

How to Conduct a

Focus Group



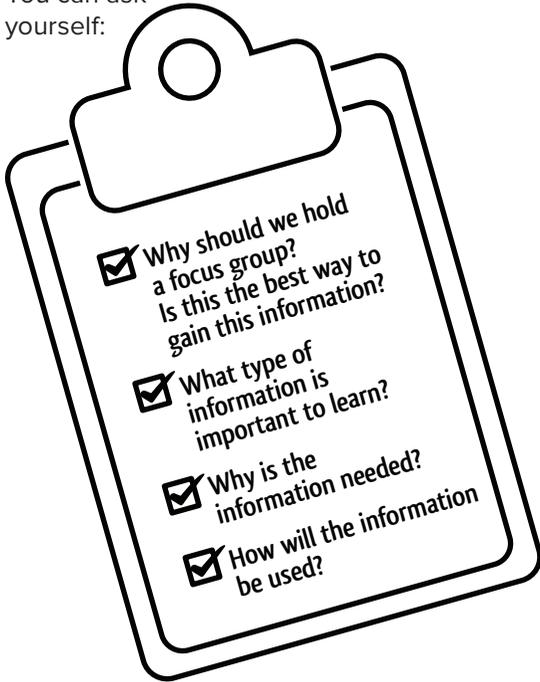
If you are looking to gain generalized insight into the perceptions, beliefs and opinions of an intended audience about specific issues, programs or services then a focus group may be a good fit. A focus group is carefully planned to create a non-threatening environment in which people are free to talk openly. Participants are encouraged to express differing opinions, ask questions, and respond to comments from other participants, as well as to questions posed by the moderator. Focus groups can bring out valuable information that may not be uncovered in individual interviews, telephone surveys, or other research methods.

Sometimes, focus groups can foster consensus among participants. At other times, divergent opinions will be expressed. Be aware that a focus group will not tell you the exact percentage of people who have a particular belief or hold an opinion on a particular issue. Instead, it's important to look for trends and commonalities among participants in order to understand the potential reaction or type of impact your program has or will have on your intended audience. The more you can learn about their thoughts, opinions and behaviors, the better.

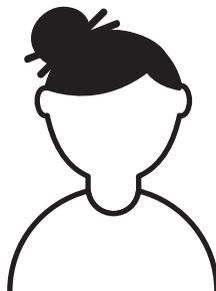


Define the Purpose

Start by defining the purpose and goals of the focus groups. Make sure that your purpose is clear and that you know what information you want from participants. You can ask yourself:



Focus groups are often used in health promotion and marketing to test reactions to materials or health messages, identify barriers to services, elicit perceived needs for new or expanded services, or provide feedback on existing programs and materials.



Potential Participants

Based on what you want to learn, determine who can provide you with answers to your questions. Be as specific as possible when defining this target audience. Consider the traditional ways of grouping people; geographic location, age, ethnicity, gender, income, employment status, family size, cultural differences, risk status and health or disease condition may help identify potential focus group participants.

For some issues, it may be important that participants share the same characteristics or experience. In other cases, you may want to select participants who will represent a broader intended audience. Remember to consider those who do not use your services or who have “dropped out” of programs. Selecting only clients or volunteers who use your services may limit the usefulness of your study. After you have determined who you want to participate in your focus groups, select the date(s), time(s) and location(s) based on what will likely be convenient and accessible for participants. Once this is determined, you are ready to recruit participants.

Recruiting Participants

Groups should consist of 8-12 participants. However, since people may forget about the group or have something come up at the last minute, you should recruit at least 12-15 individuals. Participants are recruited one to three weeks in advance of sessions. Depending on your target audience, recruitment can be done via telephone (if an existing database or contact information exists), in-person (e.g. clinics, senior centers, etc.), or even using online networks sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

Make sure that potential participants know their participation in the group. Their personal experiences, opinions and concerns will be valuable information for the topic of discussion. For example, if you are looking to understand the dining out behaviors of young families and encouraging them to eat healthier, it's okay to let them know the topic will be centered on food choices.

