

How to Conduct Focus Groups to Obtain Truly Useful Information

by Dr. Dennis Rosen

So, you are going to be conducting some focus groups. Maybe you are the owner of a small business who wants to find out what your customer are thinking. Maybe you work for a business, and your boss has assigned you to do some (because you're a good talker and people like you). Here's a warning: it is very easy to do bad groups—groups that do not end up obtaining worthwhile information from the participants, or worse yet, obtain incorrect information. And most nonprofessionals end up conducting bad groups.

There is more to a focus group than just talking with a set of people. A focus group is a well-thought-out discussion on topics of interest to you with six to ten individuals who represent a target market—usually a set of your customers or potential customers. Its purpose often is to understand their true motives and decision processes. Sometimes the purpose is to generate new product ideas or get initial reaction to potential products or promotions, brand names, positioning strategies, etc.

Hints to Doing Great Groups

As moderator (the group leader), you are responsible for getting useful information from the group during its 1½ to 2 hour session. Here are some important points to help you conduct great focus groups:

- Have a clear understanding of the purpose of your focus groups. Don't go into groups with the hope that you will learn something interesting. Know what it is you want to find out before you start. List three or four areas and assign an amount of time to discuss each. Start with general topics and move into those that are more specific. List a few questions under each topic, again moving from general to specific. This document becomes your "moderator's guide" and will help you keep the group on track.
- Make sure participants represent the market of interest through proper screening questions (e.g., have purchase in the last six months, have used the product/service a required number of times, etc.).
- Consider the topic, and select respondents so they will feel comfortable talking with each other. Consider, for example, will men and women feel comfortable discussing the topic together? If not, they will require separate groups. How about participants in their 20s with others in their 60s. Again, they will often not feel comfortable being in the same group depending upon the topic.
- Never have more than ten in a group. There won't be sufficient time for them all to talk. It is common to recruit a couple of extra participants in case some don't show. But if more than ten show up, thank the extras, pay them (if payment was used as an incentive) and send them home.

- Always try to do more than one group per target segment. The more consistent the responses across groups for the same segment, the more comfortable you can feel about the value of the results you are obtaining.
- Start the group by introducing yourself and explaining the general purpose of the group (don't give them too much information). Tell them that they are all expected to participate but must talk one at a time. Let them know if the group is being recorded (they should sign a waiver) or they are being observed. Then go around the table and give them each 5-10 seconds (no more) to introduce themselves.
- Audio record the session. You won't have time to take notes.
- The first ten minutes should be designed to get everyone comfortable with talking. So make the initial questions general and easy.
- Do not ask a question and go around the table getting each person's response. Instead, the interaction should take the form of a discussion. Ask a question, wait for a response, and then ask the group to chime in (e.g., "Everyone, what do you think?"). If they don't talk, just stay quiet and look at them. They will become uncomfortable with the silence and will start to respond.
- Use probing questions after a response as appropriate. Questions like, "Why is that?" "What do you mean?" "And that's important because. . .?" will get the respondent to clarify and help get to his/her true feelings.
- Watch for facial expressions. A participant might grimace, smile or widen his/her eyes at another participant's response. You can then address this respondent and ask for his/her thoughts (e.g., "Jane, I get the feeling that you don't agree. How do you feel about Steve's comment?")
- Control those who talk too much by looking away from them when you ask a question. Or hold up your hand when they start to respond and say, "Jim, excuse me. You've been a really good participant. But I need to hear from some of the others first, and then I'll get back to you."
- Get quiet participants to respond by looking at them when you ask a question. Or prod them with statements like, "Jane, you haven't said much yet, but I can tell from your expressions that you are thinking about the topic. What are your thoughts?"
- Play devil's advocate, to help force discussion. Or ask participants, "What do others like you think?" Often they are more willing to talk about "others" than themselves.
- Be flexible. Your moderator's guide is just that—a guide. Depending upon the discussion that develops you may change the order of questioning, rephrase or add questions and spend more or less time on a topic.

Focus groups can provide valuable information and are not hard to conduct if you keep in mind what it is you are trying to accomplish. Plan the group and select participants accordingly. Let the participants do the talking, and guide them to stay on topic. Probe to get to true feelings. The results can be very rewarding.

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