

## FOCUS GROUPS

### WHAT IS IT?

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Qualitative research method for gathering information, attitudes and opinions on a particular topic or issue in an interactive group setting.

### HOW DO YOU DO IT?

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#### PROCESS

- **Develop a research objective and research questions for your focus group:**
  1. **Research Objective:** What is the main purpose of your research? Research objectives usually begin with language such as “To determine, to assess, to gauge.”
  2. **Research Questions:** What are the questions you need to answer in your research? Research questions usually begin with “who, what, when, where, why and how,” or “could we, should we, do we.” Research questions are NOT the specific questions you will ask in your focus group. Instead, they are the 4-7 questions your research needs to answer in total.

#### **Example:**

*Research Objective:* To determine member attitudes toward our association’s programs in order to improve member benefits

*Research Questions:*

- What are members looking for in our program offerings?
  - Which programs do our members find the most/least valuable and why?
  - Do we need to add or delete programs to better serve our members?
  - What types of programs should be added?
- **Choose a moderator for your focus group:** A moderator will guide the group discussion. A good moderator is someone who can facilitate open discussion, listen to participant responses and probe further for deeper meaning (see moderator’s tips). It is often helpful to choose a moderator who is not too close to, or too vested in, the topic. This helps avoid researcher bias in swaying opinions. Make sure the moderator is well-informed about the issue, but not to the point of taking a side.
  - **Develop a moderator’s guide:** A moderator’s guide will do just that – guide the discussion. A guide should move from general to specific topics. Do NOT think of the guide as a list of questions that you want answered from participants. Instead, the moderator’s guide should include a series of discussion starters that will get the group talking in a more conversational setting. Be creative in developing your guide. For example, to help determine what members are looking for in association programs, the moderator might say, “Write down the three main reasons you joined this association.” Then the moderator can go around the group and have each participant discuss their responses, encouraging other participants to join in. This will start a discussion about the benefits members are looking for in the association. A moderator’s guide should begin with introductions and a “lead in” or icebreaker to get the participants talking about the topic. The moderator will then move through the discussion guide and end with a “wrap-up” or one last comment from participants to wind down the session.

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- **Recruit focus group participants:** Focus groups should include 6-10 participants. Determine the demographic (age, gender, etc.) and psychographic (lifestyle, beliefs) that will be most valuable to your research. For example, do you want new association members or long-time members? Do you want an even mix of females and males? Age groups? Members who are very active in the association or moderately active? Participants are best recruited via telephone or email for expedience, though certain situations may allow for face-to-face recruitment. Many researchers offer some type of incentive for participation, such as food or payment. (See ethical considerations). It is likely that one or more participants will not show up on the day of the session. For this reason, you will want to “over-recruit.” If you need six participants in your focus group, recruit 10. Make sure each participant has the correct time and address for the focus group.

Another consideration is whether or not to recruit participants who know each other and/or the moderator. There are pros and cons to both sides, depending on the situation. Knowing the moderator may mean that participants provide answers they think the moderator wants to hear. For this reason, it is often better to select a moderator who is unknown to the participants to get a fresh perspective. On the other end of the spectrum, some cultural groups may not feel comfortable talking with a moderator who is considered “an outsider.” The same consideration is needed in deciding whether you recruit participants who know each other. If your focus group topic is controversial, for example, participants may feel more comfortable sharing their opinions with strangers than with someone in the community who might hold their opinion against them. However, if you have a broad, and more personal, topic, you may want to recruit a group of friends or acquaintances. For example, if you want to find out how women feel about aging, having a group of women openly discuss the topic with close friends, and a moderator with whom they feel comfortable, could yield richer, and more personal, results. Think about your specific topic and situation to determine if participant acquaintance will help or hinder the collection of data.

- **Hold your focus group (see below)**

#### PREPARATION

- **Room set up:** The ideal setting for a focus group is one that puts participants at ease while facilitating open, and equal, discussion. The room set up depends on your field of study and the situation. For example, marketing focus groups are usually held in a well-lit room with participants sitting around a rectangular or oval table. Chairs are arranged so that participants are sitting across from each other and can easily converse. The moderator should sit at one end of the group. An alternative is to hold a focus group in a living room setting, with furniture arranged in a circle, in a classroom, or in a community setting such as a school or community center. Just be sure to arrange the room so that participants have equal status in the circle, and can easily converse with each other and the moderator without having to crane their necks or turn around.
- **Name plates:** If the moderator and participants do not know each other, develop nameplates that can be placed in front of each participant, as well as one for the moderator. An easy way to do this is to take a piece of 8½ x 11 card-stock paper and fold it lengthwise. Have the participants write their first name on one side of the folded paper and set it in front of them. This allows the moderator and the participants to call the each other by name during the session. It’s much more personal to call a participant “Jane,” rather than “that woman over there.”

