

Focus on Focus Groups

Planning and Administration



Focus Groups

- Structured group interview process
- Small number of participants
- Typical focus group objective is not consensus or debate
- Often combined with other methods



Focus Groups

Strengths	Limitations
Stimulate new ideas	Moderator skill
Learn about participant perceptions of products or services	Attitudes can become more extreme
Learn general information about a topic	Emotionally charged issue may cause argument
Learn how respondents talk about topic of interest	Some topics are off limits
Provide context for quantitative data	“Social desirability” effect

Planning the Focus Group

1. Decide on degree of structure

- Standardize questions, but allow for minor changes to accommodate the group

2. Select participants

- 8-12 individuals that ideally don't know one another
- Segmented into homogeneous groups (4-6 groups per segment)

3. Select a moderator

- Requires ability to manage time and diverse personalities, probe deeply into topics, and be flexible

Planning the Focus Group

4. Develop questions

1. Revisit project goals.
2. Determine what information is currently available.
3. Draft a preliminary list of questions.
4. Elicit feedback on the draft questions.
5. Revise the list of questions.
6. Seek final approval of the question list.

Planning the Focus Group

5. Secure a venue and date/time

6. Invite participants

7. Create a process agenda

- Prepare room
- Welcome participants
- Overview the process with participants
- Begin focus group questions
- Session debrief

Exercise I: Planning the Focus Group

- Three flavors of ice cream will be served at a very important upcoming event, and you have been assigned to choose the flavors. The stakes are high. If your boss and the guests are happy with the ice cream options, your boss will give you a promotion. You want to do this right, and so you decide to do focus groups to help you choose the flavors.
- Review the seven steps of planning a focus group and apply to the situation.
- How structured will the groups be? Who will I invite to attend? Who will moderate? What should I ask my participants? Where will I host the focus groups? How shall I go about inviting participants? What will my process agenda look like?

Conducting the Focus Group

- **Follow your process agenda**
 - Prepare room
 - Welcome participants
 - Overview the process with participants
 - Begin focus group questions
 - Session debrief

Exercise II: Focus Group Practice

- Three flavors of ice cream will be served at a very important upcoming event, and you have been assigned to choose the flavors. The stakes are high. If the guests are happy with the ice cream options, your boss will give you a promotion.
- We will now perform the focus groups.
 - Split into groups (one group per 10-14 people).
 - Each group will have one moderator, one note-taker, and 8-12 focus group participants.
 - Follow your process agenda to conduct the focus group

How'd it go?

- **What did you learn?**
- **What went well?**
- **Any problems?**
- **Any surprises?**

Thank You!

For more information:

Chris Ellis, PhD
Social Scientist
Human Dimensions Program
NOAA Coastal Services Center
Phone: 843.740.1195
chris.ellis@noaa.gov
www.csc.noaa.gov

Caitie McCoy
Environmental Social Scientist
Illinois-Indiana Sea Grant
U.S. EPA Great Lakes National Program Office
Phone: 312.886.1430
cmccoy2@illinois.edu
www.iiseagrant.org