

Are You Using the Double Power of Focus Groups?

BY LARRY D. LAUER

Your focus group can be more than a research tool. You can use it to send your message to your most important audiences.

Focus groups are one of the most useful nonprofit communications tools. You can use a focus group as a research instrument, a method for testing communication material, and as an audience which will influence others later. There are six keys to effective focus groups:

1 Understand What Focus Groups Can Accomplish

A focus group is a facilitated discussion among a selected small group of people on a specific topic. It has two main purposes:

1. Research Purpose

Focus groups can have one of many different research objectives. For example, they can do the following:

- Identify and clarify problems.
- Find the best solution to a problem.
- Assess reaction to an idea or service.
- Evaluate the performance of a service or person.

At the beginning of a focus group, the facilitator should tell participants exactly what the research purpose is.

2. Communication Purpose

In addition to its research objective, a focus group can and should have a communication purpose. For example, you might use a focus group to fulfill the following communication objectives:

- Test ideas for your publications.
- Listen for new words and phrases which you can use later to enrich your communication materials.
- Convey specific messages to the focus group participants. For example, you may want them to know your organization's overall communication goals.
- Ask for participants' word-of-mouth support after the focus group is over.

Qualitative vs. Quantitative Character

A focus group is a qualitative rather than quantitative research activity. Quantitative research projects, such as surveys and some interviews, gather data for statistical analysis and comparison. Their strengths are in their ability to include many participants, collect detailed data, and cross-compare results. Their weaknesses are in their occasional low or unrepresentative responses and in their tendency to raise

more questions than they answer. It's not unusual for a communicator or executive to read questionnaire results and still feel the need for a more personal, in-depth reaction from key constituents. This is why the best research program will combine both quantitative and qualitative methods.

While surveys can reach more people, focus groups usually are formed around more targeted and homogeneous groups. For communication purposes, focus groups can be invaluable.

Three Communication Benefits

The strength of focus group research for communicators derives from its qualitative nature. The small group setting provides the kind of understanding you can get only from both listening to and watching responses. There are three main benefits:

1. Focus groups allow you to ask follow-up questions to probe for deeper insights and broader perspectives.
2. Listening to people talk gives you usable communication material—for example, new slogan ideas, new ways of phrasing old ideas, fresh language for explaining your organization to the public.
3. During the focus group, you can tell participants about your organization and solicit their support. By asking participants to spread your message, you turn your focus group into a two-way communication tool.

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HOW NONPROFITS ARE USING FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups are especially effective with nonprofit organizations because of their identification with emotional and complex human causes. Much of a nonprofit's market niche is defined by its culture, values, and service style; such subject matter can be developed effectively in focus group sessions. And when more people participate, more people become committed to the cause. Some examples:

A small college in the Northwest used focus groups to develop a new marketing plan for undergraduate admissions. The college identified its priority audiences as: current traditional students, adult degree students, high school counselors, faculty, staff, alumni, trustees, and community leaders. Focus groups were organized for each of these audiences. Clear objectives and key questions were identified. Participants were selected in part because they represented their audience category, but also because they would later be able to influence the opinion of others. At the beginning, each group was told that their ideas would help shape the new marketing effort of the college. They were also asked to tell their friends that this college was embarking on a new day. Thus, by the time the new marketing plan was announced, a feeling of renewal already was in the air. Enrollment increased by 20% the first year.

A blood center used focus groups to develop a plan for increasing blood donations by minorities. The project began by asking employees to identify minorities who were current clients. These clients were invited to participate in several focus groups. Other focus groups with non-givers were then formed in minority communities. Both blood-donor and non-donor focus groups were asked to list problems and barriers to giving blood. The results were illuminating. Among other insights, the focus groups showed that some cultures have religious concerns about giving blood, that getting minority community leaders involved was critical, and that going to familiar, safe-feeling locations was important.

A human service agency had some employee complaints which were difficult to assess. The discontinuing of soft-money projects had caused some people to lose their jobs, and staff morale was low. Concern about employment stability seemed to be contributing to complaints about management style, the computer system, and so forth. Focus groups were used to identify complaints, clarify the real problems, and find workable solutions. Ultimately several managers left the organization as a result of the focus group findings. The morale of the remaining employees is much improved.

A major university used focus groups to develop a plan for increasing football attendance. The university identified its priority audiences as: corporate leaders, small business leaders, community organization leaders, the news media, alumni, and current students. Next, the university held focus groups representing each of these priority audiences. The focus groups identified factors which would have the greatest effect on football attendance: flexible discount ticket packages for families, extra attractions for children, added advertising incentives for getting corporate sponsors more involved, and a theme which would make the city feel more a part of the university. The university followed these suggestions. As a result, it had one of the largest percentage increases in football attendance in the nation.

The Nuts And Bolts Of Focus Groups

Focus Group Functions:

1. Planning:
 - Set organizational direction.
 - Develop a new communications plan.
 - List long-range program goals.
2. Problem-solving:
 - Identify and solve organizational problems.
 - Clarify cultural traits and values.
3. Evaluation:
 - Assess perceived strengths and weaknesses of a program.
 - Evaluate performance.
 - Test ideas, and evaluate materials.
 - Assess feelings.