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- **Video/audio taping:** It is often helpful to tape the session to record the data generated from the focus group. A transcript is then typed from the tape, allowing the researchers to analyze the data after the session. If using a video camera, set up the camera behind the moderator and make sure all participants are in the viewfinder. Check microphone/s to make sure participants' responses will be picked up. It is helpful to have one or two auxiliary mics placed on the table in front of participants. (See ethical considerations).
- **Paper and Pens:** You will want to place a pad of paper and a pen or pencil in front of each participant. This allows the participant to write down ideas or thoughts as they come to mind. The moderator may also want to use the paper during the discussion.
- **Food:** Make sure food is set up before participants arrive for the focus group. Set up food in an adjacent area where it will not interfere with the session and can be easily removed once the session begins.
- **Note takers/observers:** Though you will likely record your focus group, you will also want at least one observer who can take notes during the session. Observers should sit off to the side, out of the way of participants, and take notes quietly so as not to distract the discussion.

#### **HOLDING THE FOCUS GROUP**

- **Timing:** The focus group session itself should be no longer than 1 hour to 1 ½ hours. But, you will want to build in extra time for late arrivals and for food to be served. The time of day you hold your focus group will depend on your participants. If participants work, for example, you will want to hold your focus group in the evening.
- **Food:** If food is served, have participants eat before you start the group session. It is difficult to eat and talk at the same time.
- **Release Form:** You will want participants to sign a release form (see ethical considerations) before they leave the session.
- **Session:** The moderator should begin the session by introducing himself/herself and explaining the purpose of the focus group. You will also want to set up the "rules" of the group. In other words, establish that this is an open, honest and confidential discussion, and that you are truly interested in what they have to say. The moderator will then go around the room and ask participants to introduce themselves. An icebreaker, or discussion starter, is often helpful in beginning a session – something that will help participants build common ground and feel more comfortable with each other and with the topic. After the moderator has moved through the discussion guide, he/she will want to watch the clock and begin wrapping up the session when time is running short. Having a watch setting on the table in front of the moderator is helpful. An easy way to end a session is to go around the room and ask participants to "tell us the most important point you feel we discussed this evening."
- **After the focus group:** Make sure to thank participants for their time and answer any questions about how responses will be used in your research. Once the participants have left the room, immediately convene with your notetaker/s to "debrief" on the session. Though you will type up the transcript and analyze the data later, it is often helpful to discuss initial thoughts and observations while they are still fresh in your mind.

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## MODERATOR TIPS

- **Set the tone early:** If you are relaxed and casual, your participants will be also. Start off the session outlining the “rules” of the group. For example, say how important it is to get everyone’s opinion. Ask participants not to talk over each other, but to take turns providing their comments. This is particularly important if you are recording the session. If two or more members are all talking at the same time, the recording will not pick up individual comments for the later transcription.
- **Conversation Dominators:** If one person is dominating the conversation, there are ways the moderator can help. For example, you might say, “Jim, I like where you’re going with that. I’m curious how many others in the group have had that same experience.” Then you can move around the group. It is often helpful to give the dominator an “assignment” that will give you time to talk to others while he/she is writing. You may say, “Jim, you have some great thoughts on this. Could you write down three ways we can overcome that, and I’d like for you to talk about them in a minute.” While Jim is writing, you can move on to other questions for the group.
- **Conversation Shyness:** There may be one or two group members who stand back and don’t take part in the discussion. A seasoned moderator will watch for this and draw out these members. For example, you might say, “Jane, I bet you have some interesting thoughts on this subject. Could you share them with us?” It is often helpful to ask a specific question. For example, “Jane, we’ve been talking about how participants get to work. Tell me what your routine is?”
- **Conversational Questions:** Since the purpose of the group is to generate discussion, avoid yes or no questions. Instead, start topics with general discussion starters, then move to more specific questions. For example, “Do you take Highway 40 to get to work?” is a yes or no question. “Tell me about your daily route for getting to work,” is a more open-ended discussion starter. After they have discussed their routes to work, you could then ask, “How many of you ever use Highway 40?”
- **Avoid giving your opinion:** Sometimes the discussion is so interesting, the moderator wants to jump in and give his or her opinion. In doing so, you risk swaying opinions, or inserting researcher bias into the discussion.
- **Be an Active Listener:** One of the most important characteristics of a good moderator is the ability to listen and probe for details. For example, if someone says, “I like taking Highway 40 to work,” probe further. Ask the participant to “tell me more.” “What do you like about it?” You should also pay attention to non-verbal cues. If the entire group seems to be in agreement, but Jane is sitting back with her arms folded across her chest, she may have a perspective you haven’t heard. Draw her out and ask if she has other thoughts on the subject.
- **Keep the group focused:** Often, a group will get off-topic, and it is up to the moderator to bring them back in. Sometimes these conversational offshoots can provide interesting information, but other times they are simply time wasters. If the group is discussing a topic that has nothing to do with the topic at hand, you might say, “I wonder if you can relate that to the topic we were discussing earlier?” or, “That reminds me of something else I’d like to get our opinion on.”

