thefocusgroup
thebusinessofconversation

THE FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

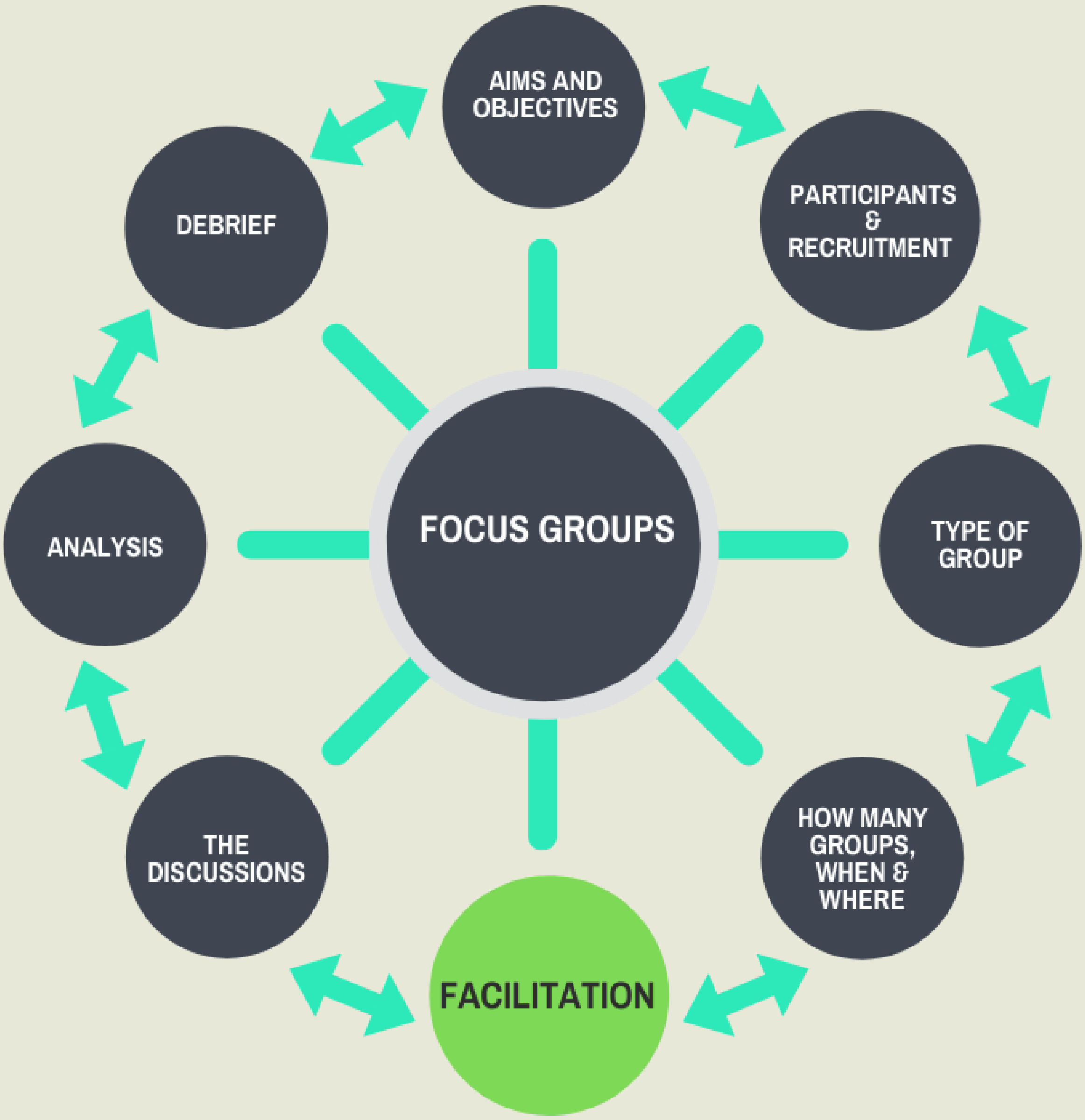
A PLANNING GUIDE FOR RUNNING FOCUS GROUPS

thefocusgroup

The steps to planning focus groups

There are a number of interrelated steps that need to be considered when planning focus groups. These are the same whether you are choosing an online focus group or a traditional face to face (F2F) group – there are just some slightly different considerations to be aware of.

