

# Want to

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Gather  
In-depth  
Insights &  
Advice

# Focus Groups



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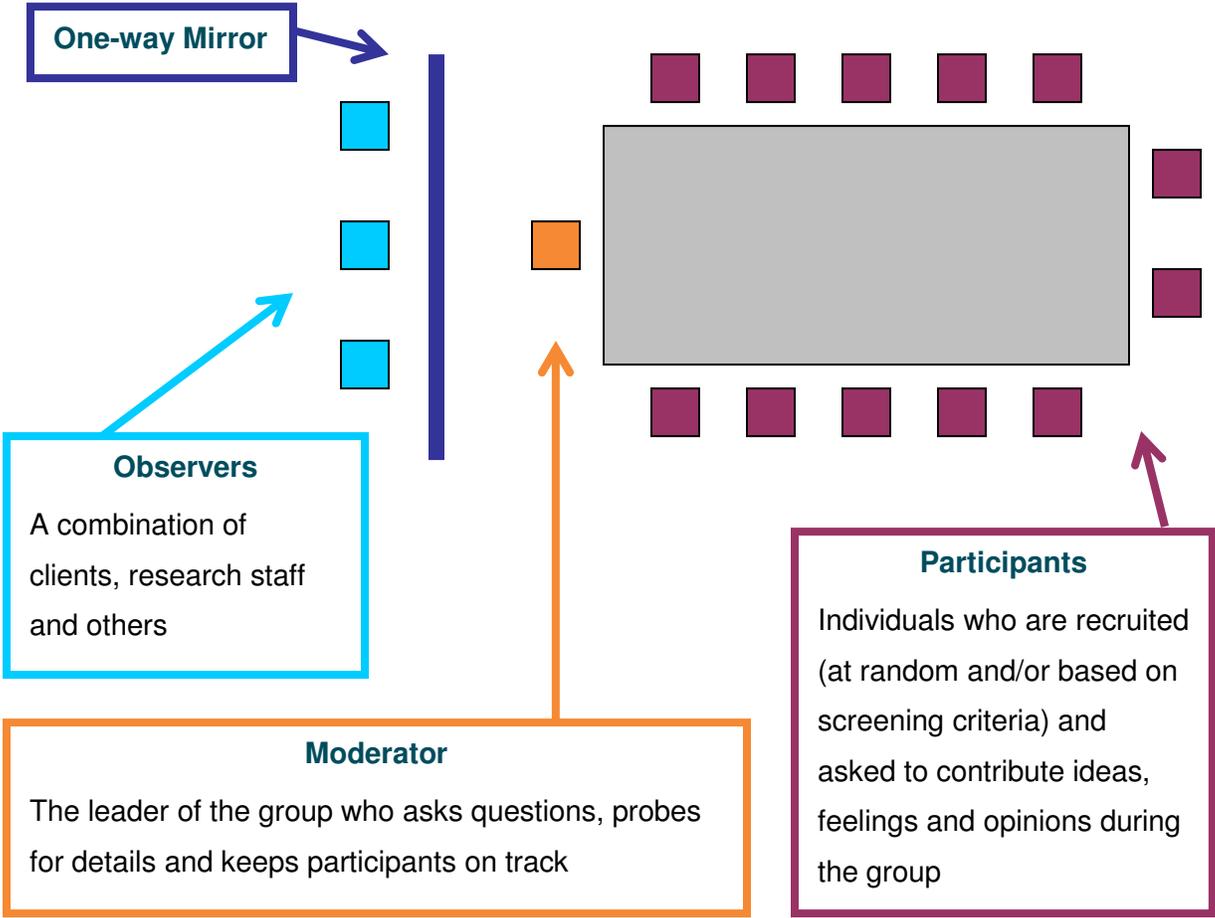
# How Focus Groups Can Make You Smarter, Today!

A focus group is an organized, facilitated discussion between 8 to 12 people gathered around a conference table. The groups are typically led by a moderator—someone who has prepared a number of questions ahead of time and manages the group dynamics.

