

# Focus Groups

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As early as the 1930's, social scientists expressed concern about the interview as a data collection technique. Interviews were judged to be overly dominated by the questioner, and criticised as not leading to the true feelings of the respondents. Various approaches were attempted in response to this criticism, leading to such innovations as Carl Rogers' non-directive therapy, and later, invention of the T-group. Another approach became known as the Focus Group. A focus group is a group comprised of individuals with certain characteristics who focus discussions on a given issue or topic. Since the 1960's, the technique has been adopted by market researchers who use it to determine what consumers think of products, or potential products. In the last decade, serious applied and scholarly researchers have also discovered the technique and are now using it for data collection on a wide variety of issues and topics.

The focus group has advantages over other approaches to data collection such as the questionnaire or the interview. The use of questionnaires in data collection permits no input, other than that of the individual respondent. There is no opportunity to clarify questions or for the respondent to expand his or her own perceptions by sharing and comparing them to those of others. In the case of interviews, there is some opportunity for clarification and other input in that the interviewer might probe and suggest ideas which give rise to views and opinions which the respondent may not have shared in a written questionnaire. The focus group goes one step further. It not only discloses what is important to individual respondents, but it

attempts to provide a situation where the synergy of the group adds to the depth and insight. Thus, the group strives to provide in-depth qualitative data which could not be obtained as efficiently any other way. In this sense, focus groups have something in common with brainstorming techniques.

Focus groups have many uses, most of which relate to program planning, program improvement and program evaluation. They are often used before the introduction of a new social or educational program in order to determine needs, to test reactions to possible program offerings, and to examine the factors which help make people decide to enrol in programs or not. They are also used in the development of research procedures to test reactions to possible evaluation, questions and procedures to be used later using quantitative methods. They are particularly useful in helping develop specific research questions and issues for further exploration. Focus groups are sometimes used during an on-going program in order to provide formative evaluation. They are increasingly being used after programs are conducted in order to provide a basis for evaluation and analysis. They provide a useful complement to other methods of summative program evaluation.

Why do focus groups work? Focus groups work because they provide a setting in which individuals are comfortable in self-disclosure and furthermore, where the group dynamics create a chain of reactions designed to exhaust the views on the issue or topic. They work, in part because of the skill of the leader in

planning and conducting the group, in part because of the group composition, and also because the participants are in some way motivated to focus on the issue at hand.

## Planning the Focus Group

As with all types of research and data collection, one must have a clear idea of the purpose of the exercise. In planning to use focus groups, you need a clear idea of what specific information is needed, who will use the information, and you should also have some notion of why the information is important.

It is vital to select an appropriate category of individuals to be included in the focus groups. It would be fallacious for the market researcher to involve people who do not use the product being researched. Similarly, in focus groups used for your research, you must decide who are in the best position to give the information you require. Sometimes one single category of people can give you what you need, but be sure not to restrict your focus groups to only one target population when several may relate to the problem. In examining a training program, for example, you might like to involve participants in the program, those involved in instructing, and perhaps even those who choose not to attend the program.

One of the difficult tasks with focus groups is to construct the questions. When you finish, the questions are deceptively simple, but in practice, they take considerable energy to develop. Good answers dictate the need for good questions and as is the case with interviews, the questions have both a content and a process function. With respect to content, many focus groups include only five or six questions, but because of the group process, a great deal of discussion and elaboration can take place - much more than would be possible through interviewing any of the group participants alone. Focus group questions are always open-ended. For

example, in an evaluation activity you might ask such questions as: "What did you think of the program?" "What did you like best about your training?" "Have you been able to use any of your training back on the job?" Be sure to keep your questions of a qualitative nature, and avoid quantifiers such as "how much?" These qualifiers tend to restrict answers, rather than provide for the full range. Also, avoid questions that have a possible "yes" or "no" answer. Ironically, while the main purpose of focus groups is to discover why people hold certain views, the "why" question is rarely asked in the focus group session. You are not interested in a rational answer to the question "why". Instead, you want to determine why from a less directive approach obtained from questions based in how people feel about what is being discussed. It is often useful as part of your planning to brainstorm a large list of questions and systematically reduce and refine them, until you have the core. The questions must then be sequenced, and the sequence must ensure a natural flow and transition from one to the other. Participants should not feel that they have finished one question and are then being asked another. Instead, they should feel that the session is an overall discussion, exploring a variety of related issues and leading logically through the various topics.

