

# Effective Focus Groups

**A focus group is a research method that includes:**

- 1) a focused discussion
- 2) among 6-12 similar people
- 3) facilitated by a skilled moderator
- 4) where participants provide qualitative data to help understand an area of inquiry. Then,
- 5) careful, systematic analysis of the discussion provides insight into the area of inquiry.



Focus groups are beneficial through the program cycle.

## Pre-program implementation

To inform program planning and goal setting, survey design, location services, scheduling, and/or to test messages or social marketing campaigns.

## During program implementation

To collect opinions about the program, recommendations for program improvement, and recruitment of non-user services.

## Post program assessment

To evaluate strengths and challenges, to ascertain client satisfaction, and to elicit recommendations for next funding cycle.

Compare the pros and cons to decide if focus groups are right for your program.

| Pros                                 | Cons                         |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Interactive group process            | Data can't be generalized    |
| In-depth information obtained        | Less control over discussion |
| New ideas and concepts generated     | Groups can vary a lot        |
| Uncovers differences in perspectives | Can be difficult to arrange  |
| Uncovers influences on behavior      | Needs right environment      |
|                                      | Time consuming to analyze    |

## Seven Steps for Effective Focus Groups

- 1} Planning for the focus group
- 2} Developing the focus group questions
- 3} Recruiting participants
- 4} Facilitating and taking notes
- 5} Implementing the focus group
- 6} Analyzing the data
- 7} Reporting your findings

### STEP 1} Planning the Focus Group has three components:

#### 1) Defining the Area of Inquiry

The exact area of inquiry must be determined so that everyone involved is clear about the purpose for the focus group.

#### 2) Identifying Information-rich Participant

Identify those who you can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the inquiry. In some cases, several types of people can give you information from different perspectives.

#### 3) Designing the Study

This involves balancing design with available resources. Design options include: 1) Single Category, 2) Multiple Category, or 3) Double Layer design.

### STEP 2} Developing the Focus Group Questions

| How to develop your questions:                 | Methods for Developing Questions             |
|--|--|
| Revisit your area of inquiry                   | Brainstorming                                |
| Generate content areas                         | Pay attention to how the question is phrased |
| Generate open-ended questions                  | Pay attention to the order of questions      |
| Questions ought to inform your area of inquiry | Estimate time for each question              |
|  | Get feedback from others                     |

| The Order of Questions | Tips for Crafting Questions                    |
|------------------------|--|
| Opening question       | Design to use exactly as written               |
| Introductory questions | Use words the participants would use           |
| Transition questions   | Need to be appropriate for a group setting     |
| Key questions          | Need to be one dimensional                     |
| Ending questions       | Use formal voice & native speaker to translate |
| Final question         |  |

### STEP 3} Focus Group Recruitment has ten components:

- |  |                                  |
|--|----------------------------------|
| 1) Determine number of participants          | 6) Plan for refreshments         |
| 2) Define participant criteria ("screens")   | 7) Define and obtain incentives  |
| 3) Define recruitment strategy               | 8) Invite potential participants |
| 4) Schedule according to participants' needs | 9) Send confirmation letters     |
| 5) Identify location                         | 10) Make reminder calls          |

### STEP 4} Facilitating and Note Taking

| Tips for Good Facilitation                | Tips for Good Note-taking       |
|---|---------------------------------|
| Keep discussion on track                  | Correctly label the 1st page    |
| Encourage open conversation               | Provide word-for-word notes     |
| Encourage participation                   | Note major non-verbal cues      |
| Ask questions as written                  | Help keep group on track        |
| Don't express your views                  | Maintain neutrality             |
| Don't agree or disagree with participants | Ask for clarification if needed |
| Don't influence the conversation          | Pay attention to tape-recorder  |

### STEP 5} Implementing the Focus Group

| Before the focus group        | During the focus group:             | After the focus group: |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Set up chairs and snacks      | Make opening statement              | Thank participants     |
| Post signs & locate restrooms | Set ground rules                    |                        |
| Greet & make introductions    | Ask all questions in order provided | Distribute incentives  |
| Ensure participants' comfort  |                                     |                        |

### STEP 6} Analyzing the Data

| Content Analysis involves:             | Tips for Conducting Content Analysis        |
|--|---|
| Identifying major themes               | Not everything is worthy of analysis        |
| Expanding findings within each theme   | Analysis is based on pattern identification |
| Exploring variations and commonalities | Be aware of personal bias                   |
| Using quotes to illustrate points      | You are the voice of the participants       |
| Reporting participant recommendations  |   |

### Types of Analysis

| Long Table Approach (Low Tech)                                    | High Tech Approach                  |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| Named because of the amount of space used                         | Computer programs track information |
| Involves cutting & sorting participants' thoughts                 | Pre-defined categories              |
| Cut-up thoughts are taped onto flip chart paper to develop themes | Line tracking is automatic          |
|   | Search functions are available      |

### STEP 7} Reporting Your Findings

There are 3 types of written reports commonly used in writing up your findings.

- 1) The narrative report which is a lengthy description of the study.
- 2) The bullet report which is similar to an outline of the narrative report but with careful choice of phrases and words to clearly convey the concepts.
- 3) The report letter to participants which is a report letter to participants, based on one of the other types of reports.

#### Outline of a Typical Report

- |                           |                                    |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1) Cover page             | 5) Results and findings            |
| 2) Summary                | 6) Conclusions and interpretations |
| 3) Table of contents      | 7) Recommendations                 |
| 4) Purpose and procedures | 8) Appendix                        |

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