

Focus Group Interviewing on the Telephone

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Focus group discussions can be conducted on the telephone. With a conference call hook-up a moderator can carry on a focus group discussion with people scattered around the country. The primary advantage is that it allows greater potential for participation. This is particularly true for busy people or people who have difficulty getting together.

The principle disadvantage of telephone focus groups is in the lack of nonverbal communication. Much is gained in focus groups by having people together, watching the participants—head nodding, signs of boredom, smiles, frowns, alertness, interest in the topic—all of which are lost on the telephone. A telephone focus group will lack the richness of in-person focus groups.

Telephone focus groups can be conducted with varying levels of sophistication. They can be conducted with limited resources and resemble a conference phone call. With more sophisticated telephone equipment it is possible to have a console with lights and names to identify speakers, special switching devices that allow only one person to speak at a time, and lights that indicate when others are attempting to talk.

Differences between Telephone Focus Groups and In-person Focus Groups

Telephone focus groups are shorter, have fewer participants and fewer questions than in-person focus groups. In most situations two hours is too long to be on the phone. We recommend one-hour telephone focus groups. Because we have less time, we only recruit four to six people for a phone focus group and we limit the number of questions we ask. There is something else that we do for phone groups that we don't usually do for in-person groups—we send out the questions ahead of time. This seems to make the short time we have more productive. People know where we are going and know what they want to say and will stick with us mentally, even when we aren't together physically.

Some have argued that telephone focus groups are less threatening and less intimidating because participants cannot see each other. As a result there may be greater clarity of language because of the absence of eye contact, gestures and non-verbal signals. Participants cannot detect signals of approval or disapproval for other participants or the moderator. The difficulty is that the moderator has limited ability to detect if someone is "tuning out" of the conversation and paying more attention to reading the newspaper, reviewing documents, or working on their computer. In summary, you have no reliable indicator of the degree of attention that a participant is placing on the discussion.

Guiding Principles of Telephone Focus Groups

- Small size group—4-6 people recommended
- Share questions or discussion topics in advance
- Limit questions to 5-8
- Have participants identify themselves (if voices are not recognizable)
- Limit the length to about 60 minutes
- Call on people who aren't actively participating
- Periodically ask for round robin responses
- Include ending questions

The Sequence of the Telephone Focus Group

Before the Telephone Focus Group

- Invitation made by phone, writing or email to participants several weeks in advance. At the point of invitation, confirm their direct-line phone number, fax number and email address.
- Soon after the invitation is accepted a confirmation letter is sent reminding participants of date, time and instructions for connecting with the conference call. Let people know that you expect to begin promptly.
- Anticipate the amount of time you will allow for each question.
- Optional: Consider making a reminder call 15 minutes before the focus group.

During the Telephone Focus Group

- Participants call into a designated number or the operator calls and connects the participants.
- Listen for clarity and sound volume when participants join the session. If problems exist, contact operator or reconnect the participant.
- Welcome each participant and have them identify themselves as they sign in.
- Small talk is acceptable and appropriate while waiting for others to join the discussion.

- Once a sufficient number have joined the discussion, you should begin the focus group. Begin as soon as possible because you only have one hour.
- Welcome the participants once again.
- Give a short overview of the study.
- Give the ground rules. (Note the suggestions in the box).

Possible Ground Rules for Telephone Focus Groups

- If for some reason you get disconnected, call this number to reconnect....*
- Let me know if you need to unexpectedly leave our discussion.*
- The discussion will last XX minutes. Please stay with us until we end. Some of the most important questions will occur at the end of our discussion. We will adjourn promptly at XXXX.*
- You should have the following items in front of you. (Name the items.) If you do not have them let us know immediately we will fax or email them to you.*
- I will be asking a limited number of questions. The questions (or topics) are listed in front of you. I don't expect that everyone will answer every question. But I don't want to leave anyone out of the conversation. If you have an opinion that has not been expressed, I encourage you to share it. If I don't hear from you on some important questions, I may call on you.*
- We are tape recording our conversation so we don't miss any of the comments. No names will be attached in any report that is prepared.*
- It's helpful if you would begin your comments by stating your name before you make your comment. For example, "This is Dick" and then make your comment.*
- We would like to be on a first name basis. Let's take a moment and get acquainted.*
- I'll do a roll call and when you hear your name, I'd like you to introduce yourself and tell us where you are located.*

- Begin the set of questions.
- Monitor time carefully and keep on schedule. Estimate the amount to time needed for each questions. Allocate more time for your more important questions.

- Bring closure to the group by asking ending questions (see box below).

Here are three valuable questions to ask at the conclusion of the telephone focus group.

Consider incorporating one or more of these questions at the end of the focus group, as time allows.

1. *“Of all the things we talked about, what to you is the most important thing that was said?” This question is helpful in analysis and gives the researcher a sense of what the participants considered to be most important.*

2. *“The purpose of our study is to ... (briefly describe purpose). Have we missed anything?” Occasionally the questions used in the focus group will inadvertently leave out an important concept. This question helps ensure that the topic was adequately covered.*

3. *“We are conducting several groups. This is one of the first. What advice do you have for us as we listen to others?” This question can surface protocol or procedures that seemed awkward or were ineffective.*

Questions in telephone focus groups

- Questions or themes are given out in advance.
- Limited number of questions—about 5-8 questions.
- First question is an introduction of each participant. Ask a factual question that is non-threatening and doesn't denote status or hierarchy.
- Place your most important questions towards the end.
- Sequence the questions in a logical or orderly flow.
- Assign an amount of time to each question, but use it as a general guide.
- Consider asking participants to reflect for a moment or to jot down something on a piece of paper, and then read the comments.
- It is OK to include questions that ask participants to rate or assign values to ideas or things. Keep the scales simple and logical.
- If you want participants to look at visuals, place them in a packet with each item labeled and in the order that they will be used. They should be sent to participants in advance of the focus group.
- Questions asking participants to answer round robin are OK in moderation.
- Include ending questions such as the “all things considered question” or the “have we missed anything question”.

Special moderator skills for the telephone

Certain moderating skills that are effective in face-to-face groups cannot be used on the telephone (e.g. looking at people to encourage them to talk) and instead the moderator now must clearly articulate these intentions. For example, instead of using the long pause to elicit comments, the moderator might say:

- “I’m waiting for more comments on this topic”
- “Perhaps there is something more that could be said about this”

With a handful of participants, it is often unnecessary to have participants continue to state their names before they talk. Stating names at the beginning can be helpful and then when voices can be identified with names, there is not need to mention names.

One of the major challenges for the moderator is to keep the conversation on topic and moving along. Occasionally participants will “get stuck” on a particular topic or the conversation will “wander” into other areas. When this occurs, the moderator should bring it back on track and keep it moving toward the key questions.

Devices that can help

Technology can help. One device is a computer screen that indicates who is speaking. This helps the moderator keep track of who is talking at any given time. Another feature is instant participant polling. With this device the moderator can ask the respondents to give numeric answers to questions. For example, all those who agree with this point of view, press 1. Then, those who disagree press 2. Or, on a scale of 1 to 9, with 1 being lowest and 9 being the highest, how supportive are you of this new design? Unfortunately, these devices cost thousands of dollars and are out of the price range for occasional user in public and non-profit organizations.