



thefocusgroup 

## **THE FOCUS GROUP GUIDE**

helping you to plan and manage your focus groups

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# Planning Your Focus Groups

There are a number of things to consider when thinking about running focus groups. The diagram below illustrates the key planning areas. Each of these areas will be covered in more detail in this guide.

## THINGS TO CONSIDER



## Purpose and Aims

### What do you want to find out and why use a Focus Group?

Planning your groups is vital in ensuring you get the most from your research. This is the stage to think about the broader aims and objectives of your research.

It may sound obvious, but by considering 'why' you want to find out the information may help you in determining the best method. For example you may want to get some consumer feedback to improve a new product, or you may want to ask current customers or clients how you could improve your service, or you may just want to brainstorm some new ideas.

As a rule of thumb the table below indicates the type of research that may fit particular project needs.

## HINTS

- If the topic area is very sensitive then you may consider running mini groups (2-3 people) or individual interviews.
- In situations where the topic area requires a lot of people to be involved you may consider running some larger workshops rather than many focus groups.
- When you want to collect a lot of factual information from a lot of people, then a survey may be a better method.

Aims	Method	Possible Alternatives to Consider
Exploring people's thoughts, feelings, experiences, reactions, behaviours, opinions and attitudes.	Focus Groups	Workshops Depth Interviews
Finding out factual information about behaviours, opinions and attitudes	Questionnaires/ Surveys	Street Interviews Telephone Interviews

## HINTS

- Is there a need to consult with different types of people that would benefit from being in separate groups?
- Do you have a minimum number of people that you need or would like to consult?
- If you are wary about running groups, for example you may not have done focus groups with particular clients before, then you may want to start with 1-2 groups. Remember you can always add on more groups.
- Think about the best time of day to catch the people you are after. Most of our consumer groups run in the evenings, essential if you want working people to attend.

## How many Focus Groups and how many people per Group?

### Number of Focus Groups

If you have decided upon focus groups then the next part of the planning process is to consider how many groups will be necessary. There is no right or wrong number of groups, this will depend on what you need to find out and most likely on your budget. 1-2 well-planned groups can achieve as much as 4-5 hastily put together groups. You may also have to think about regional representation and therefore need to ensure groups are held across your region or across the UK.

### Number of people in each group

This will depend on the issues being discussed. Most focus groups have between 6-12 people in attendance.

## Participants

### Who do you need to attend?

This is when you start getting down to specifics - exactly what sort of person do you need to attend your groups? You don't just want anyone - you want the people you are targeting your services, information or products at.

For example, do you want your groups to:

- *Reflect your customer profile?*
- *Be a mix of genders and ages?*
- *Have certain attitudes or lifestyles?*
- *Buy or use specific products or services?*
- *Be members of specific organisations or groups?*

### Paying the Attendees

For most focus groups people require an incentive fee to come along. Not surprisingly, most people prefer to be paid in cash rather than vouchers. The standard fee varies depending on length of the focus group, region and the specific demographics of the group (for example a business to business focus group will expect a higher fee than a standard consumer group).

Where focus groups are related to a person's work role and they are attending in work time, then an incentive payment is not usually necessary.

## How are you going to find your participants?

### Specialist Help

Recruitment for focus groups is a specialist work area in it's own right. Most research agencies will either have their own recruitment department or use one of the many excellent independent recruitment agencies and will be able to undertake and manage all of this on your behalf. Recruiters are amazing people who are experts in finding people, checking out quotas, screening people to ensure they match your requirements, keeping in touch with attendees to ensure no last minute hitches, etc.

The Market Research Society has guidelines of recruitment best practice and all research agencies and recruitment companies should adhere to this guidance. You can be assured that the days of getting 'Auntie Margaret down the road along to another group' are now over.

Research and recruitment agencies can also undertake recruitment from your customer lists and follow strict protocols and data protection guidelines.

