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What is a Focus Group?

A focus group is a guided discussion used to explore people's thoughts, feelings, and opinions on a specific topic. Typically, focus groups involve 6 to 12 participants who are asked to respond to a series of questions posed by a moderator. Focus group participants should be members of the group in which you are interested (i.e., your target population). A focus group session usually lasts 1.5 to 2 hours. Conducting more than one focus group on your topic of interest allows you to have more confidence in the results.

What is the Purpose of a Focus Group?

The purpose of a focus group is to use the interactions that take place within a group to obtain information that may be otherwise difficult to get. The free exchange of thoughts and opinions is what makes the focus group a unique way of exploring ideas and seeking feedback on your topic.

When is a Focus Group an Appropriate Research Method?

Focus groups are well suited to sharing ideas, deepening discussions, or obtaining feedback around complex issues. They should be used to learn about issues, opportunities, and problems. Focus groups are not appropriate for comparing ideas, or obtaining people's opinions on sensitive topics. It is also important to remember that focus groups include only a few members of your target population and, therefore, do not necessarily represent the opinions of the entire population.

How are Focus Group Participants Selected?

Focus group participants should be members of your target population (e.g., if you are interested in opinions about volunteering among immigrants, your group should be comprised of new Canadians). The members of a focus group should also share some other characteristics. Decide on the characteristics that your participants

should have in order to interact freely and provide useful information. Age, gender, ethnocultural background, occupation, level of education, and socioeconomic status are examples of characteristics that you may want to consider when selecting participants.

Steps in Carrying Out a Focus Group

Before the session:

1. Define your objectives → identify what you want to achieve and make sure a focus group is the appropriate way to meet your objectives.
2. Choose a moderator → be sure she/he is skilled in facilitating discussion (e.g., able to give all participants a chance to voice their opinions and restrain dominant participants who could influence the opinions of others), is a good listener, and understands the intent of the study.
3. Prepare 6 to 12 questions that generate continuous conversation → arrange the questions in a sequence that is appropriate to your objectives. Also, prepare some follow-up questions that will prompt respondents to elaborate on their answers.
4. Test the questions before finalizing them → they should provide enough information without eliciting tedious discussions. You can test your questions with your colleagues, the project advisory committee, or other project stakeholders.
5. Recruit participants → carefully consider their backgrounds and experiences and establish qualification criteria for selecting participants.
6. Offer incentives → e.g., refreshments, childcare, and/or monetary compensation.
7. Have participants sign consent forms → participants must be fully informed about the aim of your project and what you will do with the information they provide. Written consent should be obtained whenever possible.
8. Find an appropriate space → such as a conference room or private office.

9. Develop a discussion guide → include an outline of discussion topics, questions, and sub-questions. Make sure it is easy for the moderator to follow and indicate how much time should be spent on each topic area.
10. Set up recording equipment → focus groups are usually video taped and/or audio taped. Ask for participants' permission.
11. Assign a notetaker → have someone on your research team take notes to support the video/audio recordings. If taking notes is the only way of recording sessions, make sure the notetaker is well prepared to take thorough notes.

During the session:

1. Explain the purpose → why are you conducting this focus group?
2. Explain how you will record the discussion and use the results → who will see or hear the conversation?
3. Use an exercise to warm-up the group → e.g., pass out nametags and play a name game.
4. Move from general to specific topics → begin with the most general question to get people talking and move to more detailed questions.
5. Be creative → small exercises will help maintain interest and engagement.
6. Finish the session by reviewing the key ideas and ask for confirmation or “add-ons.”

After the session:

1. Summarize your data → reserve time between sessions to summarize what you learned.
2. Transcribe your data → type out all dialogue. If possible, have an experienced transcriber do it.
3. Be prepared to analyze your data → learn about qualitative data analysis (e.g., coding, categorizing, comparing, and contrasting responses). See below for resources on qualitative analysis.
4. Be careful in generalizing your findings to a larger population → your findings are based on a small

group. Therefore, they are more suitable for exploring new research questions or topics, or explaining or confirming previous findings.

5. Prepare a report → address the discussion guide questions and use quotes for illustration. Have a section for conclusions and suggest next steps.

Checklist for Conducting a Focus Group

- Have you established clear objectives for conducting your focus group?
- Have you chosen a skilled moderator?
- Have you decided how you will select your focus group participants?
- Have you prepared focus group questions and a discussion guide?
- Have you arranged for recording equipment?
- Are you prepared to analyze qualitative data and discuss the results?
- Have you included quotes, conclusions and suggestions in the report?

For More Information

Stewart, D. W., & Shamdasani, P. N. (1990). *Focus groups: Theory and practice*. Applied social research methods series, Vol. 20. Sage Publications.

Kitzinger, J. (1995). Qualitative Research: Introducing *focus groups*. *British Medical Journal* (BMJ), 311:299-302.
<http://bmj.bmjournals.com/cgi/content/full/311/7000/299>

Denzin N.K., & Lincoln Y.S. (2000). *Handbook of qualitative research*, 2nd ed. Sage Publications.
 Centre for Urban Transportation Studies, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Guidelines for conducting a focus group. www.uwm.edu/Dept/CUTS/focus.htm



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