
Research Tips

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Focus Groups

What is a focus group?

Focus groups are really interviews which are done with five to eight people per group. These people are asked to participate because they all have something in common that is pertinent to the focus group. Focus groups are a research method, which uses focused group discussion.

Who should conduct the focus groups?

Two people are typically involved in the focus groups: moderator and note-taker. The focus group moderator is typically the researcher. The moderator's job is to facilitate discussion. The moderator must be (and perceived to be) able to identify with the participants. It is important that the moderator have a note-taker who can manage refreshments, tape record the session, welcome participants, take notes and solve problems.

How many questions do you ask in a session?

You should have eight questions or less. The more you know about your topic, the more structure will be incorporated into your session. The questions should be clear, open-ended and conversational in style. You want people to freely communicate their answers, so pose the question in an inviting format. There are five different categories of questions, which can be asked at a focus group:

- ◆ opening (To relax people and get them taking)
- ◆ introductory questions to the topic
- ◆ transition to the next type of questions
- ◆ the key questions- the ones researchers would really like to know more about
- ◆ end questions, which help researchers decide the focus of the conversation (e.g., ask participants to focus on what was most important in the conversation) and close conversation with a short 2-3 minute summary of what was heard and ask the participants to comment on its accuracy.

How many focus groups?

Three to five focus groups may be sufficient for your study. If people are all saying the same thing, it will be evident after three focus groups. If their thoughts are quite different, then the researcher may have to do more than five focus groups. How do you decide when to stop? You can stop once you start hearing the same ideas repeated - nothing dramatically new is stated. Once you've reached this point you have "theoretical saturation"-that is, you've heard it all.

Where and when?

The where and when depends largely on your participants. You should locate the focus groups in a setting, which is accessible to all persons. The time of day depends on who you are recruiting. The session should only last for 45 minutes to one hour. Some groups are recruited more easily if the sessions are between 5-7 pm or 7-9 pm. Other sessions work best if they are done around lunch time.

How many people per focus group?

Six to eight people is considered appropriate because it will give all a chance to say something. If, however, you think your group may have a lot to say about the topic, then fewer people per group is necessary. You may need to over-recruit to allow for cancellations. When recruiting, keep in mind that you need a good representation of people for your groups - not just the most enthusiastic ones. You also need people to participate who are not satisfied with the program.

Making your pitch

A role play might help you determine what the participant would want to know and hear about when you are recruiting them for focus groups. Some questions might include:

- ◆ What would matter to them?
- ◆ What would they want to know?
- ◆ What would encourage them to react more favorably to this request?
- ◆ What would convince them that it is important to participate in this project?

Some information you might want to give them includes:

- ◆ the nature of your research
- ◆ who will be attending the focus group
- ◆ your expectations of them
- ◆ incentives (i.e., whether you'll be offering beverages, food or cash (incentives are considered a good way to encourage participants))
- ◆ nature and frequency of further contacts

Reminders

Now that you've recruit your participants, you need to remind them of their commitment and how much you appreciate their participation. Send a confirmation letter- as personalized as possible, e.g.: hand written envelope - but make sure it is on your organization's letterhead to lend credibility. And make a follow-up phone call the night before the session.

Roles

The moderator

In real estate the saying is "location, location, location;" in focus group research, we say "moderator, moderator, moderator." Before you conduct your focus group, you must have a good moderator. A moderator is someone who is positively interested in the participants, knows the subject matter, is willing to moderate and not participate, and is ready to hear unpleasant views. In some circumstances, a professional moderator is recommended if issues are extremely difficult to quantify and/or if anonymity is desired.

The moderator should have a clear understanding of group processes to be able to control difficult groups (i.e., groups that are too quiet, not respecting others' views, or one person controlling the conversation). Other characteristics of the moderator include:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Curiosity;• Good communication skills;• Friendliness;• Sense of humor | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interest in people;• Openness to new ideas; and,• Good listening skills. |
|--|--|

The note-taker

The note taker is responsible for recording information during the session. The note-taker is also responsible for setting up the equipment and room for the session. The note-taker may also contribute to the focus group through additional re-directions of respondent when issues are vague and assist with the summary of the session.

