

Tips & Tools #4: Focus Group Interviews



Deciding to use a focus group

Focus groups are used to learn about the experiences and perceptions of groups. Focus group interviews address a single topic in depth. Because the comments of each respondent can stimulate reactions from the other respondents, focus groups can yield rich insights. Focus groups are not recommended for assessing individual outcomes.

Selecting focus group participants

- Focus group participants should be people with similar experiences or backgrounds so that they feel comfortable talking with one another.
- Focus group participants are more likely to share their experiences and perceptions if they do not know one another before the focus group.
- Focus groups should have no fewer than 6 participants in order to get a good group discussion and no more than 10 participants so that less assertive participants will still contribute to the conversation.
- Focus groups with youth usually have fewer participants (5 – 7). Groups with more youth are more difficult to keep focused.
- Focus group participants are usually selected purposively and are not a statistically representative sample of the population of interest.

Deciding how many focus groups are needed

- The number of focus groups is usually decided by the budget available and how difficult it is to obtain participants.
- More focus groups are recommended when different kinds of people could provide relevant information. (Remember that focus groups should include people who share relevant characteristics, so the more variety in the relevant characteristics, the more focus groups would be needed.)
- More focus groups are recommended if it is likely that there will be very different experiences or perspectives on the topic (even among people with similar characteristics).
- The ideal is to conduct as many focus groups as necessary until no new information is yielded.

Preparing for the focus group session

- Focus group interviews usually last from 1 to 1½ hours in order to allow for a full discussion of the topic.
- Only a few open-ended interview questions, written at a general level, are needed to focus the group discussion. Probing sub-questions can be used to get more detail.
- A skilled moderator is needed to: (a) encourage a truly open discussion of the questions, (b) keep the discussion focused on the major issues, (c) probe the participants to achieve a deeper understanding, (d) manage dominant participants, and (e) bring out quiet participants.

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- Focus groups should take place in a comfortable and quiet setting. Ideally, the participants are seated around a round table so that they can all see each other. Most focus group interviews offer some kind of light refreshments.
- An audio tape recorder or assistant moderator is needed to record the responses of the focus group participants. An assistant moderator is useful even with a tape recorder to ensure that the audio recorder is working and to turn over the cassette if necessary.

Analyzing focus group data

- Focus group data can be prepared for analysis with a verbatim transcription of an audio tape, notes taken from listening to the audio tape, or notes written during the focus group by the moderator and/or assistant moderator (without audio tape back-up). Analysis of a verbatim transcript takes the most resources and has the most credibility. Analysis based on written notes without an audio tape takes the fewest resources and has the least credibility.
- Analysis is used to identify overarching themes related to the questions that were discussed and the range of perspectives expressed by the participants.
- Common considerations in analyzing focus group data are:
 - Words: identify commonly used words; cluster similar concepts together; arrange responses on a continuum or in categories. Also consider nonverbal communication related to the words, such as body language and the intensity expressed by the speed, volume, or pitch of speech.
 - Patterns: Do participants change or reverse statements after hearing from others? What comments were offered by more than one participant? What themes were supported or rejected by more than one participant? What issues or questions were especially easy or difficult for the group to resolve?
 - Specificity of responses: Give more weight to responses that are specific and based on experiences than those that are vague and impersonal. Give more weight to responses in the first person rather than hypothetical third person.

Reporting focus group results

- Information about the number of people who participated in the focus group(s) and the number of focus groups conducted should be included.
- Key themes in the data should be presented.
- Direct quotes should be used to illustrate the major ideas or perspectives that were identified in the focus group analysis.
- It is usually not appropriate to report the information in terms of the percentage of participants who gave one answer or another. The purpose of a focus group is to understand the range of perspectives on the topic of interest.

Focus Group Resources:

Morgan, D. L. & Krueger, R. A. (1998). *The Focus Group Kit*, Volumes 1-6 [ISBN 0-7619-0762-2]. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications [www.sagepub.com].

Tobacco Technical Assistance Consortium. *Power of Proof: An Evaluation Primer*. [http://www.ttac.org/power-of-proof/index.html]

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