



## **Conducting Focus Groups: A Description of the Process**

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### **Why conduct focus groups?**

A first step is to decide whether to conduct focus groups, a survey, in-depth interviews, or use another research method. Focus groups are most useful when the goal is to: 1) hear people talk about their experiences in their own words, 2) hear from a group that may be hard to reach in a telephone survey, 3) brainstorm and to test new ideas, or 4) help you at the beginning of a larger study to understand the initial perspectives and experiences that shape people's attitudes.

### **What are the drawbacks to focus groups?**

Focus group findings are qualitative and not statistically representative. You cannot project the findings from focus groups to the larger population like you can with a representative survey. Focus groups also do not provide you with hard numbers – which the media and others usually like to report on.

### **What are the advantages to focus groups?**

Focus groups provide you with a human face on an issue. You hear personal stories and experiences. You can see the intensity of people's emotions on an issue through focus groups. You can also reach groups of individuals often missing from traditional studies – such as individuals who speak various languages. Focus groups also enable you to test materials, information, forms, and ads in a risk-free way. Focus groups allow you to ask original questions and to be creative when discussing solutions and policy changes.

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

Usually it is a two-hour discussion, held in a professional focus group facility, which includes about 8-10 people who are paid to attend. The typical payment is \$50 per person. Groups are usually held in the evenings to allow working people to attend. It often makes sense to hold two groups in one evening – 5:00pm-7:00pm, and 7:30pm-9:30pm. Most urban areas have at least one focus group facility. These facilities are usually able to set up focus groups in rural areas. In some cases, it is impossible to use a focus group facility, and so we use rooms in local restaurants, libraries, schools, churches, and elsewhere to conduct the group.

### **How are people recruited for the groups?**

The best methods for recruitment are random – where individuals in a community are randomly called and invited to attend. In some cases, it is not possible to randomly recruit participants, in which case community-based organizations can be helpful in identifying eligible participants. Most focus group facilities have low-income households in their databases, and can call these individuals and invite them to attend a focus group. In other cases, these facilities can send professional recruiters to low income neighborhoods and locations where they can intercept individuals and invite them to participate. There are directories of focus group facilities throughout the U.S.

### **How do you decide how many groups to hold?**

The one rule on this issue is to hold at least two focus groups per subgroup you are trying to analyze. Thus, if you are interested in hearing from uninsured working Hispanics, then you should hold a minimum of two focus groups with this sector. However, two focus groups are not sufficient for most studies – the typical amount is 6-10 focus groups. This is because issues like geographic diversity, health status, race/ethnicity, income level, and other factors have to be considered when deciding how many groups to hold.

### **How do you make sure the right people attend the focus groups?**

The focus group facilities or community-based organizations use a “screener” to recruit individuals. The screener is a brief questionnaire that asks questions about demographic issues – age, family income, number of children, insurance status, etc. Participants must fit the criteria on a screener in order to be invited to the focus group.

### **Who runs the focus groups?**

It is best to use professional focus group moderators to facilitate the focus groups. Even better, it is useful to try to “match” the moderator with the type of group they are facilitating. In other words, use a Hispanic moderator for focus groups with Hispanics, use an African-American moderator when holding focus groups with African-Americans, and use a female moderator when holding a focus group just with women. Matching the moderator with the group helps encourage the free flow of discussion.

### **How do you decide what questions to ask in the focus groups?**

The project team develops a Moderator’s Guide that is a script for the focus groups. Usually, the team brainstorms together on the issues they want to probe in the group. Then, a researcher puts the questions in a format for the focus groups. The team gives feedback on the guide, and it is revised, perhaps several times. If various focus groups will be conducted in languages other than English, the guide(s) may need to be translated. Utilizing professional translators to conduct a forward and backwards translation is best to ensure that all phrasing is appropriate in the translated language.

### **Can observers come to the focus groups?**

If the groups are held in a professional facility, then it is useful to have project team members observe the groups. Most facilities have a one-way mirror, and an observation room behind it. This allows the project team to learn as the focus group is in progress, and have a message slipped to the moderator to clarify any questions or change the direction of the discussion. If a professional facility is not used, observers may have to sit in the same room – which can intimidate participants.

### **How are focus groups analyzed?**

Focus groups should always be audio taped, and some are video taped as well. The researcher should then have the audiotape transcribed, and then read through the transcript. The researcher looks for compelling quotes, recurring themes, important language, and key findings while reading through the transcript. The researcher then develops an outline of the major themes and then develops the full report using quotes from the focus groups.

#### **The Focus Group Process from A to Z**

- Decide if focus groups are the best research method for your study.
- Discuss the number of focus groups you need to hold, and in what locations.
- Identify focus group facilities or community-based organizations that can host the focus groups and recruit participants.
- Develop a “screener” to guide recruiters.
- Develop a Moderator’s Guide for the discussion.
- Conduct the focus groups and encourage project team members to observe. Make sure all groups are audio taped.
- Debrief on initial findings.
- Transcribe the audiotapes and conduct analysis.
- Develop a draft of the report – revise it – then finalize it.
- Consider dissemination strategies.