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, or visit our website: [http://www.psu.edu/president/pia](http://www.psu.edu/president/pia)

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