

What is a Focus Group?

TIP: Focus groups are different than small and large group discussions. They are recommended to be used to probe for further clarification, and not to educate or inform participants. Focus groups should last no longer than 90 minutes.

The “What” (Definition)

- A focus group is “a **carefully planned series of discussions** designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment”.
- Focus groups are a means of **qualitative data collection**.
- This form of data collection provides rich descriptions of processes, people, and when combined with other data, provides a holistic picture of a program.
- Focus groups **provide some answers to important questions** like how much, when, where, what and why.

The “Why” (Purpose)

- The purpose of focus group data is to **gather specific information** about a certain topic.
- Focus groups help to **discern ideas about behavior**, i.e., why people do what they do.
- Focus groups can also be **an equalizer in giving a voice to people who may not answer surveys** or who feel that the best way to give input is to verbally give their opinion.

The “When” (Protocol)

- Have focus groups **last between 45–90 minutes**.
- Have a **check-in halfway** through the focus group so that the group is aware of the remaining time.
- **Prioritize questions:** Ask the most important ones first, so that key questions are answered.
- **Keep the questions short** so that responses can be easily captured from a variety of people.
- **Keep the questions simple** so that they do not have to be explained or repeated.
- If needed, a “**Round Robin**” approach will allow people to go in turn. Those who respond will do so with the idea that they need to say something short in order to allow the next person to respond.

The “Who” (Sample Participants)

- **Participants:** A focus group brings together a relatively homogenous group of 6–12 individuals. Individuals are recruited and, when possible, given an incentive for their participation.

Criteria

- Review the purpose and objectives of the group when selecting participants so that they can provide answers that address these objectives.
- Get the **right people** in the room. Carefully select the potential candidates from a designated group in order to gather information.
- Make sure that the individuals in the **groups** are **similar**. If your group is too diverse, sufficient information may not be garnered to answer the questions.

REMINDER: Facilitators are important and should pay attention to group size, peer pressure as well as individual body language and interaction.

The General Focus Group

TIP: Using focus group data with other forms of data collection methods, such as qualitative surveys provides rich descriptions of processes, people, and a holistic picture of a program.

How to Conduct a Focus Group

Focus groups typically last between 45-90 minutes. The focus group goals and objectives are always clearly stated to the participants. The choice of a moderator is important because she/he should be a person who is able to facilitate the group well. The moderator usually prioritizes the questions, keeps them simple and facilitates the establishment of ground rules by the group.

Equipment for a Focus group

Tape recorders, and video recorders can be used, but before they are used, confidentiality statements should be read and signed. Additional equipment can include: audio tape, extra batteries, extension cord, power cord, laptop, paper, pens, markers, name tags, flip charts, paper and easels.

The Dos and Don'ts

DO	DON'T
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Set up a room with chairs in a circle, boardroom style, or U shape. Facilitators should sit with the group and not outside or away from the participants.▪ Have a flipchart or another visual with each question or series of questions on a separate sheet.▪ Review the purpose and objectives of the group when selecting participants so that they can provide answers that address these objectives. markers of different colors to emphasize different points.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Don't conduct a focus group without clear objectives and specific questions.▪ Don't allow non-participants to join the group.▪ Don't allow eating while the session is being conducted; it distracts from attention.

DO

- Have a note taker present to note highlights of the discussion.
- Have working markers of different colors to emphasize different points.
- Do know the participants' needs. If transportation or child/older adult care is needed, help the participants work through issues ahead of time.
- It may be convenient to bring along dependent(s) but this should be negotiated beforehand.
- Do explain to all that information is *confidential*.
- Do provide some type of incentive as a thank you for group participation.
- Do host the meeting at a facility that is convenient or known by most and large enough to accommodate all participants.

DON'T

- Don't allow people to **leave early**, if possible; it breaks the unity of the session.
- Don't **ask general questions**; the questions should be very specific and geared to obtaining information on a certain topic. You do not want your focus group to wander from topic to topic, as you're seeking in-depth feedback on the selected topic

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What is an Online Focus Group?

An online focus group is a way to collect qualitative research data via the web by connecting to a session from an internet website or social media networks. There is no in-person presence required.

TIP: Online focus groups are gaining in popularity. They differ from a chat room because the information is specific, targeted and used as qualitative data. One tip is to make sure that you use a reliable internet service that won't drop calls. This type of focus group should last no longer than 60 minutes.

Selecting Participants

Select 5-7 participants who are representative of the target population and who can provide answers to the questions that you may pose because of their background or experiences. Over invite participants since people often cancel.

How to Conduct an Online Focus Group

Before the Focus Group

- Send invites by phone, mail and/or email to participants weeks prior to the focus group.
- Share questions or discussion topics and ground rules in advance with supporting documentation. If you want participants to look at visuals, place them in a packet and mail, or email, with each item labeled and in the order that they will be used.
- A reminder should be sent to participants at least twice.

During the Focus Group

- Once a sufficient number of participants have joined the focus group, begin the focus group.
- Review ground rules.
- Remember to engage all participants on the online focus group.

Concluding the Focus Group

- Bring closure to the group by asking ending questions such as, "have all things been considered?" or "have we missed anything?"
- Thank the participants and remind them to complete their evaluations.

Equipment for Online Focus Group

Have continuous and unlimited access to the internet.