Follow up with participants a week prior to the group by a letter signed by the moderator on your organization's letterhead. Remember to include key information such as the date, time and location of the group. The day before the group will meet contact the participants by telephone to remind them of the time and location.

Participant incentives are viewed as a symbol that the moderator is giving something in exchange for the time and information the participant is giving. Incentives help to promote value and respect between the moderator and the participants, as well as help ensure participants will show up for the agreed upon session.

Small monetary incentives (\$25 to \$75, depending on the geographic region), either in check format or gift cards, are often used to entice people to participate. For example, if your focus group topic is food-related, a gift card to a local grocery store may be appropriate. Or, if you are conducting a group with women who have given birth within the last six months, perhaps a gift of baby supplies could also be appropriate and enticing.

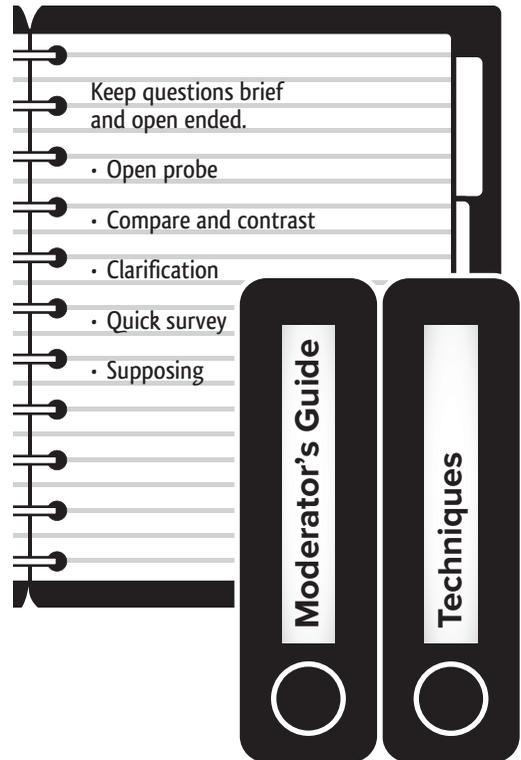


Design a Moderator's Guide

Determine and outline what it is you want to know about your product or program. The guide should be developed in a way that questions seem conversational, even though they have been carefully selected and worded to elicit the maximum amount of information from participants.

Techniques for Writing Your Moderator's Questions:

- **Keep questions brief and open ended.** This will allow for new ideas or connections from other participants. Avoid questions that yield yes/no answers or forced choices. Limit the use of "why?" questions. When asked why, participants may feel that they have to defend their responses, thereby changing the tone of the discussion.
- **Open probe:** questions that begin with how, what, which, when and who.
- **Compare and contrast:** questions which ask the other person to look for and discuss similarities or differences. Example: How do you think the needs of families with children that have special health care needs differ from those families with children who do not have special health care needs?
- **Clarification:** questions designed to elicit a deeper explanation of something already said.
- **Quick survey:** a technique in which the moderator provides a list of choices to the participants, which also provides an opportunity for quantitative results. (This can also be used as a quick break for the moderator to review upcoming questions.)



Example: In surveys, a small incentive or giveaway is provided to show appreciation to people for taking the time to complete the survey. We want to see how you like the incentives we've come up with: 1) refrigerator magnet which doubles as a picture frame, 2) 10 first class postage stamps, or 3) crisp one dollar bill. Which would appeal the most to you?

- **Supposing:** questions which allow the participants to fantasize or explore an alternative reality by giving themselves a different viewpoint or perspective. Example: If you were in charge of this prenatal clinic, what would you change to better meet the needs of your clients?

