

Sustainability Series Tip Sheet Designing and Conducting Focus Groups

What is a focus group? A focus group is a planned, focused discussion involving a small group of people and facilitated by a skilled interviewer. It should be conducted in an environment that encourages participants to be comfortable, relaxed and able to share ideas, perceptions and feelings. Focus group members influence each other by responding to ideas and comments in the discussion.

A focus Group is ***not:***

- A quantitative research method
- A brainstorming session

Reasons to use a focus group:

- To obtain in-depth information
- As a way to develop survey questions
- To observe and record nonverbal communication
- To gather information inexpensively
- To gather results quickly
- To hear from a wide range of constituents
- To encourage exchanges between people
- To generate new ideas that may not be uncovered otherwise
- To bring people together in an more relaxed and informal setting

Limitations of focus groups include:

- A facilitator is needed to conduct the group
- Group dynamics are not always easy to control and diversions may happen that don't pertain to your topic
- Time is limited and may limit the number of questions you can ask
- It can be challenging and labor intensive to assemble the participants needed
- Verbally gathered data can be difficult to analyze

When should you use focus groups? Focus groups are typically used for planning, marketing and evaluation. They are used to improve a product or service or during the development of strategic plans. Focus groups might help you to:

- Check out opinions, beliefs and attitudes about issues of interest to your organization
- Check out your assumptions about the community in which you conduct your business

There are also secondary advantages to conducting focus groups:

- It might encourage discussion about a specific topic
- It can help to build energy and excitement about a topic
- It can provide opportunities for participants and the facilitator to learn more about a the topic or issue

Ten Steps for Developing and Implementing a Focus Group

- 1. Define the purpose:** Why are we conducting this focus group? What do we want to know and why do we want to know it? What outcomes do we want to achieve? Who will help us get the information we need?

A good purpose statement can help you:

- a. Develop good questions
- b. Get the information you need
- c. Let participants know why you need their input

Sample Purpose Statement: To find out from our clients what new services they would value the most

- 2. Establish a timeline:** Planning, implementing and reporting on focus groups will take a minimum of six weeks.

Components of a focus group timeline include:

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| ✓ Writing the purpose statement | ✓ Follow-up phone calls to participants |
| ✓ Identifying the participants | ✓ Room arrangements and refreshments |
| ✓ Gathering contact information for participants | ✓ Preparing session materials |
| ✓ Selecting a facilitator (and recorder) | ✓ Conducting the focus group |
| ✓ Developing the questions | ✓ Thank you letters to participants |
| ✓ Developing a script | ✓ Transcribe the notes |
| ✓ Reserving the site | ✓ Summarize and send summary to participants |
| ✓ Contacting prospective participants (letters and phone calls) | ✓ Analyze sessions and write reports |

- 3. Choose the location**

The location should be:

- Inviting
- Comfortable
- Fully and easily accessible to the intended participants
- Large enough for 15 people
- Have space for refreshments

- 4. Identify and invite the participants**

First you must decide how many focus group sessions you will conduct.

- What are your available resources?
- Are there separate and distinct groups of constituents you want to hear from?
- Can you offer incentives?

Develop a list of participant attributes based on the purpose statement. Typical attributes are:

- Age, race, gender
- Family size
- Geographic location
- Income, employment status
- Past experience with the service
- Sector affiliation (business, govt., CBO, etc)

- Relationship with the organization (donor, client, employee, volunteer, general public)
- Tenure (with the agency/in the neighborhood)

Decide how many participants to invite

- An effective focus group has at least six and no more than twelve participants
- Expect a response rate of 50% - 66% from your outreach and invitations

Options for finding participants

- Nominations: obtain nominations from people who know the constituents you intend to reach (advisory committee, community leaders, staff members)
- Lists: names from membership or participation lists
- Piggyback selection: conduct focus groups before, during or after another event

Avoid

- Inviting supervisors and subordinates in the same group
- Inviting spouses in the same group
- Inviting close friends or relatives

5. **Generate the questions to be asked**

To be effective, focus group questions should be:

- Open-ended (except some introductory questions)
- Narrowly focused
- Move from the general to the specific

Time is limited to one or two hours, so choose your questions carefully.

Start with a few warm up questions to make people feel comfortable, then move into the questions that get at the heart of your research.

To develop effective focus group questions:

1. Brainstorm a list of possible questions based on the purpose statement
2. Prioritize, rewrite and sequence the questions
3. Test and refine the questions as needed

6. **Develop a script**

The script is an important part of the focus group plan. The script

- Helps you put the questions into context for the participants
- Ensures uniformity among presentations
- Keeps the facilitator on track

A script includes:

1. Opening

- Welcome and introductions
- The topic is...
 - The results will be used for...
 - You were selected because...

- Guidelines
 - There are no wrong answers
 - One person speak at a time (we're taping)
 - First names only
 - You don't need to agree with others, but please listen respectfully

2. The questions

3. Closing – Wrap up, thank you, comments

7. Select a facilitator

The facilitator should be:

- Knowledgeable about group dynamics
- Skilled at leading meetings
- Able to deal tactfully with outspoken group members

The facilitator's job includes:

- Making participants feel relaxed and comfortable
- Getting full answers and probing for more
- Monitoring the time
- Keeping the discussion on track
- Making sure everyone is heard
- Ensuring that the written notes can be understood if interpreted by someone other than the facilitator

❖ *It is a good idea to have a note-taker so that the facilitator can concentrate fully on the participants*

8. Conduct the focus group

Materials you may need:

- ✓ Notepads/pencils/Name tags
- ✓ Refreshments
- ✓ Tape recorder (optional)
- ✓ Time piece
- ✓ Flip charts
- ✓ Participant list/Sign in sheet

- Be early and prepared
- Set the tone – have fun
- Follow the script
- Stay on track
- Probe for full answers
- Monitor time closely
- Head-off individual exchanges of opinion

9. Interpret and Report the results

- Summarize each focus group soon after it ends
 - Discuss the session with any observers
 - Listen to tapes

- Transcribe notes
 - Jot down observations
- Analyze the summaries
 - Group the results
 - Note trends
 - Note unexpected comments
- Write a report of findings
 1. Background
 2. Details of the sessions (# of participants, characteristics, number of groups, dates, etc)
 3. Results (trends, surprises, quotes)
 4. Conclusions
 5. Appendix (script, questions)

10. Take action on the results

- Meet to review the report and discuss its implications
- Put the focus group into context with other information you have gathered (such as surveys, interviews, research data)
- Prioritize the information gathered
- Develop an action plan to address the main themes (issues, problems, questions)

Portions of this tip sheet are based on the following books:

Richard A Kreuger, *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* (2009 Sage Publications)

Judith Sharken Simon, *Conducting Successful Focus Groups* (1999 Amhurst H Wilder Foundation)

The National Viral Hepatitis Roundtable is a coalition of public, private, and voluntary organizations dedicated to reducing the incidence of infection, morbidity, and mortality from viral hepatitis in the U.S.

To support the increased capacity and sustainability of non-profit member organizations, NVHR produces a series of Tip Sheets on a variety of topics. If you have questions or suggestions for a future Tip Sheet topic, please contact [Martha Saly](mailto:Martha.Saly).