### Do it yourself

We work with many organisations (often public sector bodies) that need to undertake this aspect of the project themselves. For example they may be getting their members together for work related consultations, or have specific interest groups that they need to consult and have relationships with. You too may feel that it is more appropriate to undertake recruitment in house e.g. if you want to make use of your customer or memberships lists.

## Discussion Guide

### What are you going to ask and how?

This is the part when you have to work out what you are going to ask your focus groups, and how you are going to ask it. You know what your aims and objectives are, so this is the obvious starting point for writing the discussion guide.

We always recommend that our clients think broadly in terms of topic areas rather than specific questions, you want your group to discuss issues not just answer questions. Therefore try not to get too bogged down with individual question wording. It is the aim behind the question that is important.

Also think around your research objectives, are there areas of conversation, and therefore questions, that could promote people to think more creatively? Also think about areas of discussion that may go 'off the topic' that the facilitator should be aware of.

A good facilitator will be invaluable in helping you develop your discussion guide, as they will have a good understanding of group dynamics and how to turn your objectives into workable discussion topics.

## Hints

- Ensure that the recruitment is undertaken in an independent and impartial manner; don't just get the people you know will say nice things!
- Don't rely on handouts, leaflets and emails. You need to get responses from people, chase people, talk to people and keep in touch to maximize attendance.
- Recruiting can be very time consuming, ensure that the person responsible for recruitment is allocated enough time.



## Hints

- When designing your discussion guide think conversational rather than questionnaire.
- Include the facilitator in designing the discussion guide.
- Ensure the facilitator is aware of potential 'danger areas' where the questions/topics may prompt people to discuss related (but not directly relevant) subjects.

## How will you ensure the Group is both enjoyable and efficient?

We believe that participants should enjoy attending focus groups. It makes sense that people who feel comfortable and relaxed will be more talkative!

When designing your discussion guide, think about any exercises or visuals that will help engage the participants or help them understand your subject.

Sometimes, particularly where the topic is a very serious one, nothing but talking will do, especially if time is needed to share personal experiences and stories. However, there are also plenty of occasions where an element of fun could be injected into the group to stimulate discussion.

It may also help for the facilitator to have a few 'exercises' up their sleeve in case the group are finding it difficult to engage with the subject or are showing signs of boredom! Remember that keeping people talking on a particular subject for 1.5 hours is not easy, people naturally get bored and switch off, your discussion guide needs to mitigate against this.

Also think about any pre-group preparation that the participants could do to help make the most of the time available at the group. Are there any websites, or products or information that you may want them to think about or read before attending?

## Hints

- Think about anything that can liven up a group – i.e. creative exercises, different ways of thinking about your subject, visuals, etc.
- Is there any pre-group preparation that the participants could do?
- Most focus groups last between 1.5 to 2 hours. If you feel that you need more time, consider either running a workshop format or using smaller groups.



# Facilitation

## Who will facilitate & have they the right skills?

Who is going to facilitate your groups? Do you need to buy in the skills of an experienced facilitator or are you (or someone else in your team) aiming to facilitate the groups yourself?

The key is to ensure that whoever facilitates can be independent and is non judgemental. It can be difficult for people who are very involved in the project to be able to hide their own views and opinions and it's easy to unconsciously ask leading questions. For the results of a focus group to be truly useful, you need to ensure that the group weren't influenced by the views and thoughts of the facilitator.

## We believe that a good facilitator should be able to: -

- Cope with silence, but not let it go on forever
- Interrupt people and move conversations on in a friendly manner
- Deflect questions effectively and not get sidetracked into other discussions
- Keep calm and non judgemental at all times
- Deal with difficult people and situations that may occur (i.e. strong differences in opinion, forceful personalities)
- Be flexible, 'go with the flow' of the group and not get too hung up on following the exact order of the discussion guide, sometimes discussion flows and participants will naturally cover topics without being asked
- Ensure that all the discussion topics are covered
- Keep to time
- Have (and keep) a sense of humour

## Choosing a venue?

The venue should be accessible and close to good transport links. Hotel meeting rooms are ideal and range from 'budget' to 'luxury'. You may also have your own meeting room that you can use. Think about the need for disabled access and toilet facilities.

