

Designing A Successful Focus Group

The idea of focus groups has its origin in post-World War II, United States military efforts. Social scientist used focus groups to assist in evaluating listeners' responses to various radio programs (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). On a much broader context, focus group interviewing helps provide insight on a particular issue or issues. Focus groups as a data collection tool can provide a rich and meaningful context for assessing the strengths and weaknesses of a focus issue. It is a way that participants' responses can be explored in a real-time milieu, dynamics of within group behaviors can be observed and put into perspective, and responses can be clarified. Focus groups afford participants an opportunity to be involved in the design and the decision-making process of an issue.

A focus group is characteristically composed of one to two moderators and six to ten persons who are unfamiliar with each other, but share a common interest in the focus issue under exploration. The group should be conducted in a non-threatening environment, which allows for the free-flow of thoughts, feelings, and candid feedback. Well-planned focus groups can provide the researcher with invaluable insight about the focus issue.

Appropriateness

Before proceeding with the discussion, it is important to note, there are instances when a focus group may not be an appropriate data collection method. Krueger and Casey cite focus groups should not be utilized when:

1. You want people to come to consensus.
2. You want to educate people.

3. You don't intend to use the results but instead want to give the appearance of listening.
4. You are asking for sensitive information that should not be shared in a group or could be harmful if shared in a group.
5. You need statistical projections.
6. The environment is emotionally charged, and a group discussion is likely to intensify the conflict.
7. You can't ensure the confidentiality of sensitive information. (Krueger and Casey, 2000, 25),

Planning & Purpose

One of the most crucial dimensions of conducting a focus group has to do with planning. Planning helps to ensure the focus group experience is optimal and the desired results can be achieved. Simply put, planning helps to ensure that everyone involved is on the same sheet of music. Developing and articulating a clear purpose helps to ensure the process will yield intended results. What is more, without a clearly articulated purpose, systematic replication of the focus group interview is next to impossible.

The purpose helps to steer other dimensions of the successful focus group such as, determining characteristics of the participants (age, educational attainment, gender, social attributes etc.), questions and questioning strategies, process methodology, degree of moderator training, sampling and etceteras. Asking oneself the following questions may assist in shaping the planning process:

1. What is the purpose of the focus group?
2. Is the purpose clear to all persons involved in the focus group process?
3. What type of questions will be asked?

4. What is the interviewing methodology?
5. Will the moderator(s) need special training?
6. What type of equipment will be needed to document the process?
7. What is the sampling strategy?
8. Is a focus group the most appropriate method for collecting necessary data?
9. How will the information be used?
10. Will it be necessary to replicate the focus group?
11. What ground rules will be needed?

Questioning Strategy

Perhaps at first thought, developing a questioning strategy may seem to be a bit rudimentary; however, it is the nucleus of a good plan. Often, generating questions that set participants at ease and establishes a non-threatening environment is as much of an art, as it is a science. When developing the questioning strategy, consider how participants may answer the questions. It is important that each question generate the type of response that will help achieve the purpose of the focus group. Admittedly, further probing may be necessary to clarify responses; however, questions should strategically lead in a particular direction. Functionally, focus groups are intended to allow for the probing, clarification, and discussion of a focus issue.

As a rule, questions should not be phrased to produce a yes or no response. Questions should tend toward discussion and further exploration of a response. Participants should be fully engaged in the line questioning and desiring to further their explain responses. Developing good focus group questions may take some attention to detail, rehearsing, timing, and without to

say, pilot testing. Krueger and Casey cite the following as characteristics of good questions:

1. **Sound Conversational.** The focus group is a social experience, and conversational questions help create and maintain an informal environment.
2. **Use Words the Participants Would Use When Talking About the Issue.** Don't use acronyms, jargon, and technical lingo unless you are talking to a group of experts.
3. **Are easy to say.** Good questions are written so the moderator won't stumble over words or phrases. Some questions are great in written form but are awkward or stilted when asked orally.
4. **Are clear.** When the question is asked, participants should understand what you're asking.
5. **Are usually short.** Lengthy questions can be confusing to respondents.
6. **Are usually open-ended.** Open-ended questions are a hallmark of focus group interviewing. (Krueger and Casey, 2000, 40-43)

Facilitator

Selecting a well-trained moderator or facilitator helps to ensure optimal group interaction and helps to ensure desired outcomes. Principally, the moderator should be aware of self, trained in-group dynamics, group formation, problem resolution, meeting facilitation, and verbally articulate. The moderator not only must be knowledgeable about group procedures, processes, but also content. Moreover, it is crucial that the moderator be able to manage the unpredictability of a group. A moderator is not just a person who moves a discussion along from point a to point b, he or she has the awesome responsibility of assuring the success of the group.