## Group Composition

Group composition is fundamental to good focus-group technique. First, the participants must have some common characteristic related to what is being focused upon. For example, participants in a training program have that as a common characteristic, regardless of gender, background, education or experience. This becomes the glue that bonds the group together, and it is advisable not to confuse this by having too many other common characteristics. It is a mistake, generally speaking, to involve people who know one another outside the group context. Such

people will not benefit as much from the ideas of colleagues as they would from those of complete strangers. In some types of evaluation, however, this is hard to avoid since those who participated in a program have generally come to know one another. There is particular danger dealing with intact groups, which have evolved a life and personality of their own, which is rarely conducive to the focus group purpose. Wherever possible, one should involve a mix of relative strangers who will feel comfortable sharing their views without having to wonder what their friends and colleagues might think about their responses.

Focus groups generally range from 6-12 participants. You need enough people to achieve synergy and facilitate group dynamics, but not so many as to prevent everyone from having a full say. In practice, it is difficult to control groups greater than 12, which tend to break apart into various factions. Groups smaller than six generally don't have enough to provide the synergy required. The exception is where the topic needs to be explored in great depth, and where people have had lengthy experiences related to it. In those cases, mini-focus groups are often best.

Participants are typically pre-screened to ensure that they have the required characteristic, and are telephoned or written a letter to pre-screen them and to invite their participation. You don't invite people to attend a "focus group", but merely to join a group discussion on the topic of interest. As with any method, you must make clear arrangements concerning the time of the group, its purpose, and how long it will last. It is best to meet in some neutral but convenient place, where the intended participants can be expected to feel comfortable.

You will need more than one focus group. In practice, researchers typically collect data until they stop getting appreciable new information. In most situations, the first two groups give

considerable new information. Thereafter, the new insights rapidly diminish. In my experience, by the third or fourth session, the topic has generally been exhausted unless, of course, the groups have some inherent difference. For example, in examining national training programs, I have conducted focus groups on the training program, but have also been interested in regional differences. In such cases, groups in various settings across the country permit insights into regional variations.

## Conducting the Focus Group

To be effective, the focus group procedure requires a moderator, skilled at leading groups. Such a moderator should have sufficient group dynamics skills and techniques to be able to exercise control over the group, yet do so unobtrusively. The skilled moderator will be able to draw out silent individuals, and control those who dominate the conversation. Such a moderator will be skilled at asking the questions, and keeping the flow directional, animated and relevant. The moderator has to be a good listener, and know how to empathise. In my experience, it is most effective to have an assistant as well. The assistant frees up the moderator to focus entirely on the process, while the assistant is instrumental in overcoming logistical difficulties and is occupied with taking notes and sharing in the analysis phase.

It is advisable to begin the session with some transitional period. For example, one can provide coffee and refreshments for those who arrive early, and the moderator and assistant can engage in appropriate small-talk. You will want to use this to put the participant at ease, but avoid talking about the issues until the group formally begins. This also provides an excellent context to assess who is in the group, and the skilled group leader will identify the dominant individuals who, whenever possible, should be seated at the moderator's side. Once the expected number of

participants have arrived, it is best to seat them so that all members of the group have eye contact. Be sure to avoid the "head table" approach as the moderators should always be seen as part of the group. As a moderator, beware of other people arranging the setting for you as they may not understand your requirements in arrangement of furnishings.

Begin the group by thanking the participants for coming, and briefly state its purpose. You might also inform people why they were selected. Be sure to emphasize the rules of confidentiality, and provide an opportunity for people to ask questions about why they are there. Tell the participants how the information will be recorded and reported. They generally ask whether or not they will receive the results, so this question should be anticipated. The first question should be an ice-breaker, designed to engage people in the process. As the process develops, the moderator will introduce relevant questions, provide probes, pauses, involve people in discussion, always without expressing any value on the answers received. Avoid closing a response with agreement or head-nodding. Even comments as innocuous as "yes" imply a value to the response received.