Setting a Focus Group Agenda:

1. Identify the function of the focus group (planning, problem-solving, or evaluation).
2. State the specific objective of the session.
3. List four or five key questions.

Facilitating the Group Process:

1. Design an informal ice breaker.
2. Let participants make notes related to agenda questions.
3. Promise confidentiality.
4. Encourage each participant to make complete statements regarding each question. Use follow-up questions to draw out each participant.
5. Record the session.
6. Turn the session into a two-way communication mechanism by telling participants about your organization and asking them to spread your message and garner word-of-mouth support for your organization after the session is over.

Preparing a Focus Group Report:

1. List agreements and disagreements related to each agenda question.
2. State major findings as action recommendations.
3. Describe material related to enriching organizational communications (story ideas, slogans, and so on).
4. Distribute your report to all focus group participants.
5. Distribute an executive summary of all reports to employees.

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Involve the Right People

Nonprofit executives and their professional communicators should always keep lists of their priority audiences at hand. These audiences include clients, vendors, donors, board members, community leaders, and appropriate government officials. Your focus group should include at least one representative from each priority audience. Depending on the scope of the project, you might organize several focus groups within each category.

For example, within your client audience you might form a focus group of clients under 30 years old and another group of clients aged 30 and up. Then you can ask each group the same questions and compare results. By designing homogenous categories within each priority audience, you can collect useful, reliable information.

Of course, the weakness of all qualitative research is in its lack of scientific data. You cannot add up numbers to reach conclusions. However, if you have the right people representing the right homogenous groupings, you can make informed communications decisions.

The best participants will be thoughtful, articulate, and interested. The size of the group must be manageable—usually between six and 10, certainly no more than 12.

3

Set the Right Agenda

There are three critical factors in arriving at a focus group agenda:

1. You should understand group dynamics. For example, will your focus group conversation be more like planning, problem-solving, or evaluating? Your answer will affect how you shape the conversation format. Will you be listing goals and objectives, clarifying problems and discussing solutions, or establishing criteria for assessment and judgment? Also, are you prepared for any potential hostility, conflict, or other predictable participant problems?
2. You must state a specific outcome for the session. A clear objective stated at the top of the agenda will keep the group focused.
3. List four or five key questions which, when answered, will fulfill that objective. These questions should be open-ended so that they will elicit participants' feelings. Well-phrased questions provide an important mechanism for keeping the group on track.

4

Facilitate the Meeting Effectively

Reliable outcomes will be determined by how well the session is conducted. All participants must clearly understand the ses-

sion objective, have a chance to develop their thoughts, and feel comfortable about participating. You may want to hire a skilled facilitator at first, but with time and practice you can facilitate focus groups yourself. Your main role as facilitator is to make participants comfortable and get them to speak freely.

First, set up the room to encourage good conversation. It's effective to serve refreshments first as a way of having participants get to know each other informally. After about 10 or 15 minutes, hand out an agenda and ask each person to find a place around a conference table. Name cards will help encourage conversation.

Focus groups can be effective tools for gaining long-term stakeholder support.

After you have clearly stated the focus group's objective, move to your list of questions. Ask each participant to take a few minutes to make notes on each question. Then, address each question in order, letting participants refer to their notes as they answer. This approach breaks the ice, eases tension, and promotes participation from everyone.

Encourage all participants to express themselves completely on every question. Your body language should show that you are listening intently to their answers. Ask follow-up questions designed to get a deeper response from each participant.

The proceedings must be recorded for later analysis. Most focus groups are audio recorded. Others are video taped through a one-way mirror. A video camera in the room itself can be too inhibiting, but most groups will get accustomed to the presence of an audio recorder. It is imperative, however, that you promise confidentiality. A group secretary taking notes is helpful. These notes will speed the process of reviewing audio-tape transcript later.

5 Evaluate and Share Results

You can use simple content analysis procedures to analyze your focus groups' results. Skim participants' notes, the group secretary's notes, and the audio-tape transcript. List each idea that participants express. Then note the frequency of agreements and disagreements to each idea.

Write up a report of the results. Your report should have at least three sections:

1. Summarize responses to each key question, noting the number of agreements and disagreements.
2. State the most significant outcomes as recommendations for action.
3. Present the focus group's ideas about enriching communications. Such material will often take the form of illustrative story ideas, historical or people anecdotes, well-stated slogan ideas or phrases, fresh ways of stating the organization's vision, interesting ways of dealing with sensitive issues, and so on.

Your report should be concise, three to five pages. Send copies to the participants with a thank you note.

You should also prepare an executive summary, outlining the results of all the focus groups. Distribute this executive summary to your employees, including volunteers.

6 Keep It Up

For focus groups to be effective, they should be part of an ongoing communications program. Rather than conducting a few isolated focus groups, build the focus-group approach into your long-range plan. A continuing focus-group procedure can be one of your most effective tools for building a strong reputation and gaining long-term stakeholder support. ■

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