Many focus groups are held at special facilities with one-way mirrors where you (the client) can watch what people (your customers and prospects) have to say about your products, services, billing and a host of other issues.

Groups don't have to be held at special facilities. Conference rooms, hotel meeting rooms and other locations can work just as well.

## Focus Group Setup



## Why They Are Valuable

Focus groups are a great tool for listening to people you care about and are especially valuable for three reasons.

- 1. Focus groups give you in-depth insight.** You hear the detailed thoughts and insights of the participants. You don't have to guess about what they mean, you just have to ask them—and then ask follow-up or probing questions to find out WHY they think the way they do.
- 2. Focus groups allow you to hear people talk about things in their own words.** You are not receiving a rewritten or summarized version of what customers are saying. It's the raw format, and it can really help you understand what they are thinking. You get to hear customers' exact words. And what's more, you are hearing how they are saying it. Are they angry? Are they enthusiastic?
- 3. Focus groups work great when you need to physically show something to participants, such as ad mock ups, TV commercials, new bill formats, etc.** You can see their nonverbal reaction and listen to their verbal response. It's the next best thing to being a fly on the wall.

Focus groups offer a number of other advantages:

- Better understand consumer preferences, perceptions and behavior about a product category.
- Obtain impressions about the new concepts of products.
- Generate new ideas about older products.
- Test material for advertisements and develop a creative concept.
- Secure impressions about prices.
- See the first reactions of consumers to specific marketing programs.
- Interpret results previously obtained from telephone or mail surveys.
- Conduct internal research with employees to learn what they think about new benefits, packages or upcoming changes.

## Cautions

Although focus groups can be very effective and useful, they don't work in every situation. Focus groups have limitations.

- The results from a focus group are not projectable to a broader audience. Just because a few people in the group said it, doesn't mean that everyone in the broader community thinks that way.
- Most of what you hear in a focus group is also found in follow-up surveys. Don't be afraid to use the insights you learned in your group. They can still be very valuable. It's just that surveys do a better job of quantifying how many people believe the same things you heard in your group.
- Conduct more than one group. If only one focus group is conducted, the group may have been a dud or overly enthusiastic. To overcome this limitation, conduct at least two groups. If you hear the same themes in both groups, you can be more confident in your results.
- Finally, remember there can be a tendency to "persuade" participants instead of "listen" to them. Suggesting the "right" answer will only bias your findings. Make sure you keep an open mind and really try to listen to what's being said—even if you don't like it.

# 16 Steps for Conducting a Focus Group

Once you've decided to conduct a focus group, there is a lot more to it than just gathering some people together and hoping they give you some useful information. This would be a waste of everyone's time, money and resources. Make your focus group as effective as possible by following these steps.

- 1. Is a focus group study really appropriate?** Make sure this technique will satisfy your information needs before conducting a focus group study. Ask yourself: is there an easier, more efficient way to find out what I need to know? If so, scrap the focus groups and use another research tool.
- 2. Spell out your information needs.** Specify the information needs that will drive the group sessions. This should be done in the proposal you prepared/receive. Be specific.
- 3. Decide who will moderate.** Great moderators are exceptional people with a special gift (that's what my clients told me and I confess, I let it go to my head). The moderator will control group dynamics while still actively listening to what everyone is saying. You want someone who makes people feel welcomed and gets them to open up during the meeting.
- 4. Schedule groups with care.** The date and time of focus groups requires careful consideration. Avoid scheduling on days of the week when participants are likely to be busy, like Monday, Friday and the weekends. Tuesday through Thursday evening works best for consumer groups. Lunch time meetings work great for business and employee meetings.
- 5. Decide who's going to be in your groups and how you're going to recruit them.** With consumer groups, it's pretty easy to obtain a list of women, 25-54 years old. If a company has a customer list, you may want to invite a specific type of customer ("A" level who purchase a minimum level annually).