Sample Outline of a Moderator's Guide



Introduction (5 minutes)

- The moderator should introduce themselves, their role and the person recording notes, if applicable.
- Focus group explanation. (What is a focus group? How will the information be used? How will it not be used? Technology being used such as recording equipment.)
- Purpose of today's session. (What topic you are focusing on. Looking for genuine opinions and insights.)
- Ground rules. (No talking over anyone, everyone should participate, what to expect from the moderator, etc.)



Warming up to the Topic (10 minutes)

- Choose a few basic and general questions on your topic that will provide some background information, confirm key thoughts and knowledge on behaviors and generally provide a nice transition into more detailed questions.



Topic Discussion (20 minutes if also doing testing materials; 40 minutes without testing materials)

- This is the heart of where much of the information you are looking for is going to come from. Choose 8 to 10 questions that will create an engaging and insightful conversation around your target audience's behaviors, obstacles, opinions, decision-making

practices and rationales, as well as any other key information you are seeking to obtain. Questions should flow nicely into one another. It's important for the moderator to have some room to ask additional questions as they apply to the conversation as key points are discussed by the group.



Testing of Materials (40 minutes)

- This is your opportunity to see if existing, new, revised or even another county's or similar program's materials resonate with your target audience and why.
- Test their knowledge to see if they understand the key messages.
- Upon seeing the materials, what would it prompt them to do?
- Which materials do they like best?
- Would they make any changes?



Winding Down (10 minutes)

- At this point in the session, your participants should have a clear understanding of what you are testing and seeking to learn. Acknowledge this.
- Ask questions such as: before this focus group, was this a topic of concern/interest? Has this conversation changed the way you think about this topic? Is there anything you may start doing differently?
- Seek specific feedback on anything that may have been missed or what could have made the experience better.



Thank you (5 minutes)

- Let participants know how their conversation and feedback will be used (i.e. commonalities among the group and each session will be looked at in order to create or revise materials) and how their insights will be used.
- If there is another session immediately following, ask participants upon exiting to avoid discussing the topic of the focus group to prevent influencing the next group.
- Thank them once again and hand out incentives if this was not done before the session.

Select your moderator

If you are not hiring an expert focus group moderator who has years of experience, don't worry. Check with people in your organization or other people in your line of work to see who may have experience in situations similar to focus groups or with the topic of discussion.

For the role of moderator, look for someone who would be comfortable leading and talking to a group; someone who can relate to participants (for example, if the participants are female, your moderator should be as well; or, if the participants are African American men, you should have an African American male moderator); and, who has background knowledge on the topic area you will be discussing. You'll also want to ensure this person is a good fit personality-wise. You want someone who is approachable, friendly, likes to carry on conversations, can actively listen and think on their feet

To be a good moderator, a person must have skills in three key areas:

- Listening
- Paraphrasing; and,
- Probing

The most important of these is good listening skills. A good listener listens:

- With his or her eyes — looking at each person as they speak — as well as ears;
- For basic facts, main ideas, attitudes, opinions or beliefs;
- Doesn't interrupt the speaker and uses positive, non-verbal communication to prompt the speaker; and,
- He or she is aware of the speaker's nonverbal communication. Body language can sometimes reveal more than what is said.



A good moderator also should be able to remain neutral and objective throughout the session. The role of the moderator is to pull ideas from the group, not to support one particular view or add his or her own ideas. The moderator is responsible for understanding what needs to be learned from the group. He or she must be familiar with the questions (refer to but don't read the questions), remember what people say, guide the group, and steer the conversation back on track. The moderator must also be prepared for the unexpected. Sometimes things can and do go wrong during a group, such as:

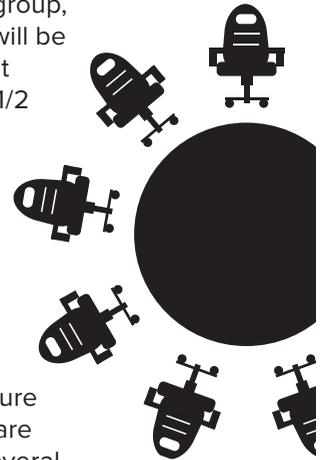
- Fewer participants than expected attend. Hold the session anyway; you may be surprised at information you'll receive.
- Participants are hesitant to talk. Call on individuals or go around the room and have participants answer questions one by one, until they feel comfortable enough to respond without being called on. Be comfortable with silence. It's important to leave time for participants to gather their thoughts. Don't jump in with other questions to fill the silence.
- Participants get involved in what they are talking about and they don't want to leave. Believe it or not, this does happen. Stay awhile and listen to them, if you have time.
- Bad weather conditions. Contact each person to let them know that the group has been cancelled and when it will be rescheduled.

Conduct the Group

Set up chairs in a circle or around a table, before participants arrive. Open the focus group by discussing the purpose of the group, how the group will be conducted (most run about 1 to 1-1/2 hours), ground rules, and how the information will be used and not used.

Explain that sessions are audio or video recorded to ensure that comments are not missed. If several people talk at the same time, it will be difficult to hear everyone and capture comments when reviewing the recording. Reassure participants about confidentiality. Recordings are used only for the purpose of the final report. Tell participants that only first names will be used during the group and that no names will appear in the final report or in future materials that are created, i.e. they won't see their quotes or direct feedback in materials. Remind participants to speak one at a time.

While the moderator leads the discussion and asks questions, another person should record the information.



The moderator and the recorder are the only two individuals, aside from the participants, who are included in the group. The exception to this is if other arrangements have been made for an attached viewing room, using video equipment, the session is being streamed live in the web via a secure site or a one-way viewing room is available. Either way, you don't want staff to visually outnumber, distract or intimidate the participants.

When you have worked through the moderator's guide and all questions have been asked, thank all the participants for attending the session, ask if they have any additional comments or concerns, hand out incentives and dismiss the group per the recommended outline in the previous section.



Analyze and Report the Findings

Brief summaries should be completed as soon after the groups as possible. Listen to the recordings to refresh your memory about the setting, participants, tone of discussion and general reactions to the discussion. Make note of trends and commonalities of the group as



well as any previous sessions that may have already been held. Review the recording and recorder's notes and mark participant comments that may be worthy of future quotation. Jot down insights, hunches or important ideas, and highlight quotes, words or phrases that might represent potential overall thoughts and opinions. Examine one question at a time. Identify themes or patterns across the group(s), or that are associated with age, sex, family, composition, etc.

Focus Group Checklist

Recruitment

- Recruit via phone, in person, or online networks.
- Recruit 12-15 participants for a group of 8-12.
- Send each participant a follow-up letter one week before the focus group.
- Call each participant the day before the session.

Moderator

- Should be same sex and race/ethnicity as participants.
- Be bilingual if the group contains “other-than-English” speakers.
- Be well rested and alert for the session.
- Practice introduction without using moderator’s guide.
- Remember questions without using moderator’s guide.
- Avoid head nodding.
- Avoid comments such as excellent, great, wonderful, OK.
- Avoid giving personal opinions.

