

# Innovation insights

OFFICE OF PLANNING AND

Institutional Assessment

Innovation Insight Series Number 8

## How to Use Focus Groups to Solicit Ideas and Feedback

### Definition of a Focus Group:

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

### Purpose of a Focus Group:

- Analyse 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 decision-making, 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/video tape, 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.

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- 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.

For more information, contact the Office of Planning and Institutional Assessment at 814-863-8721 or [psupia@psu.edu](mailto:psupia@psu.edu), or visit our website: <http://www.psu.edu/president/pia>

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