Portland State UNIVERSITY

Focus Groups

Overview

The Focus Group is an exploratory research method used to help researchers gather in-depth, qualitative information of their participants' attitudes and perceptions relating to concepts, products, services, or programs. There are several other reasons to conduct a focus group.

- To generate new ideas. Open discussions with clients may lead to new perspectives on service delivery, as well as provide a means of evaluating customer satisfaction and/or complaints.
- To search for questions, vocabulary, and perceptions of buyers, and users of a product category.
- To analyze target consumer reaction to copy and advertising methods.
- To explore customer/prospect reactions to new products/services.
- To formulate hypotheses that can be tested with quantitative surveys.
- To interpret previously obtained qualitative data.

Focus group interview procedures are built around the specific needs of the user. The most common types of focus group structures are as follows:

- Evaluative/descriptive. Respondents are asked to vocalize their feelings toward a product, service, or situation.
- Behavior/experience. Scenarios are presented to participants in order to gauge their reactions.
- Risk oriented. Participants' responses are evaluated based on personal characteristics associated with participants' willingness to take a chance when outcomes may vary. The line of questioning may or may not lead to innovation.
- Test/experimental. Used to btain reactions to a product or service test or experiment.
- Demonstration/educational. A means of informing respondents so they can comprehend a product or service in relation to their needs or means of application. An outside facilitator performs the task rather than the moderator.

There are numerous advantages to using this type of exploratory research method:

- It allows respondents to express detailed feelings, opinions and attitudes - usually telephone or mail surveys limit respondents to responses, which can be expressed only in a few words.
- It is possible to ask "What if..." type questions.
- To discover hidden feelings and motives.
- It is possible to use visual or audio props in a focus group study - participants in the focus group can actually be exposed to examples of advertising and give immediate reactions.
- Participants give immediate reactions. In the give and take of a lively discussion, people can raise questions that the researcher had not thought of and might never have raised in the course of a few individual interviews.

- Learn what the people "out there" really think.
- Offers the client immediate contact with current and prospective customers.
- Focus groups can help guide marketers in providing better goods and services**.**

Focus Groups Procedural Guide

This overview of procedures used in developing and implementing a focus group are just that - an overview. More detailed information can be found in the reference section below. Much of the work presented here is taken from two sources:

Stewart, D. W., & Shamdasani, P.N. (1990). <u>Focus groups: Theory & practice.</u> Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
Krueger, R.A. (1994). <u>Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research</u>. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

There are nine steps typically followed in the development and implementation of focus groups.

1. Establish research agenda
2. Identify sample characteristics
3. Select the focus group moderator
4. Plan focus group: physical planning
5. Generate and pre-test an interview guide: write a screening questionnaire and develop a moderator's outline (both could be standardized)
6. Recruit the sample
7. Conduct the focus group
8. Analyze and interpret focus group findings
9. Write and present report

1. Establish research agenda

- <u>Client relationship.</u> Before holding a group, discussion topics are developed using an outline, which is prepared in consultation with the client. The researcher and the client(s) together should develop a research plan or a plan of action. This plan should include the identification of the research objectives and/or questions, characteristics of the sample to be recruited, resources available, time line for all phases of the research process, and budget.
- <u>Problem definition: Identify the purpose; specify the objectives and/or questions to be answered</u>. Because the focus group is intended to collect specific information about topics of interest from identified sets of individuals, focus groups must be well established with well-defined objectives.

2. Identify sample characteristics

A critical element in the success of focus groups is in the recruitment of participants. Care must be given to the composition of the group because the quality and direction of the discussion is determined, in part, by the interactions of the individuals within the group. Several factors must be considered in determining the sample of participants to be recruited:

a. Group homogeneity. The group should be homogeneous but with sufficient variation to allow for contrasting opinions. Most commonly, homogeneity is sought in terms of occupation, past use of a program or service, educational level, age, gender, education, or family characteristics. The composition of the group is largely determined by the topic(s) of interest.

b. Intrapersonal or individual characteristics. Personal characteristics of individuals (e.g., physical, personality, demographic) will determine their behavior in the group, how others react to them, and may influence the group's behavior.

c. Size of the focus group. Typically, the size of the focus group is from 6 to 12 participants. The group should not be so large that each participant does not have a chance to contribute. Nor should the group be so small that it limits the range of experiences and opinions to be shared. Again, the size of the focus group is largely determined by the topic(s) of interest.

d. Representativeness of the sample. A well-selected group is more representative of the target population than a poorly selected group.