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- **Gaps in the Conversation:** Don't be afraid of silence. Sometimes the group needs a few minutes to gather their thoughts. Other times, the moderator needs to get the discussion going again. For this reason, it is helpful to have two or three ways at getting at a particular issue. If you try one way and it doesn't work, move on to the next. Chances are the group will be responsive to a different way of looking at the issue.
- **Clarify and Summarize:** Several times during the session, it's helpful to "check in" to make sure you are understanding what you are hearing. You might say, "Okay, so what I hear you saying is that you like the activities the cultural center holds, but they don't have enough interaction with the community. Do I have that right?" If you see nodding heads, you know you're on the right track. If not, the group will likely redirect you.

### **WHAT IT CAN ACCOMPLISH**

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- \* Allows us to gather information in a more conversational setting. Rather than looking for specific answers to specific questions, focus groups allow us to probe deeper, putting attitudes and opinions into a broader context such as how they arrived at those opinions.
- \* Can add multiple perspectives and voices, often giving you a range of responses that may contradict each other. This is very useful for establishing understanding of the complexity of an issue or community.
- \* Helps us understand how people reason and make decisions through interaction with their peers.
- \* Useful for probing further into a participant's response to understand the underlying meaning. Focus groups often raise issues that cannot be anticipated or predicted through other forms of research.
- Helps determine specific variables to test with further quantitative research.

### **LIMITATIONS**

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- \* Focus groups are qualitative and cannot be generalized to the larger population. Focus groups should be used to investigate the context of an issue further, but they do not tell us if the larger population will react in the same way. Focus groups are helpful if combined with other forms of research.
- \* More vocal group members may sway, or silence, opinions or responses of other group members. In addition, if participants know you are looking for certain responses, they often try to give you what you want. A good moderator will plan for this, and will devise ways of generating open, honest discussion from all participants (see moderator tips).
- \* One focus group may yield very different responses than another. For example, people on the east side of town may feel very differently about an issue than those on the west side of town. For this reason, it is recommended that multiple focus groups be held on the same topic to look for common patterns (or differences) among various groups.

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

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- **Videotaping:** If a focus group is videotaped, you must let the participants know they are being videotaped, how the video will be used, and get their written permission to do so.
- **Clear statement of purpose:** You must let the participants know why you are conducting the focus group and how the information will be used. This is often difficult to do without tainting the data or swaying opinions. For example, if you tell participants you are holding the focus group to determine if a new highway should be built, this may automatically sway their opinions. One way to approach this is to provide a general purpose to participants before the session, and then further explain how the information will be used once the session is completed. This allows for full disclosure while giving the participant the option of dropping out of the research before the data is used.
- **Privacy/Confidentiality:** While you cannot provide anonymity with focus groups (especially if they are being videotaped), you can provide assurance of confidentiality. All transcripts should identify participants as P1, P2,, or by pseudonyms, rather than by name. In addition, videotapes should be held in a locked room or cabinet, accessible only to the researcher.
- **Consent forms:** All participants should be asked to sign a consent form before leaving the session. A consent form gives express permission for the researcher to use the information as stated. (For sample consent forms, see the sample IRB proposals on the PERCS website under “Resources” and then “Ethics and Human Subjects Resources”).
- **Incentives:** In market research, participants are often paid a fee for their time. While this is appropriate in market research, it may not be appropriate for academic, government or other forms of research. In education, food is often the incentive. Choose incentives carefully based on the ethical considerations of your field of study.