A viewing studio is recommended if a lot of people from the organisation wish to view the group in action.

You should ensure that your chosen venue supplies refreshments – you don't have to supply a feast but a few snacks are always appreciated.

Your chosen research agency will be able to source suitable venues on your behalf.



## Observers

If people wish to observe the group then we recommend using a viewing studio. However if there is only one observer, this can usually be managed in a standard meeting room, but this does need to be discussed with the facilitator and roles agreed.

If there is any reason to suspect that an observer in the room may affect the discussions, or if the discussion topic is very sensitive or about personal issues, then we would not recommend any observers.

## Analysis and Reporting

### How to analyse what was discussed at the Group?

Ideally the facilitator should be responsible for writing the report – it is very difficult to have a valid report written by somebody who wasn't there!

This stage can be time consuming. We always listen to the groups again before we start the report, making notes and capturing key thoughts.

### Recording the Group

*For a full analysis of the groups it is important to capture the group discussions. We use audio digital recording as standard for all our groups. This is to ensure we capture everything that is said, in context, and can report accurately. You may also want your group recorded on video. Ensure that the participants are aware that audio or video recording will be used before they agree to attend the group.*

The analysis of your focus groups needs to be done systematically and objectively. The job of analysis is to identify, order and make sense of the discussions.

- Always keep your research aims in mind, but be careful to remain objective and not try to make the discussion fit into your objectives – it is vital to keep an independent perspective.



- Try to look at the bigger picture before getting into too much detail. Don't be too clinical about the analysis; you are also looking at feelings, emotions and reactions.
- Don't feel you have to write up everything that was said, you are looking for the relevant bits, it is natural for groups to have some element of discussion that will not be relevant (however if there is too much of this, this could be a facilitation error).
- Allow plenty of time for re-reading, re-listening, re-analysing and re-adjusting your thought processes, focus group analysis does take time to do well.

## Hints

- The facilitator and observer need to agree some ground rules so that both are aware of each other's roles.
- If there are a lot of people from the team that wish to view the group, consider running the group in a viewing studio.

## How will you present and use the results?

Think about the best way to present your results. For example: -

- Will a report be enough?
- Will you need a summary report?
- Will a face-to-face meeting with the project team be useful?
- Do you need to do a presentation?
- Think about the people who need to use the report, is there anyway you can present the information to help highlight key issues.

We often have a debrief meeting with our clients to talk about their report and answer questions or clarify points of particular interest. Don't underestimate the amount of insight and information that the facilitator will have.

### Hints

- Use quotes to bring life to the report, but ensure that all quotes are kept in context and do not identify the speaker.
- Think concise if you want your report to be read.

### Feedback

Do you need to feed the results back to the participants? This is especially important for employee groups or groups that have taken place with members of organisations. If you want people to continue to support your projects and remain involved then feedback is essential.

*Use the results wisely - remember, focus groups can give you a fantastic insight into the way your clients/customers think. The results should be able to inform your thoughts and plans and give you a different way of thinking or reviewing things, but they do not give definitive truths*

# Finally – About Us

## Our Expertise

We are an independent research agency that specialises in qualitative research, in particular focus groups. We've been doing this for a long time, and we are always interested in finding new ways to gain information and insight from people and getting the best results for our clients.

## Need Outside Help?

We provide a full research service and can help with all aspects of your project. This includes planning, helping with the discussion guides, recruiting the right people to take part, facilitation, analysis and reporting.

### We specialise in the following areas

- Health and Social Care
- Public Sector - Local and District Councils, Education
- Voluntary and Charity Sector
- Consumer Feedback

### Our services include

- Focus Groups
- Workshops
- Consultations
- In depth Interviews
- Telephone interviews
- Street Interviews
- Online bulletin boards and diaries

We hope that you found this guide useful. If you need any further advice or information then please do get in touch.

## Contact us for further information and advice

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