

Focus groups

Technote

Introduction

Focus groups are a common form of social and market research. Groups usually involve five to ten participants who are guided through a series of questions by a moderator.

Focus groups can be used for many purposes, including advertising design, packaging, developing names for organizations or products, testing question wording, identifying issues for a program evaluation, testing on-air TV personalities, evaluating voter perceptions of the “warmth” and “honesty” of a politician, or obtaining opinions about an organization. Focus groups are useful for gathering information and determining the range of opinion on a particular issue.

Focus groups are a form of qualitative research. Statistical analysis should not be performed on focus group data for several reasons:

- ▶ Samples are small.
- ▶ Respondents are not selected using representative or random sampling.
- ▶ Questions are not administered in a standardized fashion.
- ▶ The information gathered is complex; if the data were coded for use in a statistical program, important insights would be lost.

Focus group data should never be used to infer population attributes.

The term *focus* is very important — this research technique works best when the research question can be stated clearly. Focus groups are less successful when used to explore very general issues.

Good practice

Participant selection should be purposeful. Enrol participants who have knowledge, are willing and able to share that knowledge, and represent important segments of the population.

Group dynamics are critical. The meeting must be positive and group members should be able to interact easily with each other.

Homogenous group composition is the norm. It is usually unproductive to combine young and old or rich and poor in the same group unless they are united by a strong common interest. The comfort level respondents have with each other is extremely important for gaining useful information. Some researchers try to include a cross-section of participants in each focus group to get a representative sample. This approach usually fails because focus groups are simply too small to be representative of the general population.

Moderator skill is very important. Focus group moderation requires maturity, research experience, and substantive knowledge of the field:

[Moderators] must have intellectual ability, yet show common sense and be 'down to earth'. They must show imagination, yet be logical. While an eye for detail is essential, they must have conceptual ability. They must show "instant" empathy, yet project themselves neutrally. They must be able to identify the typical, yet think beyond stereotypes. They must be articulate, but also good listeners. The ability to summarize concisely is essential, but a literary flair or style is needed. While thinking analytically, they must tolerate disorder.

[R & D Sub-committee on Qualitative Research. (1979). Qualitative Research – A Summary of the Concepts Involved. *Journal of the Market Research Society*, 21(2).]

A good moderator listens and explores, but does not dominate the discussion. If the moderator talks too much, either the enrolment failed to include the right people, the topic is not salient to the group, or the moderator is inexperienced. It always pays to wait, especially at the start of a group, for one of the participants to speak. Someone will always break the tension of silence.

Focus groups should begin with a **concise and focused agenda** for discussion. Define two to four main issues. Detailed questions can help the researcher explore the goals of the research with the client, but the moderator must be free to explore ideas as they arise in the groups.

It is a mistake to rush a focus group. A focus group should not attempt to cover too many questions, otherwise the moderator will have to rush through certain topics, which defeats the purpose of the group. For example, if 20 questions are asked of 10 participants in a twohour focus group, each participant will have less than 40 seconds on average to react to each issue (without leaving any time for introductions or questions/guidance from the moderator). As is the case in any conversation, important insights are more likely to emerge when participants have time to think about their responses.

Small groups work better than large groups. Often only five or six people participate extensively in a focus group, which means that in a group of 10 or more people, several participants will attend and be paid, but will not contribute to the discussion. Small groups, in which participants have time to consider all aspects of an issue, are more advantageous, assuming the attendees meet the knowledge and communication criteria. Six participants is an ideal size for a focus group. Smaller groups reach a high comfort level faster than larger groups, and genuine opinion emerges earlier in the session. This gives the moderator time to explore important issues.

Basic steps

Always use more than one focus group in any research project. The number of groups may be dictated by the number of sub-populations involved. Segmenting groups by key characteristics is common practice to ensure comfort and engagement of participants.

Recruitment is usually done by telephone. Participants should be screened for verbal ability, experience with the product or service, and willingness to be candid about their opinions (a very shy person probably will not articulate an independent opinion). People who work in the same area as the client or in market research should not be invited to participate, and no one who has recently participated in a focus group should be recruited (to avoid including focus group “professionals”).

Setting is important. Many firms use central facilities with one-way mirrors and sophisticated electronic recording equipment. Hotel rooms and other meeting facilities can be acceptable venues for a focus group, especially for the professional and business community or in situations where respondents may be intimidated by a professional office.