This guide will take you through each step and illustrate the key components that you need to consider along the way. You will see that facilitation is highlighted – this is because we believe that it is the facilitator who holds a focus group together and should be involved in all of these steps. When we take on a new project, the facilitator is also the project manager. More about this as we move through the steps.



Aims and Objectives

What do you want to find out?

The first part of planning any research project is to clarify exactly what your aims are. This may seem obvious but clear aims and objectives are vital in getting all other aspects of planning right. Vague ideas and hopes do not make for a targeted, insightful focus group project.

We prompt our clients to discuss the following questions.

- ✓ What sort of information are you hoping to get from the research? What are the key questions you need answered?
- ✓ How will the research fit in with your overall strategy?
- ✓ What part will these groups play in helping you make key decisions? How will the results be used?
- ✓ Who are your target audience?
- ✓ What is your budget? Whilst this can often be difficult to ascertain, having some idea will help to draft a plan of what is possible and how groups can be most effectively organised.

HINTS –

- Involve your facilitator at this point. By understanding the background and requirements of your project, an experienced facilitator will be able to advise on the best way forward. It is also important that the facilitator understands your aims and objectives right from the start.

Participants

Who do you want to talk to?

Defining who you need to take part in your focus groups is key to getting the insight and feedback you need. Projects fail by not thinking this through. Common demographic requirements to consider include:

- ✓ People who reflect your customer profile – they may use your product or use similar products
- ✓ People who hold specific attitudes or lifestyles
- ✓ People who buy or use specific products or services
- ✓ Specific demographics such as age or gender
- ✓ Geographical/regions to target

Think flexibly and realistically

Once you have your list think about key attributes that are essential and those that you can be flexible on. This flexibility is not a plan B but a way to get a realistic group of the right sort of participants - people fall in and out of habits, ideals and use of products on a daily basis – you may not need a brand champion to get great insight into your brand. Remember you want to talk to humans not research subjects.

Incentives

Commercial focus groups will require an incentive payment to attend. We recommend cash/BACS, but general vouchers can be used (e.g. Amazon). We have also given a donation to charity for some charity/fundraising groups instead of cash/ - BUT most participants still prefer a cash incentive.

The incentive is an essential element – it is a thank you for participants time and effort to attend. You risk compromising the recruitment and attendance without it.

The amount will vary depending on the region and specific demographics of the group. B2B groups require a larger incentive for attendance. For employee focus groups, whilst no monetary incentives are given, these groups should take place during work hours and please provide decent refreshments!

Note

You cannot provide a voucher, gift or service that relate to your company/client as an incentive. The Market Research Society have strict regulations for incentives to ensure that there is no direct marketing or promotion involved in the research process.

Recruitment

How to find your participants

Recruiting participants for research is specialist work. We work with expert recruiters who will work toward our participant profile and adhere to best practice guidelines, strict protocols and GDPR requirements. Recruiters can work free find – where they use their own networks/social media/local recruiters to find the right people, or they can work from client/consumer lists. The Market Research Society has guidelines for best practice in recruitment.

Recruitment is time consuming and requires perseverance, time, and people skills. Don't underestimate the skill and time it takes to recruit for a focus group and most importantly build in enough time into your timelines to allow for this. We usually ask for 2 weeks to recruit for projects we are working on.

HINTS –

- Your research agency will be able to handle all the recruitment as part of their service. We offer clients a full service and work with them to outline a participant profile that we can recruit from.

DIY?

We work with many organisations who choose to take on this aspect themselves – this is usually clients who are inviting their own members or stakeholders to groups. A few important hints for those taking on this recruitment.

- ✓ Ensure recruitment is undertaken in an impartial manner, don't just invite people you know will want to attend or will say the right things!
- ✓ Be clear on the criteria you need – do not ask people to invite friends along (unless your project requires friendship groups), they may not fit your criteria.
- ✓ Don't rely on handouts, leaflets, social media, and emails. You need committed responses, and this means keeping in touch with individuals, sending reminders and replacing cancellations to maintain the group size you require.
- ✓ Allocate enough time and resources – recruitment is time consuming.
- ✓ Make sure you get your letter/email checked to ensure it complies with GDPR and MRS code of conduct.

Type of Group

Online or Face to Face?

