

Association of Scottish Community Councils



Focus Groups

Information Gathering Tool Kit

Introduction

Focus groups are a quick means to generate ideas and get reactions. With the aid of a professional facilitator, a small group of people, and a meeting space, in only two hours you can have pages of responses and opinions about a plan or a newsletter or any specific element of your project.

While information gathered in a focus group should not be considered a representative sample of public opinion, focus groups can help you understand different groups' perceptions and expectations. We also find questions and issues that arise in focus groups can be used as the basis of other public involvement work such as surveys and workshops. This input can help drive development of policies, programs and services and help target limited project resources where they are most needed.

Definition

A group interview where 8-12 people respond to a specific concept or subject.



Essentials

Focus groups are an excellent opportunity to explore attitudes in-depth and gain understanding about underlying issues. The small setting gives community members and stakeholders an opportunity to freely express their opinions about topics that are meaningful to them. For the host organisation, listening to the dialog is a chance to reassess project objectives and goals.

Two important points: (1) A focus group must be run by a facilitator who is not involved in the project and displays no bias towards the topic; and (2) if representatives of the host organisation are present, they can listen and take notes but they cannot speak out or offer a defence at any time.

Keeping that in mind, a focus group includes these basic features:



- A carefully crafted agenda with five or six questions specific to only one topic.
- Brief presentation of material to set context and subject.
- Six to twelve participants who understand their role is to give personal insights and perspectives that will inform the planning process.
- Emphasis on gathering qualitative information such as perspectives and opinions.
- Informal but structured conversation and interaction among group participants.
- Facilitator's solicitation of, but not shaping of, opinions and perspectives.

How to Use It

1. Make an Agenda

Think of specific questions it would be helpful to have answers for – questions like "Is this really the most important way we can spend our budget?" Or "Do people really want a straight path or a circular route?" Or "Does anybody read this newsletter? Why/Why not?"

Do not be lured into trying to get a little information about a lot of things. Determine a single topic and ask questions directly related to it. Use open-ended questions about perceptions of the physical, natural and social environment or use focused questions about specific programs or projects and even types of behaviour that may affect project viability. The focus group does not have to be limited to writing; creative approaches works well, e.g., "draw a picture of the river in your community." No matter what approach, keep the topic specific.

2. Determine the Budget

Running a focus group may incur costs such as facilitation fees and travel, possible compensation of volunteers, transcription materials and services, meeting space rentals, refreshments for focus group participants, and documentation and analysis of the results.

Creative financing may cover some or all of these costs. Consider in the following steps how to use volunteers or involve public agencies that do not

charge.

3. Recruit a Facilitator

Take the tentative agenda and questions and get a professional involved. A nonbiased facilitator will be able to guide the interview design, advice on ways to collect the information and ensure the flow of dialog during the meeting.

Select a facilitator whose background indicates experience with focus group techniques and familiarity with the discussion topic. Possible sources of assistance include marketing and advertising agencies, anthropology departments of universities, and government agencies whose planning programs require extensive public outreach.

4. Handle Logistics

- Find a meeting place: It should be perceived as neutral and comfortable for all participants and easily accessible. Appropriate meeting places could include houses of worship and other community centres, conference centres, and even homes.
- Pick a date and time: Schedules should be tailored to meet the needs of participants; e.g., evenings or weekends for those who work.
- Arrange for light refreshments: If a budget is tight, this is an obvious place for volunteer assistance.

5. Send out the Invitations

Either randomly selects individuals from a broad-based mailing list or voters' registration list or specifically select individuals from a targeted interest group or from referrals. Again, information obtained from focus groups can guide or

suggest possible future direction; it does not represent public opinion.

When inviting participants, whether through the mail or by telephone, supply details such as when, length of meeting, where it will be held (including directions) and a brief statement of the purpose. Focus group participants are never prepared in advance or coached to give specific answers—their immediate gut reactions to the facilitators' questions are much more valuable.

The optimal number of participants is 8-12. To have that many, it may require inviting many more people.

6. Legwork Before the Meeting

- Help the facilitator prepare to introduce key opinion leaders or others in the community who are there to offer a short background on the project or topic and related issues. (After the background, the individual should be asked to leave the room so as not to influence or intimidate discussions.)
- Write out any guidelines or expectations for behaviour; e.g., not interrupting others, not offering judgment, etc. This list should be posted in the meeting room.
- Determine how the discussions will be recorded, transcribed, and analysed. The facilitator would most likely record and transcribe group discussions but additional professional assistance might be needed for the analysis.

7. The Big Night (or Afternoon, or Morning)

- Welcome and thank the participants and make necessary introductions.

- Explain how the results will be used.
- Assure the participants that the information gathered will respect the privacy of individuals.
- Thank the participants.
- Review the ground rules including reminding any project members or those who are involved and are there to observe that they are to remain silent.
- Allow the facilitator to facilitate.
- Thank the participants.

Use It If.....

- You need a reality-check and want to identify likes, dislikes and perceptions about a specific proposal, concept, tool, etc.
- You need a relatively inexpensive and easy way get feedback about something specific. With the right professional assistance, focus groups can be organised in a few weeks as compared to other methods of information gathering such as public opinion surveys.
- You want to reach a lot of different groups and compare their thoughts and ideas – have a focus group for community representatives, one for technical experts, one for a special interest group, etc.



- You need to reach underrepresented groups. Focus groups encourage people to speak out in an informal non-threatening forum without fear of criticism.

Not Recommended If....

- You need a comprehensive public outreach program. Focus groups supplement quantitative or technical information gained from using other public outreach techniques. Focus groups provide qualitative responses and are not statistically representative of the larger community or society as a whole.
- You want to build consensus. Focus groups are about gathering specific viewpoints of individuals or the groups they represent. Focus groups are not for debating issues and coming to agreement.
- You are looking for a way to "sell" your idea. To do that would take intervention in the conversation and that goes against focus group rules. The goal of a focus group is to obtain individual opinions, not distribute information or persuade others.