Review major issues with the client before the group. The moderator and client should agree on the agenda (also termed a “protocol”) that will guide the group discussion. A skilled moderator leads the group through all questions, although not necessarily in sequence. If the group begins to discuss an issue that responds to a question to be addressed later, the moderator should pursue the discussion at that time and remember to bypass the question when it comes up later. Finally, the moderator must be able to recognize new ideas and pursue them during the course of a group, while still ensuring that the protocol is covered.

Participants must be informed of audio or video recording and client observation. Under no circumstance can recording or observation (behind a mirror) be kept secret. If any participants are uncomfortable with either the recording or observation, they should be given the option to withdraw from the group. In very rare cases, the observers may be asked to identify themselves to the group. If the group is being video recorded, participants should be informed of this fact when they are recruited.

Sometimes clients may wish to observe from within the meeting room rather than from behind a one-way mirror. This is usually not a good idea — the goal of the group is to gather candid opinions from participants; clients would require a great deal of self-discipline if they were in the room when a participant criticized a pet project, for example. It is true that the client may be able to gently reintroduce a theme if the moderator fails to follow an interesting lead; however, careful preparation and moderator skill reduces the likelihood of this occurrence. As a general practice, clients should not participate in the focus group.

Set the stage with a clear introduction. A typical introduction might be:

*Good evening. My name is _____,
and I work for _____, a market
research company.*

*Before we begin, I have some meeting
guidelines I would like to review.*

*There are no right or wrong answers. Please
provide your honest opinions even if they are
different from others in the group.*

*Try to speak one at a time, so the entire group
can hear your comments. Please avoid side
conversations while others are speaking. To
ensure that everyone has an opportunity to
speak, I may ask for your opinion or I may
interrupt you, not because what you have to
say is not important, but to allow others to
have the opportunity to speak.*

*Because we are recording our discussion,
please try to speak up. We audio-record the
group in order to make sure that our notes
accurately reflect what everyone says. We will
not use your name in our report, and after the
report is complete, we will erase the
recordings.*

Clearly, this introduction would be tailored to a particular organization and task. Non-profit and government agencies would modify this approach.

Problems in group dynamics

Conducting focus groups requires skills that are similar to those used to conduct a meeting.

The moderator faces some specific challenges:

Tolerating silence. After a few moments, someone will speak up. It is important to respect the need for individuals to collect their thoughts. If you have spent time explaining why their thoughtful opinions are important to the research, why rush them for information?

Dealing with dominant participants. Ask another person to react to the dominant participant's comment. In this way, others have the opportunity to enter the discussion.

Ensuring that everyone speaks. A skilled moderator draws out those who are reluctant to speak.

Handling conflict. Personality conflicts among group members are unproductive, and a good moderator must be able to mediate.

Finally, some groups—about 1 in 10—simply don't "click." This must be considered when preparing the research budget. Skill and experience can reduce the occurrence of unproductive sessions, but any moderator can encounter a poor group.

Costs

The cost of a focus group can vary from \$2,000 to over \$10,000. Focus groups with small market segments (e.g., truck drivers who like baroque music) cost more. Enrolling a rare type of consumer group takes time.

Participants should receive payment for their attendance. Consumers should receive approximately \$60 to \$100 each; professionals should receive \$200 or more.

Multiple focus groups reduce the unit cost, and cost declines when the focus group is part of a general research program or if several groups are conducted on the same topic.

Moderator skill and experience also commands a premium. Clients should make sure that moderators are experienced; personal references are recommended. Do not use junior researchers to conduct groups among senior executives.

The format of the report must be agreed upon by the consultant and the client at the time of engagement. A point-form report can be produced at a modest cost; however, a report with verbatim transcript and senior researcher interpretation/advice takes time to produce and is more expensive.

Additional readings

- Greenbaum, T. L. (2000). *Moderating focus groups: A practical guide for group facilitation*. Sage: Thousand Oaks, California.
- Greenbaum, T. L. (1988). *The practical handbook and guide to focus group research*. D.C. Heath and Company: Lexington, Massachusetts.
- Morgan, D. L., Ed. (1993). *Successful focus groups: advancing the state of the art*. Sage: Newbury Park, California.
- Templeton, J. F. (1994). *The focus group*. Probus: Chicago, Illinois.

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