The first consideration is whether you want (or are able) to do either a F2F or online group. During Covid19 all groups went online, and we discovered that, with a few adjustments, this was a great option and one that we continue to offer (even when F2F returns). The table below illustrates some of the key factors to consider.

Consideration	F2F	Online
Focus Group Size	6-8 participants	4-5 participants. Conversation should flow as effectively as possible and whilst this can be more difficult to achieve online, limiting group size helps give the same time and opportunity for free-flowing discussions. As a rule of thumb – we recommend 2 online groups to replace one F2F group
Length of group	90 minutes	60 – 90 minutes – erring toward 60 minutes.
Recruitment	Specific to the location – people will only travel a short distance to a venue.	Can be specific to location or more widely spread. If geographical region is not a requirement then this can make recruitment easier and broaden the mix of each group Need to ensure participants have access to a device they can use and good internet connection.
Facilitation	Can manage off topic conversations easily and cover a broad range of questions	Need to have a more focused approach and be more aware of enabling everyone to talk. Useful to have someone to help with any tech issues whilst people are logging on.
Showing concepts, boards & images	Can be show via laptop/PC at the venue or on boards delivered to venue.	Concepts/boards/images can be shown via shared screen, videos can also be shared for comment. Concepts may need to be adjusted to ensure they are visually effective to be shown online.
Hands on product demos or conceptual models	Bought to venue for people to handle – managed carefully by the facilitator in terms of use, demonstration, and confidentiality	A video demonstration shared during the session or products sent to participants prior to the group. *There may be confidentiality issues that will limit what can be sent to participants.*
Observation	In a viewing studio and recordings available	Most online platforms (including Zoom) enable clients to view privately and groups can be recorded and real time transcribed

How many, when and where?

Number of Groups?

When planning focus groups, more isn't necessarily better. It's more important to ensure that the groups you do run are well planned. In our experience 4-6 groups gives enough insight for most projects. Sometimes more are required if there is a need to look in more depth at particular groups of people or focus on different geographical regions. Sometimes two groups can provide enough feedback to help make some initial decisions for clients. Often budget is a deciding factor. Groups can also be run as a phased project – i.e. Start with one or two and then go from there.

Group Size

Most standard F2F groups involve 6-8 people. For online groups we recommend 4-5. However other considerations include the topic that is being discussed which may dictate the group size as well as the number of groups.

Group Size - HINTS

- If the topic area is overly sensitive, then you may consider running mini groups (2-3 people) or individual interviews (IDI).
- If you need to involve a lot of people, then workshops may be a better option.

When

The ideal time should be the one that suits the participants the best and this isn't usually in office hours. Most of our focus groups take place in the evening as this is the preferred time for most people. Exceptions include older people who may prefer a daytime group or parents of school age children.

Where

Ideally the venue should fit the profile of the people attending and it needs to be easy for people to attend, so near transport links. For some groups, the venue can also add value to the work. For example, we have held groups in yacht clubs, different hotels, community centres and exclusive private members clubs. However, the most usual venues are viewing studios or standard hotel meeting rooms.

We do not usually recommend using client offices, mainly because these are not always neutral places or in the most convenient locations.

Facilitation

The role of the facilitator

We cannot stress strongly enough that the facilitator is the key to the project and should be involved right at the start of the planning process. We have written a couple of blog posts about the role of the facilitator which you can read here: -

The glue in a focus group

8 essential skills every moderator should have

If you are going to run groups in house without the use of research agency or independent facilitator then here are some important considerations

- ✓ Ensure the facilitator is involved at the very beginning of the project and is well briefed on the objectives and is involved in planning the sessions and questions.
- ✓ The facilitator should be completely independent and not involved in the project being researched. It is very easy to unconsciously ask leading questions. For the results of a group to be truly useful you need to ensure the group weren't influenced by the facilitator.
- ✓ The person needs to be able to develop a rapport with the participants and cope with difficult discussions and difficult attendees.
- ✓ Manage time and not get sidelined into other discussions – unless it feels relevant to the project outcomes
- ✓ Know the discussion guide inside out and be able to go with the flow of discussions – a focus group is not a Q & A session.
- ✓ Have a sense of humour!

The Discussions

What are you going to ask and how?

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. A good focus group is all about discussion – we cannot emphasise that enough. You are writing a discussion guide not a questionnaire.

