

# **Focus Groups**

## **1 Introduction**

### **1.1 What is a focus group?**

*“A group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research.” (Powell et al., 1996)*

Focus group research involves organised discussion with a selected group of individuals to gain information about their views and experiences of a topic.

It is an inexpensive, rapid appraisal technique that can provide researchers with a wealth of qualitative information on a variety of issues including attitudinal preferences, performance of development activities, services, or products.

A focus group is not just a bunch of people reacting to a concept or discussing a subject. Focus groups require a considerable amount of professional discipline in their design, execution and interpretation. There are extraordinary pressures to accomplish specific objectives within extreme time constraints.

### **1.2 Features of a focus group**

Most of the surrounding literature recommends that between 6 and 11 people should form the focus group for optimal results. At least two facilitators or moderators should be present. Their purpose is to lead the group in a discussion of their experiences, feelings and preferences about a topic and record the results.

The facilitator raises issues identified in a discussion guide and uses probing techniques to solicit views, ideas and other information.

It is important to get as much as possible out of groups, with more groups, obviously adding more value. Interestingly though, in a pair of groups, usually 80% of the value is in the second group. In three identical groups, usually about 60% of the total value is in the third group. Each group can add light on the one before and the one following. Furthermore, focus group research yields more information than could be gained through individual interviews or surveys with the participants. It is the interaction between the different types of people that brings out the most useful information. The moderator needs to hear where there is consensus among these different types of people, and where there is a diversity of experience and opinion. You want to hear not only opinions, but also the kinds of people who hold these opinions, how the opinions are expressed and what values are at the root of them. You also want to hear how these different types of people react to what is said. What this provides is a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

## 2 Advantages

- ◆ It is low cost and provides speedy results.
- ◆ Its flexible format allows the facilitator to explore unanticipated issues and encourages interaction among participants.
- ◆ In a group setting participants provide checks and balances, thus minimising false or extreme views.
- ◆ Focus groups allow an insight into people's shared understandings of everyday life and the ways in which people are influenced by others in a group situation.

## 3 Limitations

- ◆ The flexible format makes it susceptible to facilitator bias, which can undermine the validity and reliability of findings.
- ◆ Discussions can be side-tracked or dominated by a few vocal individuals.
- ◆ Focus groups generate relevant qualitative information, but no quantitative data from which generalisations can be made for a whole population.
- ◆ Information can be difficult to analyse; comments should be interpreted in the context of a group setting.

## 4 What is needed to run focus groups?

### 4.1 Participants?

Focus groups should include 6-11 people to allow the smooth flow of conversation. The ideal group size is about 7 or 8. Any more than that and people start relating to each other collectively instead of individually. More importantly, people with divergent thoughts can hide.

Participants should be homogenous, from similar socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Ideally people should not know each other. Anonymity lowers inhibition and prevents formation of cliques. There are issues of trust to be considered with sensitive or personal information. Participants need to feel comfortable with each other. Meeting with others whom they think of as possessing similar characteristics or levels of understanding about a given topic, will be more appealing than meeting with those who are perceived to be different.

One option to help these issues is the use of personal notebooks. Participants could be asked to jot down their key feelings or anything that they didn't mention that they feel is important. This will not only ease the pressure on the note-taker, but also will address anonymity fears and help to maintain confidentiality.

### 4.2 Discussion Guide

The discussion guide is an outline, prepared in advance, that covers the topics and issues to be discussed. It should contain few items, allowing some time and flexibility to pursue unanticipated but relevant issues.

The guide provides the framework for the facilitator to explore, probe, and ask questions. Initiating each topic with a carefully crafted question will help keep the

discussion focused. Using a guide also increases the comprehensiveness of the data and makes data collection more efficient.

#### 4.3 Types of questions

Questions should be phrased carefully. Open-ended questions are more useful because they allow participants to tell their story in their own words and add details that can result in unanticipated findings. 'Why'? questions should be avoided as these yield obvious or stereotypical answers. 'How'? and 'What'? questions work well. Furthermore, probing techniques allow the researcher to go deeper into an issue without biasing the answer given.