As cited by Jensen and Chilberg (1991), groups are notorious for digressing into irrelevant discussion, pushing through an agenda without finishing important issues, and failing to apply criteria in evaluating alternatives. The person who helps the group manage these procedural difficulties is called the facilitator. In a sense, the facilitator has to understand the group process as well as the group task.

Participants

Focus groups should consist of seven to twelve participants who are unfamiliar with each other but share some characteristic with the focus issue. Participant selection requires some knowledge of the consequence of sampling. The strategy of sampling assures the generalization of the results to a particular population. Selection of participants should be purposeful, diverse, and representative of the population to which the focus issue affects. The following are types of sampling techniques:

1. **Convenience sampling** is the selection of participants based upon availability and appropriateness.
2. **Simple random sampling** is a procedure that assures all individuals in a population have a fair chance of selection. This good procedure can produce data that has generalizability to a population.
3. **Stratified sampling** involves selecting participants so that certain subgroups in the population are adequately represented.
4. **Cluster sampling** is the selection of a naturally occurring group of participants.

Methodology

Prepare, prepare, prepare! There may be many questions asked by participants concerning the context and content of the focus group. Preparing oneself for even the 'unique' of questions can set the tone of the discussion.

Contact participants prior to the day of the group's encounter to assure their attendance. Facilitators should arrive early to set-up the room for discussion. If refreshments are to be served, assure there are sugar-free alternatives available and that refreshments will not be physiologically draining on the participants.

Typical recording equipment may include, a video recorder, tape recorder with microphone, digital video recorder, flip chart, markers, etceteras. Arrange seating to maximize group interaction and to facilitate the discussion. If you will be using a presentation type board, position the board as to allow a full view by all participants. All electronic equipment should be tested and retested. Additionally, it is a good idea to have back-up equipment.

Focus groups usually do not last more than one and one-half hours in duration. The focus encounter should begin by:

1. Welcoming the participants to the session.
2. Introducing and explaining the role of each facilitator.
3. Discussing the purpose of the focus group.
4. Articulating a brief overview of the process, duration, and explanation of the ground rules.
5. Opening with a compelling introductory question to lead off the discussion.
6. Ending with a summary question or statement to close the discussion.
7. Debriefing participants.
8. Thanking participants for their participation.

End of Session Analysis

An independent analysis should be conducted by each facilitator noting group dynamics, particular interactions between participants, discussion themes,

kinetics of participants, tonality of discussion, questions or special concerns of participants, trends or patterns, word and nonverbal cues, context and content of unique discussions, and suggestions or recommendations. Facilitators should reconcile notes and observations and write the report accordingly.

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Vennix, J. A. (1996). **Group modeling building: facilitation team learning using system dynamics**. Chichester, NY: J. Wiley.

WEB References

Beneath the Surface in Focus Groups

<http://www.mnav.com/bensurf.htm>

Basics of Conducting Focus Groups

<http://www.mapnp.org/library/evaluatn/focusgrp.htm>

Focus Groups: A Help or a Waste of Time?

<http://www.groupsplus.com/pmt0797.htm>

A manual for focus groups

<http://www.unu.edu/unupress/food2/UIN03E/UIN03E00.HTM>

Basics for conducting focus groups

<http://www.mapnp.org/library/evaluatn/focusgrp.htm>

General information on focus groups

<http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/sru/SRU19.html>

Various links to focus group websites

http://www.isixsigma.com/vc/focus_groups/

A collection of articles and other resources related to focus groups

<http://www.groupsplus.com/pages/articles.htm>

Rationale behind focus groups and how to use them best

<http://www.mnav.com/cligd.htm>

Getting more out of your focus group

<http://www.mnav.com/getmore.htm>

Information on moderating groups

<http://www.mnav.com/evmod.htm>

Concept testing in focus groups

<http://www.mnav.com/contest.htm>

Getting beneath the surface in focus groups

<http://www.mnav.com/bensurf.htm>

Getting to the right psychological level in your focus group

<http://www.mnav.com/rightpsy.htm>

Using experts in your focus group

http://www.mnav.com/Including_experts_in_focus_groups.htm

A How-not-to guide

<http://www.coolth.com/focus.htm>

A general description of focus groups and how they are useful

<http://www.icmc.org/reference/focus.htm>

Various pieces of information on focus groups

http://www.uth.tmc.edu/ut_general/admin_fin/cqi/FOCUSGR0.HTM

The use and misuse of focus groups

<http://www.useit.com/papers/focusgroups.html>

Tips for when to use focus groups

<http://www.health.state.mn.us/communityeng/needs/focus.html>

Structured focus groups

<http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/sawd/arr/focus.html>

Using focus groups for evaluation

<http://ag.arizona.edu/fcr/fs/cyfar/focus.htm>

Needs focus group protocol

http://mime1.marc.gatech.edu/MM_Tools/NFGP.html

Brief description on how to run a focus group

http://www.gday-mate.com/customer_service/focusgroup.html