

SHORT Q&A ON FOCUS GROUPS

Frequently Asked Questions on Focus Groups and How to Implement Them

by
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Q1. Typically, how do focus groups work?

A - There should be a limited small number of people who will be asked questions about their opinions and interests. The number is restricted, usually to a maximum of ten or fewer, so that everyone can fully participate. Attendees are called the “panelists.” A “moderator” facilitates and runs the session under a clearly set agenda with ground rules and with an established specific schedule. The focus group should have adequate structure so that it collects detailed qualitative and quantitative information. It is usually divided into sections with different activities, each of which has a singular topic that will be examined in depth through various devices.

Q2. What happens in a focus group session?

A – This varies as the design must be tailored to the client’s information needs. First confidentiality assurances and ground rules are provided to get the panelists at ease. Almost always, there is individual work that precedes group discussions to prevent group think. It is desirable that there are a number of interactive activities that allow the panelists to explore and interact with the issue, idea or product. This is important because it helps to get to the real central issue – which is how people really feel and why. Written questionnaires are often used. There may be exercises in rating or ranking statements or choices. The length should not be so long that panelist start to lose their focus and become fatigued. We usually suggest 90 minutes to two hours for one session.

Q3. How do the findings of the focus groups get back to the client?

A – This will vary depending on client need and timelines. The moderator’s notes will be combined with the collected handouts of the session into reports for the client by theme. There is almost always a combination of qualitative and quantitative information. Great care must be taken to preserve the specific opinions of the panelists while at the same time preserving the confidentiality of the panelists. The survey plan should identify the specific format and deliverables that the client will receive.

Q4. Is it a good idea to audio or video record a focus group session?

A – For consumer studies, there may be times that this is appropriate and helpful for the client to see consumers interacting with products and product features. For all others - no. Why? The reliability of your data is at stake. Panelists must feel totally free to report their opinions and share their thoughts without any concern for possible negative consequences.

Q5. How do focus groups differ from traditional pen and paper surveys?

A – There are many information gathering techniques that fit under the umbrella term of a “survey.” Most people think of the pen and paper approach as a survey. In reality, there are many ways to gather data about opinions, views, and preferences. These include on line surveys, panels, one-on-one interviews, kiosks, administered or mailed questionnaires, etc. The primary benefit of a focus group is that this methodology is interactive which allows for much more in-depth collection of opinions than any other approach. Gaining the specific of why and how is usually vital to planning future or corrective actions.

Q6. Who should run a focus group?

A – The moderator role is critical because this job involves many things including running the session, asking follow up questions, observing, taking notes, collecting information, and ensuring that the session stays on time schedule accomplishes its purposes. The best moderator is a skilled independent third party who can gain the confidence of the panelists. Less skilled moderators may miss vital information to the issue at hand. The moderator should be capable of detecting and overcoming reluctance, hidden agendas, politically correct responses that don't reveal real feelings, useful themes, and uncovering unanticipated issues.

Q7. How does one decide how many focus groups to conduct?

A – There is a science to this that can be a fairly complex, but simply put, this is primarily a question of *what does it take to have a credible and representative sampling*. How many people need to participate in order to gain a cross section of opinions from the target population? For example, if you are surveying employees – you will need to resolve some of the following questions. How many executives, managers, and employees do you need to include? How many departments, functions and geographical locations need to be included? How many employee categories such as engineers, scientists, production workers, and customer service people need to be included? Also you will want to make sure you have appropriate

representation by groupings such as sex, age, and length of service. Finally, not all opinions may be equal for the purpose of your information needs. What do the *opinion leaders* think? What do the key or high performing employees think? For example, for an organization with a thousand employees, a typical approach suggests you might need 8 to 12 focus groups with 10 people each.

Q8. When and how often should I survey?

A - This should be determined by your informational needs and how dynamic the situation is that you are attempting to measure. If the stakes are high and the cost of ignorance is also high, or the situation is rapidly changing, you will need to survey more often. If the situation is not changing that rapidly, then a baseline survey with periodic checks can be adequate. There is also consideration of the cost for achieving the benefits you are seeking. If the cost of a new product introduction is high, and the risks to success are high, it might be wise to do many more focus groups.

Q9. What are the potential benefits of focus groups?

A - These, of course, depend on why you are surveying and what you want to learn. There are many. One valuable benefit is understanding not just what, but *why* people think the way they do. This can provide the enhanced understanding and detailed knowledge that you need to make the right decisions. Often, it may be very helpful to know why people are satisfied or not, or to uncovering needs and expectations, or to understanding buying behavior. Another is the ability to anticipate how people might react to future changes, or to new features and programs. Another is to test or obtain input to future actions. Focus groups can allow the client to determine human behavior under different conditions.

Q10. What are the potential problems or downsides to using focus groups?

A - There can be some very real issues, but all of these can be avoided by good design and execution. We stick by the simple premise that no data is better than bad data. Shortcuts should be avoided and the emphasis should always be on valid and reliable information that is understandable. The two biggest problems are a poorly designed focus group might produce information that leads the client to the wrong conclusions and actions, or a weak moderator might fail to uncover important but hidden information. This is why the planning stage of the project is so important.