



## Focus Groups

### *Qualitative Research as a Survey Tool*

Today, focus groups have come to mean almost any setting in which a collection of people are brought together to discuss a topic of interest. But focus groups are a traditional market and opinion research tool used to gather qualitative information from a targeted audience that shares common behavioral, attitudinal, or demographic traits. They are often used as a method for initially designing a questionnaire or are deployed following a survey to add depth and texture to the study's findings. This article addresses some of the ways to get the most out of your focus groups.

As the name suggests, focus groups are a set of individuals who are assembled to discuss a subject that is fairly narrow in scope. Focus groups cannot project what a larger population believes and they are not the place to explore broad concepts or multiple ideas. Whereas traditional survey research is all about the *quantitative* elements of numbers and statistics, focus groups lean to the *qualitative* side of perceptions, explanations, and insights. They should not be used to decide between Option A and Option B, but they are extremely useful in learning more about the perceived differences between the two options and what the decision process is for choosing one over the other.

Focus groups are generally composed of a minimum of seven people and a maximum of twelve participants. Any fewer and the group runs the risk of losing its range of perspectives - any more and individual panel members are in danger of not being able to fully express their views. Groups normally last for an hour and a half to two hours and often a modest incentive is included for participants' time and input.

The purpose of the group format is to encourage dynamic and diverse discussions. Focus groups can be thought of as well controlled conversations. Conducting focus groups with the intent of reading off a long list of questions, waiting for the participants to answer and then concluding that three-fourths think "x" misses the mark. Open-ended questions that generate thought provoking dialog is the goal.

The term "focus" is derived from the objective of tailoring the questions into a tightly defined area of interest. True focus groups will include no more than eight to ten questions. The first one or two should be fairly broad but become increasingly narrow as the questions progress. A focus group studying the subject of gourmet coffee consumption, for example, might begin by asking about the use of gourmet foods, then transition to gourmet beverages. The conversation then becomes more specific to the use of gourmet coffees. The questions are presented to the panel somewhat spontaneously but they have been carefully developed.

Often overlooked is the ability of the person who will lead the focus group. A skilled moderator knows not only *what* to ask but *how* to ask the questions. The moderator should be thoroughly familiar with the subject and goals of the study so that he or she knows when to probe deeper and when to move on. The ability to carefully listen to the discussion is also of critical importance. When a participant brings up the issues involved in deciding between one alternative over another, for instance, the moderator should probe to understand why rather than hastily moving on to the next question.

A good moderator will also evaluate the participants prior to beginning each group. The quiet participants will be seated directly across from the moderator so that eye contact can easily be made to encourage them to take part, while those who are loud and prone to dominate a conversation will be seated near the moderator so they can be bridled if necessary.

Surveys can reveal *what* people think, but too often they are lacking when it comes to a focus group's strength of understanding *how* and *why* people think as they do. Surveys effectively gauge attitudes but focus groups are about *comprehending* these attitudes. In short, focus groups work because they tap into human emotions and tendencies.

## Survey Tip

Smart focus groups begin broad and become narrow for a reason. A good qualitative study camouflages the topic so that participants start by thinking in the larger context. Starting with wide, sweeping questions allows the panel to consider a range of thoughts, ideas, and emotions.

Often, our perspective is clearer when we view something from a distance before examining it more closely. Thinking broadly at the outset of a focus group, rather than going straight to the topic, allows for deeper understanding of the participants' points of view.

## Did you know...

Honesty is the top personal value among Americans, according to GfK NOP's Roper Reports Worldwide Study. The survey, conducted with more than 30,000 people around the globe, found that respondents in the U.S. rank *honesty* as the number one value, followed by *protecting the family*, *freedom* and *health/fitness*.

*Friendship*, *justice*, and *stable peer relationships* are ranked fifth through seventh, while *knowledge*, *enjoying life*, and *self-esteem* round out the top ten values for Americans.

*Honesty* has overtaken *protecting the family*, which had held the top spot as the number one value in America since the survey's inception in 1999.

Most of the 30 countries taking part in the survey rank *protecting the family* as the top value. Russia, Spain, China, and Korea, among others, say *health/fitness* is their most important value. *Faith* is the number one value for individuals in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Indonesia, while *knowledge* ranks as the most important value for citizens of India.

Source: GfK NOP

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