their relevant characteristics (Figure 1).
- Provided a full transcript of all questions, responses, probes and follow-ups. Participants received an incentive (an electronic gift card, via a third party for privacy).


Figure 1: Example of Data Collection in Progress, Moderator Screen View (QualBoard®)



## EXAMPLE #1: LUCY® BREAKERS

**GOALS**

- Assess perceptions, intentions and actual use of tobacco-free nicotine pouches with a novel flavor bead.
- Determine women’s perspectives on nicotine pouches (historically rejected most smokeless options).



Data were collected from 49 current and former LUCY® Breakers users (21 female; most formerly or currently smoked).

**EXAMPLE FINDINGS**

Most people who tried LUCY® Breakers to cut down/quit smoking or vaping found them helpful. Some used pouches as a tool to quit all nicotine use; others switched and kept using pouches.

**Many had negative initial impressions of smokeless products...**

**Ciara (9/13/2022 1:09 PM)**

Prior to actually trying / knowing what a nicotine pouch was, I only pictured chewing tobacco that you could also get in a pouch and to me, it sounded SO gross.

**Group Tags:** Age 35-44, Current LUCY Breakers User, Female, Never Smoker, Nicotine Gum, Nicotine Lozenges, Nicotine Pouches, Non-Vaper

**...or people who used them.**

**Aimee (9/13/2022 4:17 PM)**

You kinda have to fight the dip mentality. Marketing needs geared to be classy and discreet. Not a country boy dip and spit.

**Group Tags:** Age 45-54, Chewing Tobacco/Snuff/Snus/Dip, Cigars/Cigarillos/Pipe tobacco, Female, Former LUCY Breakers User, Nicotine Gum, Nicotine Lozenges, Nicotine Patches (NRT), Nicotine Pouches, Smoker Intending to Quit, Vaper

**Some women who smoked were completely unfamiliar with pouch products, packaging, use, and terminology.**

**Kim (9/13/2022 10:15 PM)**

wasn't sure how to use them, how they are different from 'chew' or 'salts', or what the product was really going to be... when the package arrived I couldn't figure out how to open the case... still don't know what the top lid thing is for... seems like they come with a lot of non-necessary packaging.

**Group Tags:** Age 45-54, Current LUCY Breakers User, Female, Nicotine Pouches, Smoker Intending to Quit, Vaper

Narratives revealed that small differences in product characteristics can attract or deter adult nicotine users: aspects of taste, flavor intensity/longevity, moisture, nicotine strength/release, texture, and pouch size. Flavor bead was a positive; users could break or dissolve it at will to customize flavor delivery and hydration.


## CONCLUSIONS

- Asynchronous online focus groups:**
- Are effective for understanding individual behaviors for many different product categories.
  - Are a cost-effective way to gain in-depth qualitative information from a large and diverse subject pool.
  - Make data collection possible when in-person groups are challenging.
  - Allow collection of thoughtful and detailed stories of individual behavior change trajectories that enables identification of subgroup perception and use patterns, and unexpected obstacles or attractions.
  - Facilitate observation of data collection by a geographically distributed research team. Team members can ask for details and adapt *ad hoc* to address new themes that arise.
  - Allow recruitment of understudied populations away from urban areas, as well as vulnerable groups who may have difficulties reaching in-person research facilities (e.g., disabled, elderly).
  - Are not recommended for low-literacy populations or those uncomfortable with technology.
  - Lack the emotional content (e.g., body language, vocal intensity) and spontaneity offered by in-person groups.

## EXAMPLE #2: THE MAGIC MIST

**GOAL**

To assess perceptions, intentions and actual use of a disposable, pre-filled cartridge for a “cigalike” e-cigarette, particularly those in vulnerable populations [3] such as adults near or above retirement age, who have smoked for decades and are at high risk for severe health consequences from continued smoking.



Data were collected from 59 current and former The Magic Mist users (42 were female; most were aged 60+).

**EXAMPLE FINDINGS**

Older adults (50s to 70+) who had smoked for decades did appear to find a cigarette-like product such as The Magic Mist especially appealing.

**Subjects sought a “cig alike” that looked (to them and to others) and felt in their mouth and hands as much like a cigarette as possible.**

**Kim (4/19/2023 8:37 AM)**

I used them mainly at home or in my car while driving somewhere. I selected Magic Mist as they seemed pretty simple to use and were one of the few that looked like a real cigarette so the act of smoking could be simulated.

**Group Tags:** Ages 60 - 69, Female, Former User, Menthol Flavor User, Smoker Intending to Quit, South, Tobacco Flavor User

**Newer vaping technologies were perceived as “awkward,” “bulky,” or “messy.”**

**Denise (4/19/2023 1:36 PM)**

looks, feels like a cig. I think those ones that are big and put out clouds of smoke are ridiculous

**Group Tags:** Ages 70+, E-cigarette User ONLY, Female, Former User, Menthol Flavor User, Smoker Intending to Quit, West

**Physical limitations also made simple devices appealing.**

**Andrea (4/19/2023 7:38 PM)**

I like the draw and the flavor. I like that I don't have to refill a cartridge. I'm legally blind and it is difficult for me to do some things like refilling a cartridge.

**Group Tags:** Ages 70+, Current User, E-cigarette User ONLY, Female, Former Smoker, Menthol Flavor User

**Subjects described aspects of switching from smoking that took getting used to.**

**Brenda (4/18/2023 11:39 AM)**

the draw was different and the weight of it in my hand was really different. Remembering to charge the batteries took awhile and getting the right nicotine content was difficult at first.

**Group Tags:** Ages 60 - 69, Current User, E-cigarette User ONLY, Female, Former Smoker, Menthol Flavor User, Midwest

Many subjects did not know the term “cigalike”; they used a variety of terms for their product and the act of using it. This population needs careful pre-testing of wording in future surveys.

## REFERENCES

1. U.S. Food and Drug Administration. *Final Guidance for Industry: Tobacco Products: Principles for Designing and Conducting Tobacco Product Perception and Intention Studies*. 2022.
2. Krueger RA, Casey MA. *Focus groups: a practical guide for applied research*. 5th edition. Sage Publications; 2015.
3. Kleykamp BA, Kulak JA. Cigarette use among older adults: A forgotten population. *American Journal of Public Health* 2023;113(1):27-29.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

- The study in Example 1 was sponsored by Lucy Goods Inc. The study in Example 2 was sponsored by The Magic Mist. The companies had no involvement in the design or execution of the studies, nor in the analysis or reporting of study data.
- CO and NS are consultants to McKinney Regulatory Science Advisors LLC. They are contracted to provide scientific and regulatory support to nicotine product manufacturers.
- We gratefully acknowledge Gayle Ireland and Mary Johnson of Vocci, LLC for assistance with data collection.