How to Conduct Focus Groups

Here's a practical, effective way to connect with the people your organization serves.

BY JUDY SHARKEN SIMON

What does the community think of your organization? Are people even aware of the services you have to offer? What types of programs do people want to be involved in? Are your employees satisfied with the mission they are working toward? These are the types of questions that can be answered by using a focus group.

While focus groups are used in all sectors, nonprofits have a unique reason to use them. Nonprofit organizations exist to serve the community and have an obligation to connect with that community and learn what its needs are. Focus groups are a way for your nonprofit to listen and learn from those who have an interest in what you do. The opinions, beliefs, and attitudes you gather while conducting focus groups can be useful in planning, marketing, or evaluating programs. Focus groups are also a way to encourage discussion and build energy about a topic—perhaps expanding the number of people who care about and support your mission.

Following are 10 steps to create, conduct, and use focus groups. Use these procedures as a starting point, adapting them to fit your goals and the needs of the people you serve.

Step 1: Define the Purpose.

Create a purpose statement by answering the question, "What do we want to achieve by gathering data using a focus group?" Then answer the question, "Why do we want to know that?" A good focus group purpose statement is clear and specific. Purpose statements that are broad and general, such as "to find out what people think" make it difficult to identify participants, develop focused questions, and get useful results.

Example: A community education program is planning next year's courses and is interested in finding out if it is offering enough daytime classes.

Focus group purpose statement: To find out from community residents their perceptions and ideas about our daytime programming.

Step 2: Establish a Timeline.

Start planning *at least* four weeks ahead of the focus group session date. Six to eight weeks is probably more realistic. It takes time to identify your participants, develop and test the questions, locate a site, invite and follow up with participants, and gather materials for the sessions. You must have all the pieces in place if you are going to have a successful focus group. See the timeline checklist in Figure 1.

Step 3: Identify and Invite the Participants.

Determining who to invite is a five-step process:

1. Decide how many participants you need and how many to invite. The number of participants you need is a function of the number of focus groups you plan to hold, the number of participants you want in each group, and the likely response rate to your invitations. Here are some simple rules to help you figure this out:

Number of focus groups: Most major themes and patterns emerge after three sessions with each audience. Politics or specific purpose statements may require more focus groups. For example, if an agency in the midst of strategic planning decided to get staff input into the strengths and weaknesses of the agency, it

Figure 1 Timeline Checklist

TIMELINE COMPONENTS	TIME FRAME
1. Write the focus group purpose statement	6-8 weeks prior to the session date
2. Identify the participants	6-8 weeks prior
3. Gather mailing & phone information on participants	6-8 weeks prior
4. Select a facilitator	4-5 weeks prior
5. Develop the questions	4-5 weeks prior
6. Develop a script	4-5 weeks prior
7. Arrange and reserve the session site	4-5 weeks prior
8. Write and send the invitation	3-4 weeks prior
9. Follow up the invitation with a phone call	2 weeks prior
10. Make room arrangements (seating, equipment, and so forth)	1 week prior
11. Place a reminder call to the participants	2-3 days prior

might be necessary to complete enough focus groups for all staff to have the opportunity to speak, even though the information becomes redundant after three sessions.

Group size: Keep the number of participants in your focus group between 6 and 12. Fewer than 6 participants tends to limit conversation because there's not enough diversity to spark energy and creativity. More than 12 participants gets unwieldy because voices may not be heard.

Response rate: If participants come from a preexisting group such as a regular staff meeting, response rate is not an issue—it will be close to 100%. When participants are *not* part of some regular meeting, expect a response rate of 50% to 66%.

The formula for figuring the number of people to invite is based on the number of groups, the group size, and the predicted response rate, and it looks like this:

(number of focus groups) X (number of participants per group) ÷ (response rate) = number of invitations

After you've figured out how many people you need to invite, you can begin figuring out who to invite.

2. Using words in your purpose statement, develop a list of key attributes to seek in participants. For example, if your focus group purpose statement was "to find out from community residents their perceptions and ideas about our daytime programming," you would pull out attributes such as community residents, people who use your programming, or people who would use daytime programming.

3. Brainstorm possible participants and categories of participants. Using the above attributes, you might come up with the following ideas for possible participants:

- people who live within five miles of the school
- past participants of daytime programs
- members of a nearby church's daytime book club.

4. Refine the list by balancing commonalties and differences in participants. Aim for enough diversity to stimulate discussion and enough similarity to create a common ground. For example, you might limit the selection to people who have participated in a daytime program *and* who live within five miles of the community school site. But you wouldn't want participants who all went to the same daytime session and live in the 700 block of Hilly Road.

5. Secure names and contact information, finalize the list, and send invitations. If the group you've identified is not preexisting (such as a staff group or the tenants of a particular building), you must figure out how to build an invitation list. You may use an existing list related to your defined attributes, purchase or borrow someone else's list, recruit on site (as at a conference), or show colleagues your categories and ask for names. Be sure your list includes names, correct salutations, addresses, and phone numbers. Once you've got the list, send out invitations and make plans for follow-up phone calls to remind participants.

Step 4: Generate the Questions to Be Asked.

The questions posed in a focus group are critical. Because focus groups are short (usually one to two hours), there's time for only four to five questions.