3. Select the focus group moderator

In selecting a moderator, here are a few essential points to keep in mind.

- Select an experienced moderator.
- Most experts recommend that the moderator be an individual not directly involved in the operation of the organization conducting the focus group.
- An outside consultant possessing a background in focus group work, working with groups, or training in group dynamics is preferable.
- The moderator should be skilled in stimulating discussion, encouraging quiet people to state opinions, and monitoring or limiting outspoken people who try to monopolize the meeting.
- The moderator should create a relaxed atmosphere.
- The moderator should understand the objectives and keep the discussion on track.
- The moderator should have adequate background knowledge on the topic of interest to place all comments in perspectives and follow up on critical areas of concern.
- The moderator should be able to communicate clearly.
- The moderator should not voice his or her opinions about the topic of interest.
- A second person may be selected to take notes during the focus group. This is particularly important as equipment may (and does) fail at critical times.

4. Plan focus group: physical planning

Arrangements for holding a focus group include: planning the location, arranging the room in which the group will be held, planning refreshments for participants, and scheduling the use of audio and/or video equipment. Environmental factors - physical location, material space, personal space, and spatial arrangements- can influence the conduct of focus groups.

- Physical location. Focus groups should be held at a location that is easy for participants to find.

- Material space. The room in which the focus group is held should be free from visual or auditory distractions - the decor of the room neutral as possible and noise from external sources should be avoided. The room should be well lighted and provide proper ventilation. The room size should be appropriate for the size of the group. The furniture should be comfortable enough for participants to sit for two hours.
- Personal space. Arrange seating so that participants' personal and interpersonal space is respected.
- Spatial arrangements. The key in effective spatial arrangements is for participants to engage in conversation with each other and with the moderator. Arrange chairs and/or tables so that participants can face each other. Note: While tables are not necessary, they may provide a comfort barrier for participants and a place on which to eat (if food is served). It is also important to arrange the room to make recording (note taking, video- and tape- recording) of focus group sessions optimal.

5. Generate and pre-test an interview guide

The interview guide sets the agenda for the focus group discussion by establishing the research questions to be addressed in the focus group. The client(s) and moderator develop this guide together. When developing this guide questions should be ordered from more general to more specific and/or by their relative importance to the research agenda. (Most to least important).

- What is the magic number for determining the number of questions to ask during a focus group? It depends on the research topic. Ask enough questions to get a clear picture of the topic under discussion, but not too many that participants do not have time to process and respond to each question.
- How structured should the questions be? The questions should not be so structured as to limit participant responses or to lead participants to a particular answer, but they should not be so general that participants are lost in knowing how to respond. A rule of thumb is to move from less structured to more structured questions when the desire is to eventually narrow the discussion.
- What types of questions should I ask during the focus group? Regardless of the type of question asked, it should be in language appropriate to the participants. Be clear, simple, and direct- avoid confusing terminology or long questions. There are a number of different types of questions asked during a focus group. The main point I want to emphasize is that questions are asked to elicit responses - not to anger, create defensiveness, or withdrawal from the group. Avoid asking dichotomous questions. Ideal questions are those that probe for "what" and "how" respondents think and feel. Directly asking participants "why" questions could be problematic if they interpret these questions as having to defend their position.
- The focus group interviewed should be pilot-tested. In doing a pilot test consider the characteristics of the questions and probes, the target audience, the moderator, and the setting. One way to review the interview guide is to pilot test it with a group representative of the target audience.

6. Recruit the participants

A few of the strategies used to recruit participants include:

- Random telephone screening. Qualified participants are typically recruited by telephone - offering an incentive to attend each group. Participants can be qualified by specific segments or drawn by random selection to match targeted demographics.
- The list. Clients can provide an existing list of customers, clients, members, and employees. While this is fast and economical, using this strategy has its' own problems. For example, the list may be incomplete - not providing other relevant information for effectively selecting participants- and may not be well maintained or revised on a regular basis.
- Piggyback focus groups. Focus groups can be added to another event where participants are gathered for another purpose (e.g., at the end of a professional meeting).
- On location. Focus groups can be held on location where people tend to frequent (e.g., shopping mall, recreational events). The problem with convenience sampling is that participants may not match the sample characteristics.

Krueger (1994) describes other techniques such as nominations, snowball samples, and screening/selection services in work.

