

Annex 2: Running Your Own Focus Group

Finding suitable participants

Focus groups usually involve 8 to 10 people but can be as small as 5 to 6. The group should include people who are similar to each other in ways that match your target audience. You should carry out two or three focus groups with each target group.

You could advertise for participants, get referrals from other groups or contact them directly. Avoid only getting people who feel strongly about the issue. The best way to make sure you are selecting suitable members is to first ask them related questions or to fill out a short questionnaire.

Make it as easy as possible for participants to attend and provide incentives if possible. Don't tell them too much about what they will be discussing in advance. You might just say, "You will be participating in group discussion about environmental issues" or "We want your advice on some materials we are developing for a new education campaign."

Tips for running Focus Groups

Develop a 'Topic Guide' with no more than 8 to 12 key questions that you need to address.

Focus groups should last no more than 1.5 to 2 hours. They should be held in a neutral and comfortable setting with as few distractions as possible. Have one assistant keep notes and assist with organization so the facilitator can focus on asking the questions.

Get people there 10 to 15 minutes before the start time. It's important that people get personally welcomed (i.e. they aren't left standing around feeling unimportant) and that they meet the group facilitator early.

Use name tags for everyone. This provides a feeling of friendship and makes it more likely that people will relax and share information. For respondents, having the facilitator use their names gives them a good feeling and a greater sense of involvement. The spacing and format of seats can also be very important.

Introduce yourself as the Facilitator – who you are, where you're from and what your role is. Say your role is neutral and that you aren't allowed to have opinions. Make some personal disclosure – not intimate details of your life but things like interests and goals. This helps respondents to 'bond' with you and gives them an idea of what they should say about themselves. Don't say anything about yourself that could alienate participants (e.g. with low-income participants, don't say you love frequent plane travel!).

Ask people to introduce themselves. Afterwards, say something like "it's nice to know a bit about each other before we start our discussion." This encourages people to relax and sets up an informal atmosphere.

Confirm the purpose of the group. Remember, you know what's coming in the discussion, they don't and some people may feel it is a bit like having a test at school – anything that you as the facilitator can do to reduce anxiety will enhance your chances of getting better quality information.

Tell people how long the session will last, and ensure this will not be a problem for anyone (hopefully they have already been told of anticipated duration).

Right from the outset of a focus group, adopt a 'listening' rather than a 'questioning' approach. Start with general issues and use your topic guide to make sure you cover the issues you need to discuss. Questions do not need to be followed in order if the discussion naturally leads to a different topic, but everything should be covered eventually.

Emphasise the importance of one person talking at a time to make it easier for the note-taker. Although you may also want to record the focus group on audio or video.

The best focus groups are where respondents exchange views and discuss the topic without too much direction from the facilitator. As a facilitator, you need to draw people out to engage with one another.

Emphasise that there are no 'wrong' answers or need to 'agree' with other group members. However, people do need to respect each other's viewpoints and they should not put other ideas down. Ask open-ended questions – ones that cannot be answered with just a YES or a NO but rather begin with: How? What? Why?

Don't hold a guide, pens and paper when running the group. This can make people feel like they are being judged, or that you are more interested in your role than in them. It may also suggest you are nervous or inexperienced and some members may take advantage of that.

When getting people to use their imaginations and visualise, talk them through every step of the 'fantasy' and get them to jot down what they saw or felt or thought. Then have them report back to the group. This lessens the chances of their simply agreeing with what the last person said.

Participants will have many different attitudes and prejudices. Don't ignore these -- work with them. Just say: "We seem to have a difference of opinion here. Let's talk about it together." Then let the group discuss it.

When a group is interacting well and you hear a chance remark that sounds like it could be interesting, don't immediately pounce on the person making the remark. Wait until the conversation subsides and then say: "Sally you were saying something earlier about what was that ...?"

Try to leave a few minutes at the end of the group for last remarks, recapping what has been said, and allowing each member to have a last say. At the end, thank members and emphasise how useful the session has been. Keep your ears open at this stage -- often very choice tidbits of information get dropped at the very end of the group after people think the 'real' discussion is over!

Analysis of Focus Groups

After the focus group, you should go over the discussion with your assistant to identify any "big ideas" that emerged and to confirm that your understandings of what happened match each other. You might wish to make notes of your immediate impressions while still fresh in your mind.

Note the words that people used to talk about issues, particularly if they tended to use different words than you did. Pay attention to key points made by the group as a whole and

compare the main ideas that emerged across all the focus groups to identify similarities and differences. Look for trends and strongly or frequently held opinions.

Try to remember when there were sounds of agreement or disagreement in the group that did not get written down – for example, if someone made an important remark and everyone agreed non-verbally.

Comments that are specific and based on someone’s own personal experience should be given more weight than those that are more general.

Don’t feel as if you have to act on all the suggestions they provided you. Sometimes they might be unrealistic given your resources, or they might just be bad ideas that don’t fit with what you are really trying to achieve.

Group the feedback you received into different topics such as “message concepts” and “visual design”. In each topic, label each idea as “definitely change,” “possibly change” or “do not change”.

**Adapted from "Tips for Running Focus Groups" supplied by Jude Varcoe and Kerry Foley from TNS Research, Wellington, NZ.*

Suggested Focus Group Work Plan

Activity	Who	Deadline
Develop topic guide		
Locate facility		
Set dates/times of group		
Select/train facilitators		
Recruit participants		
Confirm attendance with participants		
Conduct focus groups		
Transcribe tapes/write up notes		
Analyze results		
Write report		