Questions

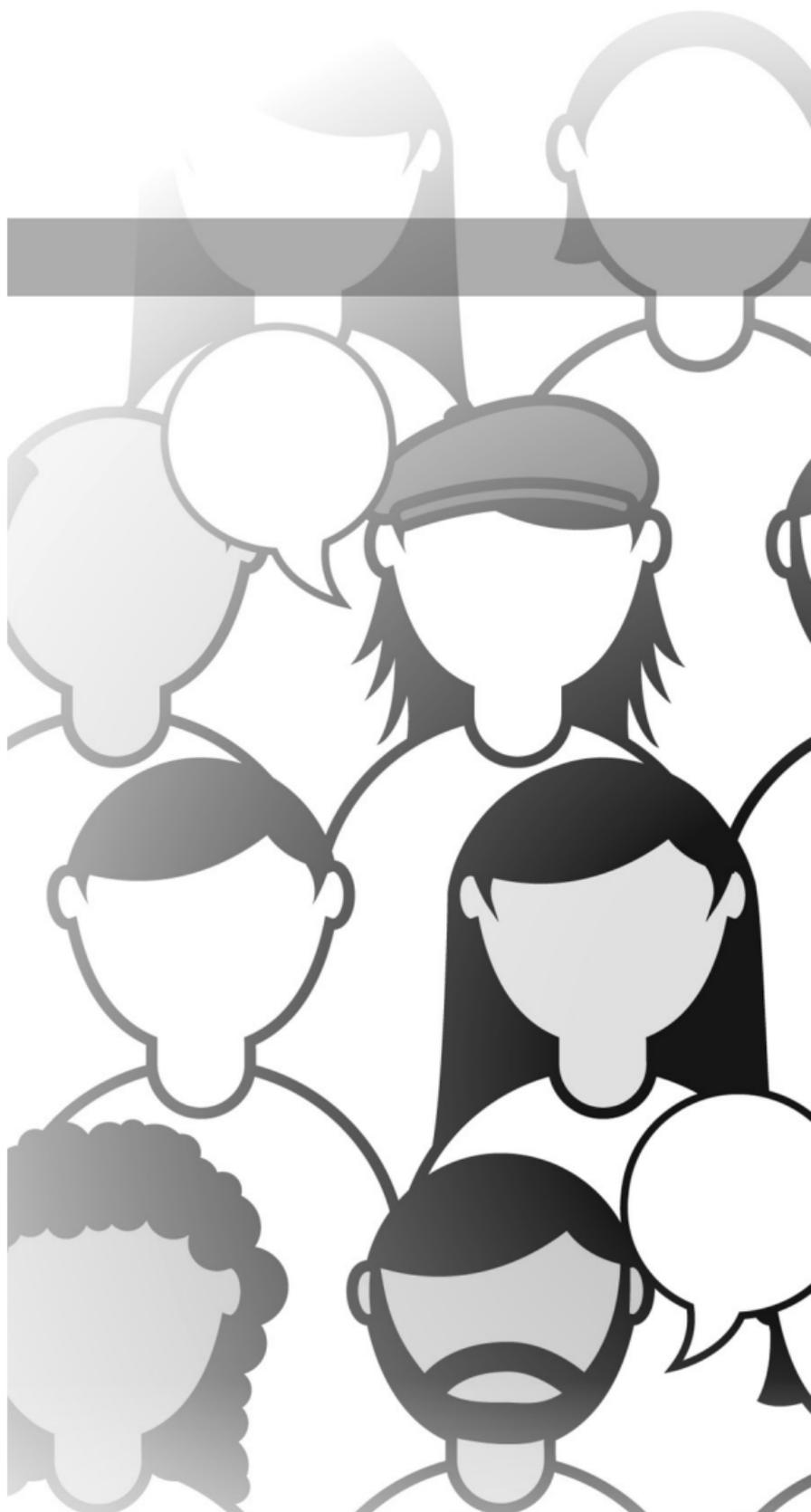
- Questions should flow in a logical sequence.
- Key questions should focus on critical issues.
- Use probe or follow-up questions.
- Use think back questions.
- Limit the use of why questions.

Logistics

- Room should be comfortable (enough tables, chairs, etc.).
- Set up chairs in a circle or around a table.
- Moderator should arrive early to make any necessary changes and have an extra person on hand to help trouble shoot, hand out incentives, etc.
- Have name tags/tents out for each participant including the moderator.
- Background noise should not interfere with recording.
- Bring extra batteries, extension cords.
- Limit food to water, coffee and tea, and light, healthy snacks.
- Provide babysitting and transportation, if necessary.
- Bring enough copies of any handouts and/or visual aids.

After the Session

- Listen to recording of the session.
- Read recorder’s session notes.
- Prepare a brief written summary of session.



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