Conducting the sessions

As an employee, you may find that before you step into the building on Monday mornings, you are mentally preparing yourself for the week ahead. The same holds true for each focus group. Before the focus group, the moderator must prepare him or herself mentally, coordinate with the note-taker to assemble the equipment and arrange the room. When the focus group participants arrive, it is extremely important to have both moderator and note-taker welcome them and make introductions. Keep things light by making easy conversation. Offering participants beverages or food will help in making them more comfortable. Dress similar to how the participants will be dressed

Usually 10 minutes past the start time, the focus group begins by the moderator introducing him or herself and the purpose of the session. The group is reminded that everyone's views are important, even if the opinions are not shared by the rest of the members.

There are three opinions for recording information during the session: tape recording, flip charts, or the use of a computer or pad of paper. If the session is to be tape recorded, all members must give their consent. The positive aspect of tape recording is that all words are recorded and later transcribed for analysis. The negative is the same and cost. For every hour of tape, it will take a good transcriptionist two to three hours to type. The recording begins with all members giving their first names or pseudo names, if appropriate. The moderator then begins with the predetermined questions.

At the conclusion of the focus group, the moderator summarizes what has been said. This summary is a useful way to show the participants that the moderator has been listening and to encourage participants to analyze the moderator's interpretation. The session concludes by thanking the participants and providing their honorarium.

Analyzing Focus Groups

The moderator is usually the one who plays an essential role in analyzing data. Below are some essential points regarding analyzing focus groups.

1. Analysis principles of particular importance to focus group research:
 - ◆ let your objectives guide the analysis
 - ◆ don't get locked into one way of thinking
 - ◆ Early analysis can move the study to higher levels by...
 - a) entertaining alternative explanations
 - b) allowing feedback from each focus group to guide analysis
 - c) comparing each focus group
2. Analysis considerations for focus group research. Consider the...
 - ◆ words and context;
 - ◆ internal consistency;
 - ◆ frequency and intensity of comments;
 - ◆ Extensiveness of comments;
 - ◆ specificity of responses;
 - ◆ what was NOT said; and,
 - ◆ find the big ideas.

The analysis process

The analysis process occurs before, during and after each focus group. Typically, what a moderator learns in one focus group is used to guide his/her understanding and formulate probing questions in subsequent sessions. As the moderator does more sessions, the data analysis is being built upon. By the time the

moderator does three focus groups, he or she will have a sense whether all has been heard, or whether more sessions are needed.

Deciding Unit of Analysis

Before moderators start data coding, they need to decide on the unit of analysis. Unit of analysis is the amount of text coded at any one time (e.g., paragraph, and sentence). The text unit needs to be manageable and meaningful. Some sleuthing through your data will tell you whether you can generate codes based on text units which are paragraphs, lines or sentences. In some projects, a paragraph analysis is sufficient because responses tend to be limited to a few sentences. The unit of analysis will depend on how the data is recorded and how much each person has to say.

Reporting

One type of reporting is the typical written professional report. Its elements include:

1. Summary- written at the end; no more than two or three pages.
2. Objectives and procedures- detailed procedures may go in the appendices; a general overview is included in the body
3. Results or Findings- consider organizing by themes and put the most important ones first. You can devise your summary different ways:
 - ◆ reporting of raw data: comments are grouped according to thematic structure
 - ◆ descriptive summary: a summary paragraph describes the peoples' responses to specific questions; each summary is follow by example quotes.
 - ◆ interpretive summary: same as the descriptive summary with the addition of a paragraph on data interpretation
4. Summary or conclusions- a few essential themes are cited. Several themes are tied together. Findings across questions are identified; unusual finding are also noted.
5. Recommendations (optional)-general or specific suggestions for the future.
6. Appendices

Reporting back to your participants

Most focus group participants want to know they have been heard and that you are planning to do something with the data. A two-page Report Memo to participants may contain:

- ◆ a thank-you for participating
- ◆ summary of findings
- ◆ list of recommendations
- ◆ ongoing and future initiatives

Incorporating feedback into Practice

We know it's sometimes the most difficult, yet rewarding, part of research: incorporate what you have learned into your operations, continue to do what people have said you are doing well (we tend to forget positive feedback) and focus on areas where there has been an identified "opportunity for improvement or growth."

The above points are from Morgan, D.L. & Krueger, R.A., The Focus Group Kit. U.S.: Sage Publications

Above article has been reprinted from:

Silverman, B. (March 22, 1999). Focus groups: The creation (part 1 of 2). Centinel, Centennial College, Scarborough, Ontario, Canada.

Silverman, B. (April 12, 1999). Focus groups: Conducting, analyzing and reporting (part 2 of 2). Centinel, Centennial College, Scarborough, Ontario, Canada.