Conducting Focus Groups: A Training Guide

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Contents

- Qualitative vs. Quantitative
- Role of moderator
- Questions to keep in mind
- Role of note-taker
- Note-taking suggestions
- Set-up and logistics
- Making small talk
- Following the script
- Control your reactions
- Body language
- Be comfortable with the pause
- Probe as needed
- When discussion gets off track
- Audio problems
- Possible problems
- Summarize discussion
- Closing
- Debriefing

Qualitative vs. Quantitative Data

1. Aim: a complete detailed description, conversation
2. Data is in form of words
3. May only know roughly in advance what they are looking for in terms of answers
4. Individual is the data gathering instrument

Role of Moderator

- Be familiar with guide, however it is just a guide
- Be ready to listen and think simultaneously
- Remember what has been discussed, what is currently taking place, what the next topic of discussion will be, and what it all means
- Show interest, positive regard
- No judgment or opinions
- Be a moderator, not a participant
- Do not educate, solely observe and facilitate

Role of Moderator

- Make people feel comfortable sharing
- Listen – make the distinction between people talking and people answering the questions
- Decide when enough has been said and when to move on to the next question
- Write notes on the flipchart – May also take notes on personal notepad to identify key ideas or future questions that need to be asked

Questions to Keep in Your Mind

- What else do I need to ask to understand this respondent’s statement – what it means, why he/she feels that way, etc?
- Am I hearing everything I need to know to understand the problem and answer the objectives of the focus group?
- How much time do I have left? Will I be able to cover everything?
Role of Note-taker

- Be familiar with guide
- Keep track of time, keep moderator on track
- Take notes on note taking sheets provided
  - Capture themes/key points held by majority/minority
  - Notable quotes
  - Notes on body language, ‘feeling’ in the room
- Operate ipad recorder, respond to unexpected interruptions/problems, and logistics
- Summarize discussion at the end of focus group
- Type up your notes after each session and send to moderator for editing

Note-taking Style Suggestions

*Refer to Example Note Taking Handout

- Quotes – capture anything notable on right side of page
- Paraphrased quotes – capture key phrases word for word. Use ellipses ( . . . ) to indicate that words are missing. Quotes and paraphrased quotes are the only information placed on the right side of the page
- Summary points or themes – List these on the left side of the page

Note-taking Style Suggestions

- Major themes – Place a star or check mark by these themes
- Questions that occur to the note-taker – These might be asked later and are identified with a question mark at the beginning and end of the question. For example, ?This is an example of the style? These questions are placed on the left side of the notes.

Note-taking Style Suggestions

- Big ideas that affect the purpose of the focus group – These thoughts and interpretations are circled and placed on left side
- Observations on body language, discussion climate, etc. – These observations are placed on the left side, and a box is drawn around each observation
- Sketch of the seating pattern – somewhere on the field notes
- Strive for clarity and consistency

Setting Up & Logistics

- Side table with refreshments (pizza, drinks, etc)
- Flipchart with markers at the front of the room
- Box labeled “surveys”, box labeled “consents”
- For each participant:
  - Manila envelope with two consent forms, one demographic survey
  - Tent cards pre-labeled (passed out during questioning phase)
  - Pens
  - In middle of table, ipad with Rec & Player app or other recording device

Making Small Talk

- Moderators/note-takers must be able to talk casually and comfortably about the issues
- Greet participants warmly and make them feel comfortable, at ease
  - Similar to hosting guests in your home
- Avoid discussing the focus group topics and instead concentrate on common human experiences (University sports, weather, etc)
- Lasts only 5-10 minutes while participants arrive
- Invite them to the available refreshments
Making Small Talk

• Observe participant interactions and note those who dominate the group, are excessively shy, or consider themselves experts
• These observations will impact seating
  – Moderator should turn lightly away from more forceful individuals and look at less talkative participants
• About 40% will be eager and open to sharing, 40% introspective and willing to talk if situation presents itself, & 20% apprehensive about the experience and rarely share

