

Innovation *insights*

OFFICE OF PLANNING AND
Institutional Assessment

Innovation Insight Series Number 8
<http://www.psu.edu/president/pia/innovation/>

How to Use Focus Groups to Solicit Ideas and Feedback

Definition of a Focus Group

A focus group is a qualitative research tool that involves the recording of responses and a detailed transcription from a one to two hour group discussion led by a facilitator. It provides a forum for soliciting ideas and feedback.

Purpose of a Focus Group

- Analyze products, services, or processes in order to improve them or to identify, clarify, or correct a problem.
- Measure or evaluate a process in order to determine the current condition.
- Provide factual information as a guide in making decisions, replacing opinions and focusing on data.
- Build a base of common knowledge about an issue or topic, especially about constituent needs and expectations.
- Evaluate the effect of change.

Use Focus Groups When You Want To

- Obtain in-depth knowledge by listening to participants as they share and compare their experiences, feelings and opinions.
- Gather more data in a relatively short time than could be collected in individual interviews.

- Use the group setting as a context in which the synergy can generate more than the sum of individual inputs.

How to Begin

- Prepare questions or a discussion guide around the topic to be probed.
- Avoid questions that persuade, evaluate or judge specific individuals, promote false or negative expectations, or propose activities contrary to University policies or practices.
- Determine how to collect participant input (audio/videotape, written).
- Determine the number of focus groups.
- Select participants, a facilitator, and a site.

How to Select Participants

- Select a random sample of representatives from target populations.
- Each focus group should be made up of 8 -10 participants.
- The more homogeneous the groups in terms of background and perspectives, the fewer groups will be needed; if additional discussions are not producing more new ideas, three or four focus groups may be sufficient.

How to Select the Facilitator

- Select a trained moderator neutral to the issue.
- Select a facilitator with expertise on focus group methodology, design and process.

Role of the Facilitator

- Begins discussion with welcome and background information.
- Describes meeting format and ground rules.
- Guides discussion with general questions, followed by specific questions.
- Controls interaction in the group.
- Moves irrelevant discussion back on track.
- Restarts discussion when the group “runs dry”.
- Ensures that “group think” doesn’t stifle opinions that differ from the majority.
- Discourages overly dominant participants.
- Engages overly reticent participants.
- Closes discussion with announcement of follow-up plans and thank-yous.

Advantages of Focus Groups

- Potentially more information offered than in interview due to group interaction.
- Can help establish or enhance relationships between members of the group.
- Promotes disclosures; identifies questions researchers may not have thought to ask.
- Widely accepted within marketing research; believable results at reasonable cost.

- Offsets the tendency to over rely on what’s quantifiable.

Disadvantages of Focus Groups

- Potentially unbalanced results because of group dynamics.
- Lack of confidentiality and anonymity may suppress or bias information.
- More skill required of facilitator than for individual interviews.
- Does not provide results that can be generalized to broader populations.

References

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Revised October 2007