

50 Tips on Conducting Focus Groups

Focus Group Recruitment

1. **Decide who will be included** and who will be excluded from your focus groups before you start recruiting participants.
2. **Clearly spell out the purpose** of the focus group and what will be expected of participants in early conversations with them.
3. **Over-invite** participants and create an “alternate” list: things always come up at the last minute that prevent a few folks from attending.
4. **Offer a respectable and respectful incentive** of no less than \$50 per participant.
5. **Consider homogeneity:** the more alike participants feel, the more they will open up and share their thoughts with each other.
6. **Consider diversity:** if participants are too much alike it is unlikely there will be much diversity of opinion.
7. **Plan to spend about three hours** recruiting for every participant you need to recruit from the community.
8. **Distribute flyers widely**, and be ready to make changes and reprint the flyers if they don't net interest immediately.
9. **Stop and talk to key informants** if recruitment efforts are not working to see if they have insights that might help you change course.
10. **Screen potential participants** to be sure they meet ALL of your selection criteria before inviting them into the focus group.
11. **Identify key contacts** that know the community or target population and are willing to help you recruit—they have insights and connections you don't.
12. **Recruit in person** when possible—it's way more effective than flyers and emails.
13. **Extend your extreme gratitude** to all who helped you recruit—you couldn't have done it without them.

Focus Group Composition

14. **Hold separate groups** if there is a chance that different types of participants will interpret topics differently or feel uncomfortable talking about certain topics in each other's presence.
15. **Never include more than seven people** in one group: four to six is ideal; fewer if you are conducting groups with experts.
16. **Separate people of different status** into different groups (e.g., boss and employee, parent and child, principal and teacher should all be in separate groups)

17. **Do not include two of the same family** in one group; they will either duplicate each other's comments or inhibit each other's contribution.
18. **Hold three groups on each topic:** it usually takes at least three focus groups to know you have reached saturation on any one topic, or that one or even two groups are not an aberration.

Arranging for Focus Groups

19. **Develop a one-page schedule** that includes information on all the groups in the study: inclusion criteria, date and time, location and address, facilitator and co-facilitator, community and contact name and information.
20. **Hold groups at convenient times for participants:** evenings, weekends, early mornings (e.g. doctors, teachers), non-holidays.
21. **Provide a light meal** and a beverage for participants if the group is held over the lunch or dinner hour; snacks if held mid-day.
22. **Provide childcare and transportation** for low-income participants who would not be able to make it otherwise.
23. **Hold groups in a familiar public setting** that is convenient, non-threatening, and has ample parking and/or is on a bus line.
24. **Arrange for a private comfortable room with a round table and chairs** where the group will be uninterrupted for the duration of the group.

Focus Group Questions

25. **Take time upfront to design good questions** that will generate useful responses: a question well-written is one half-answered.
26. **Don't ask too many questions:** seven well-worded questions are plenty.
27. **Make all questions open-ended:** "yes/no" questions won't lead the discussion anywhere.
28. **Don't ask philosophical questions**—they're too open-ended.
29. **Make questions short,** straight forward, one-dimensional (focused on only one idea at a time), and unambiguous.
30. **Arrange questions in a funnel approach**—broad to specific—to ease participants into the topic and allow them to generate new topics early on.

Group Dynamics

31. **Hire a professional facilitator:** it takes a great deal of skill to guide the discussion, probe for depth and detail, manage group dynamics, and maximize responses—all at the same time!
32. **Contract with a facilitator who has good listening skills** to do the facilitation—the rest will take care of itself.
33. **If the facilitator is not indigenous to the group, assign a co-facilitator who is**—to welcome participants, serve food, fill out name cards, take notes, run the recorder, etc.—to make participants feel more comfortable.
34. **Seat participants close to and facing each other** around a table to maximize chances for natural interaction.
35. **Seat excessive talkers next to the facilitator** (if you can identify them) —reduced eye contact will reduce their opportunities to monopolize the group.

36. **Assign each participant a unique number** by which they will be anonymously denoted in the transcript and throughout the analysis to protect their identity.
37. **Have participants sign consent forms** before the group begins to be sure they understand what they have agreed to do.
38. **Collect demographic information** on all participants so you will be able to characterize the composition of each group as well as the collective group (all groups together).
39. **Establish ground rules before starting the group:** no cell phones, respect for others' comments, no right or wrong answers, a promise of mutual confidentiality.
40. **Strive to generate as many different opinions and comments** during the focus group from as many different people as possible in the time allotted.
41. **Don't run groups longer than 90 minutes:** beyond that participant stamina begins to deteriorate and quality of data diminishes.
42. **Label all recordings and transcripts** immediately after creating them.
43. **Stick to your well-thought-out study design** unless what you learn in one of the early groups indicates it makes sense not to.
44. **Don't ever use a focus group as a debate,** group therapy session, or problem solving exercise--it is an information generating exercise.

Analysis of Focus Group Data

45. **Don't forget to budget for transcription or live captioning:** each 90-minute focus group will take seven to eight hours of professional transcription time.
46. **Read and re-read transcripts** until you are intimately familiar with the contents and can begin to assign codes to major thematic categories and sub-categories that emerge from the data.
47. **Sort and re-sort data** in a continuous refinement process until you find a reasonable fit between data and the thematic categories.
48. **Resist the urge to count responses:** focus groups are designed to provide rich narrative data, not numbers.
49. **Draw heavily on quotes** from participants to convey key findings: there's nothing more powerful than a direct quote for transmitting a compelling finding.
50. **Triangulate findings with other related data:** focus group findings are most reliable when combined with findings collected by other methods.