#### 4.4 Length of session

Sessions typically last one to two hours, depending on the number of participants and the number of issues to be addressed and questions to be asked.

The maximum number of issues that is recommended to be addressed in a group is one to three, with sub-issues under each. However, typical guides can be seen to contain 6-10. There may be a compromise in quality when you try for this much in a group. Not all questions in a guide will necessarily be asked of each group

### 5 Conducting the Discussion

Often participants do not know what to expect from focus group discussions. It is therefore important for the facilitator to establish rapport with the group. It is helpful for the facilitator to outline the purpose and format of the discussion at the beginning of the session, and set the group at ease. Participants should be told that the discussion is informal, everyone is expected to participate, and divergent views are welcome.

The discussion should contain four distinct parts;

1. **The Opening:** Welcomes and Introductions. Review of purpose of the discussion
2. **The Ground Rules:** Everyone's ideas count, everyone should have the opportunity to speak. Confidentiality will be maintained. Only summarised information will be communicated
3. **The Discussion Questions:** Provide a framework and guidance for conversation among participants to explore topics of interest. Primary questions will always derive from the purpose of the focus group. To help the group make the most of the session, questions that probe issues or follow up on particular statements are important tools for the facilitator
4. **The Wrap Up:** Often includes a 'cooling down' exercise. For example, asking group members to say 'one thing that you heard here that was really important'. Expression of thanks to the participants and restatement of how the information will be used

## 5.1 Leading and Recording the Discussion

At least two moderators should be present, one to lead the discussion, and the other to take notes. Note takers should;

- Describe the sense of what each person says
- Provide identifier of who said what, e.g. PTE
- Capture general flow of the discussion, e.g. the common ideas expressed
- Record the characteristic language expressed, e.g. specific phrases, NVC's

Focus group moderating is not easy. The qualitative researcher has to use the group dynamics to help people to get to deeper levels of meaning, to verify in different ways that he/she is getting the true story, must keep track of different motivations, and much much more.

The moderator must get the respondents to interact with each other in a way that reveals additional information. This benefits the research, rather than people being forced to give yes/no, multiple choice or numerical answers. More importantly, people are able to freely react to each others' responses. This open ended group interaction leads to several advantages. The value of focus groups is not only that people can react to each others' comments (interaction), but in so doing, they potentiate each other (stimulation), so the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Stimulation is created by the excitement, group support, challenge, new ideas and other features of the interaction. There can be an irresistible pull to say things that they would not ordinarily reveal. Focus group participants:

- React to each others' comments
- Draw each other out
- Ask each other questions you didn't think to ask
- Build on each others' ideas
- Spark new ideas
- Jog each others' memories
- Modify each others' comments
- Fill in incompletions and gaps in knowledge
- Nudge each other out of ruts and habitual thinking
- Take opposing positions
- Persuade each other
- Change their opinions

Focus groups uniquely expose and accentuate both the similarities and the differences between distinct types of people. People will go into the most amazing detail with other people who are in the same shoes, who speak the same language, who they expect to understand them.

You can get a lot more from focus groups than top-of-mind beliefs, knowledge, attitudes and practices of respondents. Focus groups are a laboratory in which you can get to much deeper feelings, implicit beliefs, hidden attitudes and secret practices. But more importantly, focus groups are a laboratory in which you can experiment with going beyond the present to what can be, beyond the *is* to the *can* and *ought to be*.

You can discover how to change beliefs and behaviour, how to persuade, how to teach, how to communicate.

## **6 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations for focus groups are the same as for most other methods of research. When selecting and involving participants, researchers must ensure that full information about the purpose and uses of participants' contributions is given. Being honest and keeping participants informed about the expectations of a group and topic, and not pressurising participants to speak is good practice. A particular ethical issue to consider in the case of focus groups is the handling of sensitive material and confidentiality given that there will always be more than one participant in the group. This issue is made even more salient if participants are not from similar social or occupational groups, whether in terms of understanding or status.

At the outset moderators will need to clarify that each participants' contributions will be shared with the others in the group as well as with the moderator. Participants need to be encouraged to keep confidential what they hear during the meeting and researchers have the responsibility to anonymise data from the group.

## **References**

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