Following the Script

*Refer to Script & Topical Guide

1. Introduction
   – Welcome
   – Overview of topic
   – Ground rules
2. Questionnaire & Survey
   – Distribute manila envelopes
   – Sign consent forms and place in box, participant keeps second copy
   – Fill out survey and place in box
   – Reminders
3. Questioning
   – First question breaks the ice
4. Summary
5. Closing Comments

Control Your Reactions

• Head nodding/shaking
  – unconscious response that signals agreement/disagreement and tends to elicit additional comments of same type

• Short verbal responses
  – OK, Yes, or Uh-huh: fine to use
  – Correct, That’s good, Excellent: avoid, implies judgment about quality of statement

Acceptable Body Language

• Smiling – signal of encouragement to participant hesitant to speak
• Lifting an eyebrow – interest, surprise, or questioning, may also encourage to speak
• Tilting head and lifting eyebrow – similar to above but more noticeable
• Gesturing with open hand from wrist toward participant – invitation to speak
• Gesturing with both open hands, palms up – says we’ve encountered a dilemma; what do we do?
• Pointing to participant – your turn to speak
• Point to one person while holding up other hand to another person – act like a traffic cop, first one person speaks, then the other
• Leaning into the table – I’m interested, tell me more
• Leaning back from the table – go ahead and talk I’m just listening

Acceptable Body Language

• Pauses/uncomfortable silences are important for participants to process information, collect their thoughts
• 5-second pause
  – Prompts additional points of view, especially when coupled with eye contact from moderator
  – Amplifies previously mentioned comment
• If no one answers question after the pause and eye contact, ask question again
  – “Take a moment and think about the answer. We’ll wait until you’re ready to respond.”
• After a participant makes a comment and no one else continues.
  – “How do others feel about that?” “Are there other views?”

Be Comfortable with the Pause
**Probe as Needed**

- Probe for clarity and understanding
- Probe at any time needed
- Probes differ from follow-up questions as probes are more spontaneous and follow-up questions are predetermined

**Probe as Needed**

- “Would you explain further?”
- “Can you give me an example of what you mean?”
- “Would you say more?”
- “Is there anything else?”
- “Please describe what you mean.”
- “I don't understand.”
- “Tell me more about that.”

**Probe as Needed**

*Refer to Probing & Other Skills Handout*

- “Who else has something?”
- “What about the rest of you?”
- “I see people nodding their heads; tell me about it.”
- “We want to hear all the different points of view. Who else has something that might be a bit different?”

**When Discussion Gets Off Track**

1. Anticipate situations
2. Know the boundaries
3. Communicate the boundaries
4. Interrupt when needed
5. Refocus the discussion
6. Later, help the participant, if needed

**Audio Problems**

- Drumming of fingers near the microphone
- Tapping of pencils or pens on table
- Tapping of feet on table legs
- Hum of heating or air conditioning systems
- Background music
- Don’t forget to remind participants to speak up

**Possible Problems**

*Refer to Participant Problems Handout*

- Distractions – Sights, sounds, participants, the environment
- Too many participants
- Problems with equipment
Summarize the Discussion (note-taker role)

- Permits participants to alter or clarify their position or add additional thoughts
- When presenting the summary, watch participant body language for signs of agreement, hesitation, or confusion
- If potentially harmful or misleading information is shared during the focus group do not correct participants during the discussion, wait until the summary
- Remember to remain nonjudgmental and synthesize the findings

Closing

- Give participants a chance for any final comments, clarifications, retractions
- Thank participants for attending
- Remind them that they are not to discuss specifics with anyone outside of the focus group
- If anyone has additional questions ask them to refer to the contact information on the consent form or provide them with the information
- Clear the room of any participants before beginning the debriefing

Debriefing (Moderator/Note-taker)

- Don’t begin until all participants have left
- Check to make sure the session was recorded
- Record the debriefing (separately)
- First opportunity for the moderator and note-taker to compare notes
  – If there is disagreement it’s a sign you need to listen to the recording

Debriefing (Moderator/Note-taker)

1. What are the most important themes or ideas discussed?
2. How did these differ from what we expected?
3. How did this focus group differ from the previous group?
4. What points need to be included in the report?
5. What quotes should be remembered and possibly included in the report?
6. Were there any unexpected or anticipated findings?
7. Should we do anything differently for the next focus group?

Questions?
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