The Dos and Don'ts of an Online Focus Group

DO	DON'T
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Understand the format and usage of the modality before the actual session/meeting.▪ Confirm participation a week before the event.▪ Send reminders with the weblink, login, and password information.▪ Share questions or discussion topics in advance with supporting documentation.▪ Test the modalities format 48 hours before the actual session/meeting.▪ During the focus group, do allow ample time for participants' responses, but keep the conversation flowing.▪ Provide an evaluation for participants following the session.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Don't conduct a focus group without clear objectives and specific questions.▪ Don't allow people to leave early, if possible.▪ Don't ask general questions; the questions should be very specific and geared to obtaining information on a certain topic.▪ Don't confirm only once, participants need to be reminded regarding the upcoming meeting multiple times especially if unfamiliar with the format.▪ Don't use capitalized words and expressions. <i>It could be perceived as shouting.</i>▪ Don't allow a few participants to monopolize the discussion. Try to get answers from all.

What is a Telephonic Focus Group?

Telephonic focus groups are conducted via telephone. This type of focus group is a form of engagement is very similar to having a conference call except that the moderator is trained in telephonic focus group facilitation.

TIP: To record information during a telephonic focus group, ensure that participants are aware that they will be recorded and then work through your phone service or conference call provider to record the session. There are also devices which can be connected to a phone to record the session, but may require more technical knowledge. This form of focus group should last only 60 minutes.

Selecting Participants

Select 6-8 participants who have similar backgrounds and demographic characteristics of the study. Over invite participants since people often cancel.

How to conduct a Telephonic Focus Group

Before the Telephonic Focus Group

1. Send invitations by phone, mail or email to participants weeks prior to the focus group.
2. Share questions or discussion topics and ground rules in advance with supporting documentation. If you want participants to look at visuals, place them in a packet and mail or email out with each item labeled and in the order that they will be used.
3. A reminder should be sent to participants several times.

During the Focus Group

1. Once a sufficient number of participants have joined, the facilitator should begin the focus group.
2. Review ground rules.
3. Remember to engage all participants on the telephonic focus group.

Concluding the Focus Group

1. Bring closure to the group by asking questions such as, “have all things been considered?” or “have we missed anything?”
2. Thank the participants and remind them to complete the evaluations.

The Equipment for a Telephonic Focus Group: Telephonic focus groups work best using a landline or a web based platform. However, if you must use a cell-phone, check the battery life and connections to ensure that phone service can last throughout the call.

The Do's and Don'ts of a Telephonic Focus Group

DO	DON'T
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Understand the format and test the format 48 hours before the session.▪ Confirm participation of the focus group a week before the event.▪ Confirm with a letter of participation including login and pass-code information, if needed.▪ Share questions or discussion topics in advance with supporting documentation.▪ Follow the thread of the conversation carefully to understand the participants' opinions.▪ During the focus group, do allow ample time for participants responses, but keep the conversation flowing.▪ Provide an evaluation for participants following the session.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Don't conduct a focus group without clear objectives and specific questions.▪ Don't allow non-participants to join the group.▪ Don't allow people to leave early; if possible▪ Don't ask general questions; the questions should be very specific and geared to obtaining information on a certain topic.▪ Don't confirm only once, participants need to be reminded multiple times especially if unfamiliar with the format.▪ Don't send confirmations without a reasonable time frame.▪ Don't engage only a few <i>participants</i> on the call.

What is a Rapid Focus Group?

A rapid focus group is usually an in-person gathering of selected individuals to focus on a particular topic that requires urgent attention.

TIP: Only convene this type of focus group when it is absolutely necessary. It should be done when there is a need to gather data from key participants due to the urgency of the situation or topic. It should not last any longer than 60 minutes.

Selecting Participants

Select 6–12 participants who have a similar background and interest or experience with the topic at hand. Select representatives who can make decisions or those who can provide answers to the questions you may pose because of their background positions or experiences. In times of emergency, all rapid focus group members, who are available, usually attend since the group is convened because a situation may affect their work or lives.

How to Conduct a Rapid Focus Group

Select a convenient location and send out notices via the most expedient method, i.e., telephone and/or internet, that the focus group will be convened at a designated site and time. Usually the focus group is held on the same day or very soon after an event has occurred. A person should be assigned to take notes. The goal will be the crisis issue or topic at hand. The choice of a moderator is very important because s/he should be a skilled focus group facilitator. However, the questions are the most important part of a rapid focus group.

Question development

Questions should get to the heart of the matter quickly. They should center on the event or topic and address the whys, hows, whos, damage or outcomes and the next steps. The moderator should prioritize the questions and keeps them simple.

Equipment: If possible, have on hand: audio tape, extra batteries, extension cord, power cord, laptop, paper, pens, markers, name tags, flip charts, paper and easels.

The Do's and Don'ts of a Rapid Focus Group

DO	DON'T
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Convene for only 1 hour, at most.▪ Assemble key participants who can make decisions.▪ Address only the emergency at hand.▪ Allow time for participants' responses, but keep the conversation flowing.▪ Assign a note taker.▪ Have findings and reports, verbal and or written within 24 hours.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Don't convene unless it's an emergency▪ Don't bring in a transcriber▪ Don't engage participants who are not key to the issue at hand.▪ Don't wait for detailed analysis to submit a report.

Focus Group Resources

Face-to-Face vs. Telephonic vs. Online: <http://mnav.com/focus-group-center/online-focus-group-htm/>

FocusVision Worldwide, Inc. (2011). Research basics: Working with focus groups (white Paper). Retrieved from <http://www.greenbook.org/marketing-research.cfm/research-basics-working-with-focus-groups-03524>

Krueger's Summary of Telephonic Focus Groups:
http://www.tc.umn.edu/~rkrueger/focus_tfg.html

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Larson, K., Grudens-Schuck, N., & Allen, B. L. (May 2004). Can you call it a focus group? *Methodology brief*. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State. University Extension. Retrieved from <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/publications/pm1969a.pdf>
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