

FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH

► What are focus groups?

Focus Group Interviews are focused discussions led by a moderator and involving eight to twelve participants each. This observation technique is quite popular for marketing and public relations research. It is qualitative research.

► Why do we use them?

- > Focus Group interviews help us to explore the feelings that people have for a given product, service or idea. They help us to understand the language people use to express those feelings.
- > Focus groups are valuable and often sufficient in themselves to test marketing assumptions regarding the emotional responses people are likely to make to a given concept. They are useful to pre-test creative ideas or to seek creative ideas with which to express product, service or idea benefits.
- > They are helpful in identifying what benefits the market or public is most likely to associate with a product, service or idea.
- > They are useful to pre-test creative ideas or to seek creative ideas with which to express product, service or idea benefits.
- > Group interviews tend to have a synergistic effect on how individuals respond. The group interaction typically stimulates a broader range and sometimes a greater depth of response than one would get from individual interviews.
- > Clients tend to like group interviews. They like the direct contact. They may trust relatively unstructured, verbatim responses more than the numerical data of surveys.

► Uses with surveys:

To precede a survey: Because of their power to expand on the feelings and ideas of people and how they express those feelings and ideas, focus groups are useful to precede surveys. They help to expand our understanding of what is to be surveyed and help to identify the language to be used in asking the survey questions. They give the researcher and client overviews of trends, themes, variables, issues and points for survey questionnaire design.

After a survey: Focus group interviews are useful after the survey is completed to explore, in depth, problems and/or opportunities that may be observed in the analysis of surveys.

► Limitations of focus group interviews

- > Because they are qualitative research, not quantitative, focus groups **cannot** be used to statistically measure human behavior.
- > The individuals interviewed are drawn at random from the populations to be studied, but their numbers are too few to offer any statistical assurances of the validity and reliability of the observations.

- > One knows only the feelings of the group interviewed. It is therefore vital whenever possible to conduct a **minimum of two interviews** with a given market or public. This affords the opportunity to demonstrate through replication of observation that the behavior observed in the first group may be more likely to represent the population being studied. The second interview often affords the opportunity to gain additional insights. It helps to avoid a group bias resulting from a line of reasoning being set in motion.

► **Parameters for Focus Group Research**

The setting. Spontaneous and emotional responses are sought in qualitative research. Once a respondent thinks, censors or intellectualizes, the response is no longer a qualitative one. The biggest danger in qualitative research is to end up with only considered, intellectual answers.

The only kind of participant who can make a fresh, spontaneous, involved, honest contribution is one who has not pre-thought his or her answers. It is incumbent on the group moderator to make that kind of response possible.

The entire setting and mood of the session must be relaxed and **as natural as possible**. The moderator creates a "coffee Klatch" mood so people can open up and talk in their own comfortable way.

If a one-way mirror is being used, there is no need to disclose that fact or the its purpose. Do tell participants that they are being recorded for note-taking purposes. Video-taping may occasionally be desirable but it is of questionable value, particularly if known. Those mechanical devices upset the natural climate.

Group characteristics. The optimum size of a group is 8 to 11 people. Generally, the group should be relatively homogeneous (men, women, age group). There may be times, however, when it is desirable for purposes of confrontation or simulation to mix demographics. This may also be necessary for the purpose of economy.

Physical location. Ideally, you will use a focus group laboratory with one-way glass viewing port and built-in sound recording. If not, select a pleasant, quiet room in a relaxed setting. Conference rooms, kitchens, motel meeting rooms and hotel guest rooms are all good options.

Length and time of interview. One to two hours in length is best. Groups with adults are usually conducted in the evening. Start no earlier than 6 p.m. Conclude by 9 p.m. You may conduct two back-to-back sessions in the same evening. Other special interest groups such as homemakers or children may require different hours. For businessmen and businesswomen, midday sessions with a box lunch or light catered-in food may prove popular. Allow 90 minutes; tell them to book two hours and thus be able to excuse them early.

Group recruitment. Participants may be obtained by random selection using telephone directories, personal inquiries, mailing lists, or passersby. Clients may have membership lists or customer lists from which you can recruit. You will need to decide what characteristics you desire in participants, such as age, gender, residence, occupation, with or without children. All participants should be screened to meet pre-set demographic criteria. There are professional recruiting services, retained by the hour or paid per participant.

► **Preparing for the Focus Group Interview**

1. Gain a thorough understanding of the research task. You may need to help the client understand the task.
2. Specify participants' age, sex, location and other relevant demographics. Prohibit people who work in marketing, advertising, public relations, the same competitive field, or professional respondents from participating.
3. Define the reasons for research and the specific area to be covered.
4. Make list of questions to be explored. Start with the general and move towards the specific. Organize areas or topics. Have a beginning, a middle and an end. Use a discussion guide (moderator's script).
5. A comfortable setting is a "must." Use a large table to sit around if desired. This gives the air of "We're here to do something."

► **Conducting the Interview**

Experience is the best teacher. There is no best way to do it. The moderator's skill requires being able to keep people ("Rushers") from dominating the discussion or from avoiding participation. The moderator stays on top of the discussion, balancing friendliness and directness to keep discussion moving. Groups respond well to lively leadership that keeps discussion vigorous by intervening when needed. The moderator's interest in the topic and alert listening are keys to success. The key to successful rapport is to make participant feel his or her feelings are important.

If clients attend, keep them unseen and unheard. Let the client "take over" only after the main discussion is finished.

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