The sequence and tone of the questions are as significant as the questions themselves. To be effective, focus group questions should be open-ended, focused, and move from general to more specific. For example, a question like, "What are some of the barriers to you using our services?" is too abrupt because it addresses negative items without letting participants ease into giving criticism. Create a series of questions, such as these: (1) What are some of our strengths? (2) In what areas could we improve? (3) What are some of the things you dislike about our services? Such a series will move participants to a point where they feel comfortable discussing negative issues. To come up with appropriate questions, follow this sequence:

- Brainstorm ideas for questions that relate to the purpose statement you created in Step 1.
- Once you have a list of questions, narrow it down by choosing those that are most applicable to your purpose statement. Select the top five or six questions.
- Find someone to rewrite your questions and arrange them in a sequence that will be comfortable for participants.
- Test your questions by answering them yourself or asking staff members to answer them. Do the responses give you the information you need? If they don't, revise them.

Step 5: Develop a Script.

A detailed script helps assure that you've put the questions in context for participants. It also makes sure that each focus group is conducted in a similar fashion and that the facilitator stays on track and on time. A script is especially helpful when the facilitator is external to the process.

Plan on a one- to two-hour time frame. A minimum of one hour is recommended because the process requires time for opening and closing remarks and at least one or two questions. Be cautious *not to exceed two hours*, or people will start to fade, and the discussion will lose its relevance.

There are three parts to a focus group script. The *opening* is the time for the facilitator to welcome the group, introduce the purpose and context of the focus group, explain what a focus group is and how it will flow, and facilitate introductions. The *question* section is where you ask the questions that you designed and tested in Step 4. The *closing* section wraps up the focus group. This includes thanking the participants, giving them an opportunity and avenue for further input, telling them how the data will be used, and explaining the larger context for the focus groups.

Step 6: Select a Facilitator.

Choose a facilitator with a working knowledge of group dynamics and a reputation as a good meeting leader. The facilitator should be able to deal tactfully with outspoken group members, keep the discussion on course, and make sure every participant is heard.

Finding a facilitator is not difficult. It can be a staff member, volunteer, or member of a committee or task force. You can also use a two-person team, where one person moderates the discussion and another records it.

Step 7: Choose the Location.

It is important to choose a setting in which participants feel comfortable expressing their opinions. Factors to consider when choosing a location include:

- What message does the setting send? (Is it corporate, upscale, cozy, informal, sterile, inviting?)
- Can it comfortably accommodate 9 to 15 people (6 to 12 participants plus facilitators and observers), where all can view each other?
- Is it easily accessible? (Consider access for people with disabilities, safety, transportation, parking, proximity, and convenience.)

Step 8: Conduct the Focus Group.

Now that you've identified why you're doing a focus group, selected and invited the participants, chosen the facilitator and location, and developed the script, it's time to conduct the session. The materials you'll need for the session are:

- notepads and pencils
- flip chart or easel paper
- focus group script
- list of participants with phone numbers
- markers
- masking tape
- name tags
- refreshments
- tape recorder (optional)
- watch or clock.

Once the group gets underway, all the skills of a good facilitator come into play: Think of it as a combination of running a meeting and managing group dynamics. Facilitators must foster an atmosphere of comfort, enjoyment, and an open exchange of ideas. A facilitator must also head off arguments or public speeches about individual items and steer the group back on track.

Step 9: Interpret and Report the Results.

It's important to report the information you gather so that it can be acted on later. There are three steps to creating a report:

1. Summarize each meeting. After *each* session there are a number of details to attend to:

- If you've taped the meeting, be sure to spot check the tape. If there was some failure, it's easier to reconstruct the session immediately afterward.
- The facilitator should debrief the session with another person to capture fresh impressions.
- Soon after the session, transcribe notes and write a summary of the focus group. It's easiest to remember what was meant by an acronym or shorthand immediately following the session than it is a month later.
- Send participants a copy of your summary to engage them more fully in your process. They can check for

mistakes or misunderstandings and see the data collected as a whole.

2. Analyze the summaries. Start by reading all the focus group summaries in one sitting, noting trends (comments that seem to be appearing repeatedly in the data) and surprises (unexpected comments that are worth noting). As you look for these elements, keep in mind that context and tone are equal in importance to the reiteration of particular words. If a comment (or number of comments) seem to be phrased negatively, elicited emotional responses, or seemed to trigger many other comments, that would be worth noting in the analysis.

3. Write the report. The final report can take many different shapes but should include these elements:

- background and purpose of the report
- details of the sessions (facilitator, date of session, participants)
- results
- conclusions.

When writing up the results, review your purpose statement and consider the audience for the report. This check back to the beginning often helps focus the report.

Step 10: Translate the Results into Action.

The most common focus-group failure is that the information is not used. Here are some tips for translating results into action:

- Schedule a meeting to review the summaries and discuss their implications.
- Put the focus group information in context. Refer to your purpose statement and analyze what answers or insights the focus groups gave you. Compare, contrast, and combine the focus group information with data gathered from other sources such as surveys, interviews, or secondary research.
- Highlight the main themes, issues, problems, or questions that arose in the focus groups. Discuss and record how you will address these.
- If there is lots of information, group it. Have a team assign action steps to priority items. For example, share the information with local policy makers, build some items into staff work plans, and incorporate suggestions into the budget.
- Follow up with participants. Mail them the summary from their session, send them a thank-you letter, and include them in correspondence about how the information was used.

Focus groups can energize your nonprofit by helping you reconnect with the community you serve and by building new excitement and support around your organization's mission. Don't lose the momentum you generate. Find a way to turn the results you collect into concrete actions.

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