6. **Design a screening questionnaire.** Qualifying and specifying the right participants with the right characteristics requires a screening questionnaire. These look like short surveys. If someone doesn't qualify (e.g., too young or too old), you simply thank them and go on to recruiting the next group.
7. **Recruit groups of like minds.** Make sure each focus group is homogenous to a degree (e.g., women vs. men; sports fans vs. non-sports fans, etc.). Because of the social dynamics of focus groups, people with common viewpoints reinforce and encourage each other to speak out.
8. **Construct a waiting room questionnaire (optional).** This second questionnaire serves several functions:
  - Provides more background information on those participating.
  - Completing the questionnaire gives punctual participants something useful and distracting to do while waiting for laggards to arrive.
  - Completed questionnaire commits respondents to a particular viewpoint prior to interaction with other group members.
9. **Develop the moderator guide.** The moderator guide is a series of open-ended questions and probes. It is a rough map of where you want the moderator to take the group. When running the session, make sure to give observers (clients) copies of the moderator's guide so they can follow the discussion.
10. **Select focus group observers strategically.** The focus group gives you an opportunity to educate the other members of the management team about issues, problems and opportunities. Advertising staffs, customer service, marketing and other departments can all provide valuable insights when applying the findings—especially if they were there to hear the comments first hand. Typically 2-5 people observe focus groups, but I've had as many as 10 watch. If you're moderating the groups, plan to have an assistant in the observation room to help manage the observer dynamics.

- 11. Brief observers beforehand.** All observers need to be briefed as to the purpose of the focus group, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of such studies. Spend a few minutes on how they should behave (keep an open mind, don't argue mentally with any of the participants, etc.).
- 12. Do your own thorough facility check.** Make sure that the audio and/or video recorders used to capture focus group discussions are working before you begin the group.
- 13. Check catering arrangements.** Make sure that catering is in place to provide refreshments or snacks to participants. Chips, cookies and soft drinks are enough for most consumer groups. Lunch and nicer food is better for business groups.
- 14. Recruit more participants than needed.** A group of ten may require recruitment of twelve to fourteen people due to no-shows.
- 15. Moderate the group.** The focus group discussion begins with a brief explanation of a focus group and the purpose of the discussion. Go over the ground rules, get everyone to introduce themselves, then start your questions.
- 16. Report focus group findings.** Because qualitative research generates such large quantities of data (verbatim comments), the greatest problem is organizing and reducing findings to more useful forms. Use notes to speed report writing. Spell out the implications of the findings explicitly. I like to focus on “trends” with occasional quotes or examples. Remember your audience—decision makers and other managers. Don't make your report so painful that it diminishes all of the hard work you did to reach this point.

# Behind the Glass: How to be a Productive Observer

I'm constantly amazed at how different a client's take on some of the things said during a group is from mine. This is because we have different perceptions and experiences. We hear at entirely different levels during the groups.

If you're asked to observe focus groups, keep these tips in mind.

- **Listen for trends and insights.** This is your chance to hear in a customer's own words their reaction to products and services. Don't get so focused on one comment or idea that you shut off everything else.
- **Don't get fixated on one person.** One person may seem to be providing particularly helpful insights, but there may be very important things you are missing from other members of the group. From time to time, I've seen clients get angry with what someone is saying. They spend all of their energy mentally arguing with the participant instead of listening to the entire group.
- **Keep an open mind.** Don't prejudge the participants based on physical appearance or initial comments. You never know from whom or when an incredible insight will occur. I remember one participant that had a big, fat cigar in his mouth. My client said his first reaction was, "Where did they find this guy?" It turned out, however, that this guy had some terrific insights and was very helpful in the group.

Finally, as an observer, it is important to take the results from a focus group and use the information. One way to package the results is to prepare a video summary and make a write up of the results. I've used a short video of the group to help many managers more clearly understand what people are thinking. So, while you're observing, listen for opportunities and great quotes. It will make summarizing the results a whole lot easier.