

Key Points for Conducting Participant Focus Groups

What you will need:

Flip charts/paper (To record individual responses)

Flip chart pens (Different colors to capture various ideas)

Healthy Habits Focus Group Script

Focus group discussion is particularly effective in providing information about why people think or feel the way they do. Focus group interviews are widely accepted within marketing research, because they produce believable results at a reasonable cost.

Sound conceptualization and planning ensures appropriate questions and allocation of adequate resources.

Purpose of Focus Groups:

- Planning: To improve the planning and design of new programs
- Marketing: Produce insights for developing marketing strategies
- Evaluation: Provide means of evaluating existing programs

Design:

Select 2-12 individuals who are unfamiliar with each other.

Participants share certain characteristics in common that relate to the group topic.

Groups have to be small enough for everyone to have an opportunity to share insights and large enough to provide diversity of perceptions.

Selection Criteria:

- WIC mothers
- Registered Dietitians
- Physicians
- Low income
- Ethnically diverse
- Nutritional risk(s)

Outcome: Data of a qualitative nature from a focused discussion

Steps:

- **Define and explain the purpose** to prevent any confusion, misunderstandings, wasted time and most likely the wrong conclusions
- **Invite participants to “discuss” or “share ideas with others”**. There is no right or wrong answers and maintain an informal tone.
- **Strive to understand the thinking of the WIC participant**. It is a particularly appropriate procedure to use when the goal is to explain how people regard an experience, idea or event.
- Use an **informal structure** or open forum that taps into human tendencies.

Validity:

- Validity is the degree to which the procedure really measures what it proposes to measure
- Focus groups are valid if they are used carefully for a problem that is suitable for a focus group inquiry
- People are not always truthful and sometimes they give answers that seem best for the situation. Other times people hold back important information because of apprehensions or social pressure.

Advantages of Focus Groups:

1. It is a socially oriented research procedure.
2. The format allows moderator to probe.
3. Discussions have high face value. Results are not presented in complicated statistical charts but rather in lay terms embellished with questions from group participants.
4. Low in cost
5. Provides speedy results
6. They enable researcher to increase the sample size of qualitative studies.

Limitations of Focus Groups:

1. Researcher has less control. Sharing results in some inefficiency, such as detours in the discussion and raising of irrelevant issues.
2. Data is more difficult to analyze. Comments must be interpreted within context. Care is needed to avoid lifting comments out of context. Participants will modify or even reverse their positions after interacting with others.
3. Techniques require carefully trained interviewers.
4. Groups can vary considerably. Each group will have its own unique characteristics, one may be dull and boring and the other may be excited and energized.
5. Groups are difficult to assemble.
6. Must be conducted in an environment conducive to conversation.

Asking Questions in a Group:

- Quality answers are directly related to quality questions.
- Questions must appear spontaneous, but have been carefully selected and phrased in advance to elicit the maximum amount of information.
- A focused interview will include <10 questions and often 5 or 6 total.
- Use open ended questions:
 - i. What do/did you think.....?
 - ii. How do/did you feel.....?
 - iii. Where do/did you?

iv. What do/did you like best about.....?

- Use dichotomous questions that can be answered with a simple “yes” or “no” response

Mental preparation for the Moderator:

- Must be mentally alert
- Free from distractions, anxieties or pressures that limit their ability to think quickly on your feet
- Practice the discipline of listening to others in group situations
- Questioning route should be memorized

Beginning the Focus Group:

The first few minutes in the focus group are critical. In a brief time the moderator must create a thoughtful, permissive atmosphere, provide ground rules, and set the tone for the discussion.

The recommended pattern for introducing the discussion includes:

- Welcome
- Overview and topic
- Ground rules
- First question

Two Essential Techniques: The Pause and the Probe

- The 5 second pause is most often used after a participant comment. This short pause often prompts additional points of view or agreement with the previously mentioned position.
- The probe is a request for additional information. Typical probing involves such comments as:
 - Would you explain further?
 - Would you give me an example of what you mean?
 - Would you say more?
 - Is there anything else?
 - Please describe what you mean?
 - I don't understand

It is usually best to use the probe technique early in the interview to communicate the importance of precision in responses and then use it sparingly in later discussion.