

The Wilder Nonprofit Field Guide to Conducting Successful Focus Groups

How to get the Information You Need to Make Smart Decisions

By Judith Sharken Simon

Part I: What Is a Focus Group?

A focus group is “a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment. It is conducted with approximately seven to ten people by a skilled interviewer. The discussion is comfortable and often enjoyable for participants as they share their ideas and perceptions. Group members influence each other by responding to ideas and comments in the discussion”.

Part II: How to Conduct a Focus Group

- **Step 1: Define the Purpose.** Develop a purpose statement that will communicate *why* you are holding a focus group.
- **Step 2: Establish a Timeline.** Start planning for your focus group at *least* four weeks ahead of the actual focus group session date, then decide when you will identify the participants, develop and test the questions, locate a site, invite and follow up with participants, and gather materials.
- **Step 3: Identify and Invite the Participants.**
 - Decide how many participants you need and how many you’ll need to invite.
 - Review your focus group purpose statement and develop a list of key attributes to seek in the focus group participants.
 - Brainstorm possible participants and categories of participants using the list of attributes you developed.
 - Refine the list by finding two characteristics all the participants will have in common, but make sure there will be no major conflicts of interest.
 - Secure names and contact information, finalize the list, and send invitations.
- **Step 4: Generate the Questions to Be Asked.** Generate two introductory, or warm-up, questions, and three more serious questions that probe the issue you’re researching. When designing the questions, it is helpful to:
 - Brainstorm a list of possible questions.
 - Prioritize, rewrite, and sequence the questions.
 - Test the questions and refine as needed.
- **Step 5: Develop a Script.** Although optional, a script may help you to stay focused and organized. There are three parts to a focus group script:
 - The opening: The facilitator will welcome the group, introduce the purpose and context, explain what a focus group is, and facilitate introductions.
 - The questions: Ask the questions developed in Step 4.

- The closing: The facilitator will thank the participants, answer questions, tell participants how the data will be used, and explain when the larger process will be completed.
- **Step 6: Select a Facilitator.** Find someone with a working knowledge of group dynamics and a reputation as a good meeting leader, who will be able to deal tactfully with outspoken group members, keep the discussion on track, and make sure every participant is heard.
- **Step 7: Choose the Location.** Choose an easily accessible setting that will make participants feel comfortable and will comfortably accommodate nine to fifteen people, where all can view each other.
- **Step 8: Conduct the Focus Group.**
 - Set the tone: Greet the participants, offer refreshments and seating, and introduce the participants to one another.
 - Make sure every participant is heard.
 - Get full answers: Ask participants to qualify their statements.
 - Monitor time closely and keep the discussion on track.
 - Head off exchanges of opinion about individual items: redirect the conversation.
- **Step 9: Interpret and Report the Results.**
 - Summarize each meeting immediately after it ends.
 - Analyze the summaries: Note trends (comments that appear repeatedly in the data) and surprises (unexpected comments that are worth noting).
 - Write the report. A general outline may look something like this:
 - I. Background and purpose of the report
 - II. Details of the sessions
 - a. Number of focus groups conducted.
 - b. Name of the facilitator.
 - c. Dates of Sessions.
 - d. Identifying information about each focus group, including participant characteristics and the number of people in each session.
 - III. Results
 - a. Trends.
 - b. Surprises.
 - c. Quotes that represent a diversity of the comments and show typical remarks.
 - IV. Conclusions
 - V. Appendix: Focus group script or list of questions.
- **Step 10: Translate the Results into Action.**
 - Schedule a meeting to review the summaries and discuss their implications.
 - Put the focus group information in context. Compare, contrast, and combine the focus group information with information gathered from other sources.
 - Highlight the main themes, issues, problems, or questions that arose in the focus groups. Discuss and record how you will address these.

- Decide what actions need to be taken.