The purpose of the focus group is not to achieve consensus but to exhaust an exploration of the various perspectives held. For this reason, I conclude by thanking the participants, rather than providing any form of summary. It is important to ask whether you have missed anything to give everyone the feeling that all their contributions have been heard. You might, of course, give some sort of comment on the great value of the contributions, then thank the participants and dismiss them. In my experience, most focus groups can be conducted in an hour and a half to two hours. A good rule of thumb is to allow about a half hour per question and slightly more for groups of more than eight.

## Recording the Responses

Because of their intensity, focus groups lend themselves to tape-recording. If you use a tape recorder, be sure to inform the participants and obtain their permission to tape-record. The advantage of tape recording is that it gives you a full record of a potentially rich source of data. Its disadvantage is that it is time-consuming to listen to the tape. As with all such techniques, it is preferable to use an unobtrusive recording device. Use tapes of sufficient length so you do not have to make a change midway through the session, as this may destroy the group atmosphere. Whether or not you tape-record, detailed notes are indispensable, if only to assist in providing the location of information on the tape. The assistant moderator should copy down copious notes of the relevant material. In doing so, the recorder must avoid giving cues to participants about the value of their contributions by noting only the "best" ones. In general, the recorder should be writing things at all times, or at least appear to be doing so. In recording the notes, it is useful to jot time references in the margin so that specific points can be located easily on the tape. It is also useful to underline or otherwise highlight particular reference points which appear at the time to be significant contributions. In some instances you can pre-define categories and organize a page of your notebook to accommodate comments in the anticipated categories. Some people use shorthand or codes in order to prevent the participants from peeking at what was recorded.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis should take place as soon as possible after the group session concludes. The moderator and other researchers present should be involved in the analysis. You should systematically go through your data record, be it a tape-recording or detailed notes. In doing

the analysis you must constantly keep in mind the purpose of the focus group. At the next level, first look for the big ideas and concepts and make a list of these, later to be refined and organized. In conducting the analysis, you must consider the words used, the context which gave rise to those words, whether people changed their views, or held them constantly throughout the session, and you need to assess the intensity of the responses; that is, the enthusiasm a participant holds for a given idea. As you explore the data, you should try to organize the big ideas into a framework. The research and focus group questions provide one type of framework. You might also use content analysis procedures to record the dominant themes and big ideas. In this, you must strive for a balance between detail and being concise. The extent to which you carefully refine the written analysis will depend on how you intend to report the findings.

## Reporting on Focus Group Findings

Some focus groups have little or no written report. In marketing research, the client is sometimes invited to observe behind a one-way mirror or view a video of highlights of the session. In assessing consumer reaction to a product, typical responses of this type are an ideal way of communicating the reactions of potential consumers. For other purposes a briefing and oral report is prepared.

For most research purposes, however, a written analysis is required. In general, there are two extremes to written forms of reporting focus group data. One is to conduct the analysis and report summaries of the major ideas and themes. The other is to use the participant's words verbatim. Which route you choose will depend on your purpose and the intended reader. Personally, I like to combine narrative summaries with actual quotes that illustrate views in the participant's own words. In doing so, be sure to avoid

extreme views and attempt to select typical statements for your quotations. It is alright to edit them, laundering the swear words and correcting the grammar if you wish, as long as the intent is clear. Remember that you are trying to obtain insight and understanding about the theme, and why people hold the views they hold. It is often possible to distil this information into a concise form, notwithstanding the great depth of data collection and analysis which precedes it.

## Conclusion

Like all data collection techniques, focus groups are an indispensable tool for certain types of issues and questions. Focus groups are intended strictly for qualitative data, and to help you understand why people hold the view they hold. For their purpose they are a good tool, and in the hands of trained researchers provide valid and reliable data. Focus groups can be an efficient data collection technique and with relatively little investment can often help us avoid asking the wrong questions, or embarking on things which are guaranteed to fail. Focus groups also provide a timely response and can suggest the futility of more elaborate forms of research. They may also help you sharpen your questions for complementary forms of data collection and analysis. Remember, however, that quality data requires trained and experienced researchers. Focus groups may have inherent appeal because they are in vogue, but only if used properly.

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