These are some useful things to think about when planning what to ask

- ✓ Think topics not questions –don't get too bogged down with individual question wording. We rarely ask the question as it is written and often questions will get answered and discussed without you having to actually ask it at all – which is the sign of a good group.
- ✓ Are there any exercises or creative materials that you wish to include? For example, concept boards, advertising materials, competitor materials, videos etc.
- ✓ Is there any pre preparation that the participants can do? We sometimes set a pre task for people to do before they attend.
- ✓ Remember that the participants may not be as engaged with a product or service as you are! So, questions and discussions that engage and enliven are essential.
- ✓ Also think about any areas of discussion that you don't want to be discussed – this will help the facilitator understand when information is useful or not.

Facilitator

Your facilitator should be heavily involved in planning the discussions. The process of writing the discussion guide is a vital aspect of preparing for the session as it enables the facilitator to really understand the information required from the group and to suggest useful tools, materials and techniques to help the group energy and dynamics.

Observation considerations

- If the topic area is sensitive and/or about personal experiences, then we do not recommend any client observers.

Observing the sessions

If clients wish to observe F2F sessions, then we recommend using a viewing studio where there are two-way mirrors. For online groups clients can view privately with most platforms. Participants must be told if a group is being viewed or recorded.

For groups that are held in non-viewing studio venues, we strongly recommend that there are no client observers in the room – we are always very aware of how this may affect the participants, and this needs careful management.

Analysis

How to analyse what was discussed at the group

Ideally the facilitator should be responsible for the analysis – it is very difficult to have a valid analysis and report written by someone who wasn't there! Analysis can be daunting and time consuming. ***We always use two people to think through the analysis and bounce ideas off each other.*** The analysis needs to be done systematically and objectively. Here are some useful pointers to make a start: -

- ✓ Immediately after the groups make some brief notes, write down some key thoughts and an overall impression of key findings. This brain dump is useful not just in capturing some immediate thoughts, but also in clearing your head!
- ✓ We audio record all our focus groups and relisten to recordings and make detailed notes. We also often work in pairs with one person observing and capturing key discussions. (Note this is another independent facilitator not a member of the client team).
- ✓ Always keep your research aims in mind but be careful to remain objective and not try to make the discussions fit your objectives or ideal outcomes.
- ✓ Try to look at the bigger picture rather than getting too swamped in the detail. You are looking for overall themes that have arisen and where there is common ground between the participants.
- ✓ Don't feel you have to write up everything that was said – you are looking for relevant elements.
- ✓ Allow time for re-reading, re-listening, re-analysing and re-adjusting your thought processes. Take a break, go for a walk, and let the discussion wash over you – it's amazing what you remember and what makes sense after a break!
- ✓ There are digital tools that help with qualitative analysis – there are mixed opinions about the use of these and the use of them may be down to personal preference. Personally we still prefer to do our analysis manually and have yet to find a programme that meets our expectations – but we haven't stopped looking and tech is improving all the time, so it's worth keeping an eye out for anything that you may find useful, e.g. tags, word clouds, automated video transcriptions.

Debrief

We usually have a debrief meeting with our clients to present and talk about the findings and to answer any questions or explore areas in more detail.

Of course – the facilitator should be there! Never underestimate the amount of knowledge held by the facilitator that is often difficult to put into words on a PowerPoint presentation.

We offer our clients the following debrief materials: -

- ✓ PowerPoint presentation
- ✓ Summary report
- ✓ Face to face or online meeting

Using the results

Use the results wisely, focus groups can give you fantastic insight into the way your clients and customers think, and these findings can help inform your strategy and plans. But they do not give definitive truths

Hints

- Use quotes to bring life and stories to the debrief – BUT ensure that all quotes and examples used are kept in context and do not identity the participant
- For employee groups and groups that have involved stakeholders or member organisations then feeding back findings is an important part of the process. You may wish to have a separate debrief or short summary report to circulate.

Finally - about us

We are an independent research agency that specialises in qualitative research, in particular focus groups. We provide a full service and can help with all aspects of your project.

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

info@thefocusgroup.co.uk

www.thefocusgroup.co.uk

01202432699

EXPERT INDEPENDENT RESEARCHERS ICG

MRS Evidence Matters™

AQR Association for Qualitative Research