

FOCUS GROUPS



TIP SHEET

What Is A Focus Group?

Focus groups are often used to learn how groups of people feel about a topic, a product, or even a program. Marketing firms often use focus groups to test new products, or find out what people like or don't like about existing products. These kinds of focus groups usually have the following characteristics:

- A professional moderator;
- Participants that fit a certain criteria (determined by those conducting the focus group) have been recruited, and generally do not know one another;
- Respondents are paid for their participation (from about \$25 to \$125 per person);
- The focus group is conducted in a market research firm with a two-way mirror, so a group of people can watch participants' responses to particular questions;
- Participants are informed they are being watched by others who are not participating;
- Sometimes the groups are audio or even video taped;
- Costs for these kinds of groups generally range from \$2500 - \$6000.

Sometimes public/non-profit organizations want to collect this kind of qualitative data but can't afford the kind of focus groups described above, so they conduct something between a focus group and a discussion group. In order to call something a focus group as many of the characteristics described above should be included, however costs can be reduced by reducing participant fees, finding a volunteer (but experienced) moderator, not using a marketing firm with two-way mirrors as a site for the groups, etc.

Why A Focus Group And Not A Survey?

The goal of a focus group is to gain insight and understanding about a topic by hearing from people in depth. Therefore focus groups are generally small, in order to allow all participants to have ample time to talk and to deal with topics in a more in-depth way than is possible through a survey. Focus groups generally work best with 8-12 participants, and generally range from one to two hours in length. A good focus group does not try to ask too many questions so that everyone is allowed to have their say, and so that the moderator can follow-up interesting lines of inquiry. Surveys are not as effective at generating new or tangential information. As a general rule it is good to focus on 8-15 questions depending on the number of people in the focus group and the length of the group.

The more diverse the group you are trying to learn about, e.g. "youth", the more groups you will likely have to conduct in order to learn about the population. For example, in an ethnically diverse community like San Francisco, it would be necessary to interview

African American, Latino, White and Asian youth (at a minimum). In more homogeneous communities you may not focus on differences in ethnicity, but rather age, geography, gender, or income differences among the target population.

ABCs of Focus Groups

There are four basic steps to conducting successful focus groups:

- A. Planning
- B. Recruiting
- C. Moderating
- D. Analysis and Reporting

Planning

A good focus group requires good planning. For example, in selecting a site you should ask yourself the following questions.

- › Is the site easily accessible? (This means can it be accessed by public transportation? Is parking available for people who drive?)
- › Is the site large enough to accommodate the group and moderator, but not so large that participants feel uncomfortable?
- › Can participants see and hear one another during the group?
- › Are the facilities in an environment that will feel comfortable and safe to participants?

It is also important to develop good focus group questions. Good focus group questions are those that do not elicit yes and no answers, but instead encourage people to describe in some detail their reactions to a particular idea or statement. Good questions should be as open-ended and neutral as possible in order to encourage people with differing opinions to express them.

If you have a lot of information that you want to collect from people like their age, ethnicity, whether or not they smoke, their zip code, etc., sometimes it is good to ask these kinds of questions on a paper questionnaire so that you can devote the group's and moderator's time to the survey. This form can be distributed to participants prior to the group and they can complete it while waiting for the group to begin.

Recruiting

As mentioned above, it can be important to have a diverse group of focus group respondents, even if respondents all fall under the same group selection criteria. For example, you might want to recruit a group of parents, but within the group of parents, you want as a diverse a group as possible in order to learn as much as you can about the attitudes, perceptions, beliefs of as many types of parents as possible.

In order to be sure you have enough participants for the group, generally it is a good idea to over-recruit by about 25%.

If you are relying on a marketing firm to recruit focus group, or recruiting them yourself you should develop screening criteria that determine which types of people you want in the group, e.g. Spanish speaking, over 18 years of age, from a particular city, etc. These criteria can then be developed into a script that can be used when recruiting participants by phone.

Once recruited:

- › Contact participants two weeks before the group to remind them.
- › Send a confirmation letter one week before the group. Include logistical information like time, date, and directions.
- › Contact each participant by phone the day before the group.

Moderating

A focus group moderator can make or break a focus group. If possible, use an experienced moderator. If you are unable to do that, at least keep the following in mind when selecting someone to lead the group:

- › Is the person good at drawing people out and encouraging people to speak?
- › Is the person able to control overly dominant people or people making inappropriate comments without disrupting the group?
- › Will the person be able to ask all of the predetermined questions, but also follow-up on comments made by respondents that need clarification?
- › Is the person known by participants? If so, keep in mind this can skew participants' responses.
- › Is the person someone that can make a group of diverse participants feel comfortable and safe?

Signed Releases

It is a good idea to get a signed release from focus group participants. While you should protect their identities, you want permission to use their opinions as direct quotes but you also want to spell out for them the conditions of their participation. If you are paying participants a fee for their participation you should also have them sign a form indicating that they received an incentive in whatever amount you determine for their participation in the focus group (this is important to create an audit trail).

What You Need On The Day Of The Focus Group

- Pens
- Chart Paper
- Easel
- Moderator
- Note taker
- Tape recorder

Analysis and Reporting

The way that focus group data is analyzed and reported varies greatly. If you are the person writing the report, it is important to attend the groups if at all possible, or to transcribe the tapes from the group in order to really understand the degree of feeling people used while expressing their ideas. It is a good idea to write up the group as soon after it occurs as possible, while it is still fresh in your mind.

A simple and more informal way to report focus group findings is to reiterate each focus group question in **bold** and then lists participants' direct quotes related to each question below it. Some groups of questions can be summarized but you need to be careful that you show the range of responses in the summaries. While it is okay to say that a majority of students responded in a particular way (if over 50% actually did), you also want to indicate responses of those that did not agree.

If you are analyzing data from a large number of focus groups and want to look at themes across groups there are a number of computer software programs to make the job easier and can be researched on the Internet.

Focus Group Costs To Plan For:

- Site
- Moderator
- Recruitment fees
- Participant stipends
- Other participant costs
- Translation (if the groups are conducted in a language other than English)
- Transcription

Resources: An excellent (and relatively inexpensive) resource is "The Focus Group Kit" authored by Richard A Krueger and published by Sage Publications Inc., 2455 Teller Rd. Thousand Oaks, CA 91320