Once potential participants have been identified or a recruitment procedure (see above) selected several steps are followed to recruit participants. The potential participants are contacted (by telephone, mail or in person) and invited to attend the focus group. If the focus group needs to be composed of individual with specific characteristics, they may be asked a few qualifying questions. Potential participants are given a general description of the focus group topics and are offered an incentive to encourage participation. Prospective participants are given the time, day, and date of the focus group. Once individuals have agreed to participate, they should receive within a few days a written confirmation or telephone call of their agreement to participate. Twenty-four hours before the focus group, participants should be contacted to remind them of their commitment and to ensure they have accurate information regarding location, day, date, and time.

7. Conduct the focus group

A focus group is conducted in a comfortable and relaxed setting. The meeting lasts no longer than 2 hours. A focus group is directed by a moderator who explains the purpose of the group, establishes ground rules for participation, facilitates the exchange of ideas among the participants, and creates a non threatening and nonevaluative environment in which group members feel free to express themselves openly. The ideal moderator is one who is comfortable using different styles of interviewing. Audio and/or video equipment may be used for recording the session. It is customary to inform participants if the session will be recorded. If tape recording the session, participants should be informed that all taped information will be transcribed and participant identity kept confidential. If video recording, participants should be informed as to who will view the tape (note: this is my personal opinion). Participants should be informed as to what will be done with all recordings at the end of the study.

Beginning the focus group process, the moderator's responsibility is to create an atmosphere for openness. A good way to do this is for everyone in the group to introduce themselves; this includes the moderator. After introductions are finished, the moderator should introduce the topic(s) for discussion. The moderator should stress through words and actions that each person's opinion is valued and necessary for the success of the group. The moderator is responsible for managing the time and keeping participants on task. At the conclusion of the focus group, the moderator may want to ask if participants have any other comments. In addition, participants should be thanked for their participation and given their incentive.

8. Analyze and interpret focus group findings

Moderators follow a planned, systematic procedure in analyzing qualitative data. This procedure helps ensure that the results will be as error-free as possible. The procedure has several components, some deal with data collection decisions made before and during the focus group and the others deal with the process of analyzing data.

The first step in making sense of focus group data is to transcribe the interview. The key in transcribing a focus group recording is to preserve the integrity of the data. The analyst should not clean up the data (misspelling, poor grammar, or incomplete sentences) if it distorts or changes what participants say and how they respond. At this time, the moderator may want to add information about participants' affective status, a description of the setting, or any other background information.

- <u>During the focus group.</u> Record data and have someone take notes to capture accurately participant responses.
- <u>Participant verification</u>. This is done to ensure that the researcher has adequately understood the intent of participants. This can be done during the focus group or after the data have been analyzed. Its involves asking participants to further elaborate on information, or to having participants respond to the moderator's summary of their responses.
- <u>Debriefing between the moderator and the note-taker</u>. This occurs immediately after the focus group. The purpose of this debriefing is to capture the highlights, and to clarify each other's understanding of what was seen and heard.
- <u>Sharing a preliminary draft of the report with focus group members</u>. This is done to give focus group members an opportunity to verify the analyst's description of the constructs.
- <u>The data must be verifiable.</u> This means derived constructs and essential finding must be supported by the data. This again reinforces the need for taking detailed notes, for recording responses, and for including members in the checking of the data.
- <u>The analysis must be focused</u>. Not all questions asked during the focus group will be equally important. With the abundance of information collected during this process, it is important to place the focus on the research questions driving the study.
- <u>The analysis must be have the appropriate level of interpretation</u>. This is based on the needs of the client and on what is necessary to answer the research question.

The interpretation of the data must be practical and manageable to the analyst. Interpretation of data can be viewed as being on a continuum. On one end is the raw data, in the middle is descriptive information, and at the other end pure interpretation. (1) The raw data are the exact statements of the participants as they responded to questions during the focus group. They can be ordered within categories by what was most often to least often said. The disadvantage of using this method is that the report will be lengthy, and it forces the client to make interpretation about what participants said. (2) On the other hand, descriptive information is summary comments prepared by the analyst. It minimizes efforts needed to interpret the data by presenting the raw data in summary form while providing representative participant comments to support the data. (3) The most difficult of the three procedures is the interpretive method. The analyst provides an interpretation to aid the reader in understanding. Using this method, the analyst uses information based on transcribed notes combined with other background information.

9. Write and present report

As in all report writing it is important to consider your audience and purpose for reporting. The language used should be appropriate for the intended audience. The report should meet the needs of the user and answer the research questions. While the main purpose of reporting is to communicate results, the report should also reflect the focus groups process and present participants' responses as truthfully and accurately as possible. In my opinion, it is necessary to include participant quotes as much as possible.