

Running a successful focus group

Susannah Wintersgill
Deputy Director of Public Affairs

Wednesday 4 November 2015



Agenda

- Introductions
- Planning a focus group
- Recruiting participants
- Preparing your discussion guide
- Running a focus group
- Analysing your data and reporting your findings
- Questions and discussion

Planning process



Define the purpose

- What information do you need to obtain?
- What are the key questions for which you need responses?
- What decisions will be informed by the responses you receive?

Points to consider

- Ensure your research is appropriate and well planned before asking people to give up their time
- Is a focus group the most appropriate way of obtaining the information you need?
 - ✓ Exploring people's attitudes and opinions
 - ✓ Encouraging creative thinking (e.g. testing solutions, developing strategies)
 - x Discussing personal or sensitive issues
 - x Gaining a detailed understanding of an individual's views
- Should you conduct depth interviews or a survey instead / alongside?

Participants

- Whose views do you need to canvass?
- Consider factors such as role, affiliation, seniority, age group, gender, ethnicity and geographical location
- Consider the mix in each group:
 - Participants should be comfortable with one another, but ideally not know one another
 - Diversity in the group will result in a broader range of views/ideas
- What is your ideal group size? 6-12 people enables discussion to flow while allowing everyone to participate.
- How many groups do you need to run? It usually takes 3 to 4 to produce meaningful results.

Logistics

- Location: select a site that is accessible
- Venue: select a room that is quiet and comfortable
- Timing: time of year, week, day, length
- Consider the set-up (e.g. U-shaped or round a table)
- Consider equipment (flipchart, laptop, projector)
- Will you record the session as well as take notes?
- Will you use name cards / badges ?
- Will you provide refreshments?

Timeline

Activity	Timeline
Preparation of research proposal and objectives	1 week
Recruitment of volunteers	3 weeks (depending on complexity of research and number of volunteers needed)
Design of focus group guide	1 week
Preparation, running and analysis of pilot focus group	1 week
Focus groups	2 weeks
Analysis and reporting	1 week
Total time	9 weeks

Resources

- Will you carry out the research and analysis yourself, or do you require an external agency?
- If you are moderating the session, is a colleague available to take notes?
- If you are recording the session, who will transcribe?
- Do you have a budget for venue hire, refreshments, travel costs for participants, incentives?
- How will you present the results?
- How will the actions that result from the feedback be resourced?

Recruiting participants



Encouraging participation

- Explain clearly and concisely how the results will be used and why people should take part
- Consider offering an incentive, if appropriate - either personal (e.g. voucher) or general (e.g. charity donation)
- Use a multi-channelled approach to promote (fliers, posters, social media, local media, local networks)
- Confirm attendance in writing and then send a reminder

Preparing your discussion guide



Discussion guide

- Prepare a discussion guide in advance
- Helps ensure you cover subject areas systematically and consistently across groups
- Pilot your guide with a test group and amend accordingly
- Keep to the same structure and questions for each group
- But, don't administer it like a questionnaire – keep the discussion free-flowing and natural

Questions

- 6-10 questions
- Focus on one area / issue per question
- Questions should be clear, simple and non-directive
- Use open-ended questions to facilitate discussion (e.g. who, what, where, when, why, how)
- Try to avoid yes/no questions
- Move from the general to the specific
- Start with a couple of softer / easier questions
- Move to the complex ones to allow a group dynamic to be established
- But don't leave your most important questions to the end

Running a focus group



Starting the session

- Greet each participant as they arrive
- Note down who is sitting where on your plan
- Introduce yourself to the whole group
- Explain the purpose of the focus group and how the information gathered will be used
- Put people at ease – ask people to introduce themselves
- Set the ground rules:
 - Be respectful
 - Agree to disagree
 - Don't talk over one another

What makes a good moderator?

Good moderators...

- ✓ Are sufficiently independent
- ✓ Are confident in themselves and with the group
- ✓ Build trust so people are comfortable discussing issues
- ✓ Are good listeners and pay attention to non-verbal signals
- ✓ Are non-judgmental
- ✓ Have thought about the questions and answers in advance
- ✓ Are able to manage the group energy levels and dynamics
- ✓ Are in control of the process (and time-keeping)
- ✓ Have a colleague available to record people's comments

A good moderator needs to...

- ✓ Generate the maximum number of ideas and opinions from as many people as possible
- ✓ Keep control of the group and the discussion
- ✓ Maintain a neutral position at all times
- ✓ Avoid leading participants towards preconceived ideas
- ✓ Probe responses
- ✓ Encourage interactive discussion
- ✓ Make sure that everyone gets an opportunity to speak
- ✓ Not let one person dominate the discussion
- ✓ Summarise the discussion to check understanding

Developing rapport

Friendly and approachable

Not too formal
Address people by their first names

Positive body language

Communicates acceptance

Inclusion

Make sure everyone has said something in the first 10 minutes

Open and honest

Clear, accessible language

Active listening skills

Positive body Language

Make eye contact

Smile

Nod

Lean forward

Face person speaking

Listen

Don't interrupt

Don't finish sentences

Demonstrate understanding

Repeat key points

Paraphrase

Identify issues

Capture key points on a flip chart

Probing to achieve better understanding

Use words like

Why

Which

How

When

Who

What

Elicits reasons for a response

Closing remarks

- End on a positive note
- Thank everyone for their time and contribution
- Provide an opportunity for final thoughts
- Recap how the information you have gathered will be used
- If appropriate, temper people's expectations:
 - e.g. "I can't promise that the changes we've discussed today will happen, but we'll be feeding your views into the next round of development."
- Finish the session on time (ideally 5 mins ahead of schedule)
 - If you do need to go over your allotted time, make sure you have everyone's agreement

Analysing the data and reporting your findings



Analysing the data

- Allow sufficient time for analysis
- Ensure you comply with data protection requirements and that assurances about confidentiality are kept
- Analyse the data with an open mind, otherwise the exercise will be seen to validate a previously held view
- Categorising the data:
 - Read all the summaries in one sitting
 - What are the common themes and key messages?
 - How do these themes help you address your key aims?
 - What areas prompt different views and divided opinion?
 - Are there factors that may explain atypical responses?

Reporting your findings

- Provide a clear account of how the analysis was undertaken
- Explain how conclusions have been drawn, and what evidence backs up your findings
- The aim is to convey the detail of the data whilst maintaining a good balance between description and interpretation
- Highlight top-level patterns and themes
- Use quotes judiciously to illustrate key findings

Common pitfalls

- Don't quantify
- Don't get bogged down with numbers or prevalence
- Don't misapply quotes
- Make sure quotes are in context and are easy to understand
- Don't sanitise quotes
- Don't overuse quotes – they should illustrate not tell the story
- Don't compromise confidentiality

Further information

- Market Research Society guidelines:
www.mrs.org.uk/standards/guidelines
- UK government's code of practice on consultation:
www.gov.uk/government/publications/consultation-principles-guidance
- Central University Research Ethics Committee:
www.admin.ox.ac.uk/curec