

The Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How (many) of Focus Groups

This guide is intended for use for focus groups in the context of preparing a new survey or doing an evaluation project. It is not intended for focus groups in the context of developing a research hypothesis.

WHAT is a focus group?

A focus group is a group discussion of a particular topic of interest. Focus groups can be distinguished from group interviews, in which each participant is individually asked each question.

WHEN is it appropriate to use a focus group?

Focus groups are useful for exploratory research, especially when little is known about the question of interest. Though they can be used at any stage of a research project, focus groups are most commonly used at the beginning stages of a research project. Focus group research is typically followed up with more precise measures of larger groups, such as a survey (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007).

WHY use focus groups?

An advantage of the focus group is the interaction among participants which can lead to more and different types of information than individual or group interviews (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999 and MacDougall & Fudge, 2001).

HOW many participants and groups should there be?

Ideally, each focus group will have six to twelve participants. Groups with fewer than six participants tend to reveal less information and can be dull. On the other hand, it is difficult to have an informative conversation with groups larger than twelve. It is also recommended that a few extra participants be recruited for each focus group, in case there are no-shows (Gibbs, 1997 and Stewart et al., 2007).

The number of focus groups depends on the amount of information needed. Some studies have used as little as one focus group. If a point is reached where no new information is being gleaned from the focus groups, no additional focus groups are necessary (MacDougall & Fudge, 2001). More focus groups are needed for more complex questions and fewer groups are needed when the population is homogenous or the question is simple. Though there are no firm guidelines regarding the number of focus groups, most studies use at least two groups and few studies use more than four groups (Stewart et al., 2007).

WHO should the participants be?

The participants should represent the population of interest. If the goal is to develop a new survey, the participants should be members of the target population. If the purpose is an evaluation project, the participants should be potential members of the program. In general, participants should be members of the same group. That is, if you are interested in the perspectives of students and faculty, separate focus groups should be conducted for each.

WHERE do you find a moderator and questions for the participants?

First, a clear understanding of the goals as they relate to the project must be developed. If the purpose of the focus group is to pilot test a survey, discussion questions will center on clarity, the adequacy of response scales, and issues of bias. Focus groups conducted as part of program evaluation will focus on the key small goals on a set of objectives for the program. It is important that the moderator be able to understand the information that will come up during the session. Moderators guide the discussion and ensure participation by all, but do not express their own opinions. It is also important that the moderator is someone the target group will be comfortable with (Stewart et al., 2007).

There are two important ideas to keep in mind while generating questions. It is important to begin with general questions first and move throughout the session to more specific questions. It is also wise to put the most important questions at the beginning of the session. Questions should also be understandable to participants and follow-up probes should be considered when appropriate (Stewart et al., 2007).

References

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- Stewart, D. W., Shamdasani, P. N., & Rook, D. W. (2007). *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Further Readings

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