

Organizing and Conducting Focus Groups

What is a focus group?

The focus group interviewing technique is a qualitative research method where a small sample of respondents participates in an unstructured group discussion about selected topics, under the guidance of a moderator. Focus groups provide the opportunity to observe a lot of interaction on a topic in a limited period of time.

Focus groups are best suited to topics of attitudes. A major strength of focus groups is their ability to explore topics and generate hypothesis, and in the opportunity to collect data from group interaction. Focus groups result in data that might not be obtained without group interaction.



How can focus group data be used?

- To understand an organization's image
- As an early research step in survey/questionnaire design
- As an exploratory tool
- To provide feedback for administrators
- To identify perceptions of representative members of a population
- To gather opinions from people who would otherwise be difficult to reach
- To orient management to a new field
- To generate ideas

How can focus group data be abused?

- Using focus groups as a low-cost alternative to more appropriate methods of data collection
- Generating data that focus groups were not meant to generate
- Implementing more focus groups than necessary
- Taking the method too seriously or not seriously enough



How many participants are appropriate?

Focus groups typically include 7-10 people, but can involve as few as four to as many as twelve. The optimum size of the group is 8-12 participants. The larger the group, the less opportunity exists for individuals to participate. If the group is too large, some people will tend to remain less involved if the larger group can carry the discussion. If the group is too small, some individuals may be sensitive to group dynamics and personality types.

What skills should the Moderator have?

The main job of the Moderator is to stimulate and guide the group. In addition, the Moderator gives the participants a sense of purpose and direction. The Moderator also establishes the “ground rules” for the group. It is vital that the Moderator use a tested “Moderator’s Guide” and be capable of following-up on participants’ comments with probing but non-judgmental questions. While it is helpful for the Moderator to be knowledgeable about the research subject, it is more important that the person be skilled in facilitating group discussions in an open, friendly, non-threatening way.

The Moderator should be part authority, part host. If participants do not feel comfortable about revealing their opinions on a topic in a group setting, or if they feel the questions or topics represent an invasion of privacy, they will withdraw from participation. If the Moderator is not perceived as impartial and non-judgmental, the results will have little value.

The successful Moderator must be able to deal with the varying dynamics within focus groups: a passive, quiet group; an overly exuberant group; a group that strays off course; a group that misses the point; or even a tense or hostile group. The Moderator must also:

- Keep the group on target.
- Know when to wrap-up a question and move forward.
- Be a good listener.
- Communicate clearly.

How should focus group questions be asked?

Questions are the heart of the focus group interview. Using open-ended, simple questions allows the person responding to answer from a variety of dimensions; does not imply an answer; does not suggest a manner of response; and reveals what the person is thinking about. The questions should be predetermined and should be arranged in a logical, natural sequence. Questions should also move from general to specific.

Focus group questions should be pilot-tested. This can be done with the first focus group interview. If major changes are made in the questions or in the procedures used by the Moderator, then the results of the first discussion can be set aside and omitted from data tabulation. Testing should consider not only the nature of the questions, but also the characteristics of the audience, the interactions among participants, and the Moderator’s procedures.



How should each focus group session be conducted?

A Moderator and an Analyst should be involved in each session. The role of the Analyst is to be a non-threatening observer taking notes to add to the focus group data. The Analyst often discusses the data collection with the Moderator at a mid-point of the focus group session.

Participants should be instructed to arrive a few minutes before the session. As they arrive, they should be greeted, sign in, and be offered some light snack or beverage. Late-arriving participants could pose a problem. If the group starts late, valuable time is lost; if latecomers enter the room after the group has started, they can have a negative impact on the group. The Moderator should decide in advance how latecomers will be handled.

The focus group can take place around a large conference table, or by placing tables in a U-shape with the Moderator at the open end. Seat “experts” and “loud” participants near the Moderator; place shy and quieter participants directly across from the Moderator.

Often, midway through the focus group session (such as during a break), the Moderator and the Analyst will briefly meet to discuss the group dynamics, any problems, or unanswered questions. Typically, the Analyst records each session by taking written notes. Participants’ responses may be recorded, as long as permission is granted by the participants in advance.

How should the Moderator handle personality types?

The Moderator should be prepared to manage the different personalities within the focus group. Participants’ personal differences must not be allowed to detract from the value of their contributions. Meaningful groups involve a variety of people. The temptation to value the insights of some respondents and to dismiss the contributions of others is often overwhelming. Moderators, Analysts, and observers must constantly resist that impulse to realize the benefits of focus group sessions.

How does the Moderator identify the different personality types in a focus group, and respond to each type effectively? Here are some clues to identify personality types, as well as management techniques for the Moderator.

The Dominant Participant

- Will be among the first to speak
- Is verbally assertive
- Has a destructive effect on group morale
- Tends to make long speeches
- Interrupts other respondents

Dominant participants need limits to be set and welcome the imposition of constraints. If left unchecked, this type of participant will use a disproportionate amount of the time available. The Moderator can interrupt Dominant participants in mid-sentence and redirect questions to another respondent in the group. Say “Thank you” and redirect, or change the question.



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The Unresponsive Participant

- Attends, but doesn't talk
- Answers, but doesn't volunteer anything
- Leans back in a chair and pushes away from the table
- Tries not to be seen by the Moderator
- Avoids eye contact, or stares



The Moderator should smile, nod approval, and gently direct invitations to participate.

The Pompous Participant

- States opinions as if "inspired" to do so
- Refers often to personal experience
- Is concerned with "how things used to be done"
- States viewpoints vaguely or using generalizations



Generally, the Moderator must tolerate comments to avoid discouraging other participants. Responses directed toward the Pompous participant can consist of bland smiles.

The Expert Participant

- Is a common personality in professional groups
- Makes other participants feel inferior or subordinate, causing them to withdraw from participation
- Is often polite, not assertive



The Moderator should direct respondents away from the Expert participant's opinions to avoid "ally-building." One option is to say, "I'd like to hear from (name somebody else in the group)." Or, assign somebody to play devil's advocate and urge that person to find arguments which conflict with the Expert's views.

The Negative Participant



- Dwells on a negative experience
- Expresses critical viewpoints
- Questions the legitimacy of the focus group
- Makes general attacks



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This type of participant has an axe to grind. The Moderator should state that a particular concern has been heard, and does not have to be repeated. Eye contact should be avoided to discourage repeated discussion.

What are some other “tools” for the Moderator?

- Start the group with an autobiographical “icebreaker” which offers each participant the opportunity to speak at least once.
- Give the group permission to manage itself, when appropriate.
- Emphasize the need for as many different viewpoints as possible.
- Talk about stories.
- Try to involve all group members. Ask, “What is your opinion?” to various participants as a conversation develops.

How should results be reported?

Getting meaningful information from random dialogue can be difficult. It may be difficult to find a pattern of significant data. The report should include a brief statement of the problem and the questions asked. General responses can also be included. Results can be organized according to the level of support for something (from very supportive to not at all supportive), or by the age of the respondents, or by participant characteristics (occupational categories, gender, relationship to the problem/opportunity, etc.).