

RESEARCH METHOD

43 Focus Groups

The dynamic created by a small group of well-chosen people, when guided by a skilled moderator, can provide deep insight into themes, patterns, and trends.¹

Focus groups are a qualitative method often used by market researchers to gauge the opinions, feelings, and attitudes from a group of carefully recruited participants about a product, service, marketing campaign, or a brand.

The power of focus groups lies in the group dynamic that it creates. When properly recruited, and under the guidance of an experienced moderator, participants can quickly accept one another as peers. In a peer setting (where the fear of being judged is diminished), participants are more likely to share experiences, stories, memories, perceptions, wants/needs, and fantasies. A well-moderated focus group will leverage the nonthreatening group dynamic to get past generalizations and start to peel back what is valuable and important to the group, and what makes the group unique.

A good moderator can get everyone in the group to provide more insight regarding any of the following design-related inquiries:

- reviewing processes that take place over an extended period of time
- explanations of what is not desirable about the current state, or about common misunderstandings with other “personalities” who are tangential to the process
- uncovering the underlying emotions the participants feel while going through a given process (fear, uncertainty, frustration, anxiety)
- work-arounds and hacks participants have invented in order to get a process to work better
- learning how members establish social capital with one another
- understanding constructs and mental models shared by group members

When analyzing focus group data, revisit the logic that participants use to arrive at conclusions. Also, pay particular attention to stories they tell, the metaphors and analogies they use, and how they describe their experiences, preferences, and memories. By looking for recurring topics and themes that produced strong responses, you can analyze for trends.²

Based on these trends, a skilled moderator will be able to generate a hypothesis that will usually require more evaluation and inquiry. Focus groups should always be supplemented with well-chosen quantitative and qualitative methods that continue to investigate attitudes and behaviors, and allow you to observe people in the actual context for which your product or service will be used. Results from focus groups should never be extrapolated for how the population in its entirety feels.

1. Originally, “Focused Interviews” were used in the 1930s and 1940s by sociologist Robert Merton and other social scientists to evaluate soldiers’ reactions to World War II radio programs and training films. The term “Focus Group” emerged later, in 1956, around the same time when the method was adopted by marketing and advertising agencies.

2. Kuniavsky, Michael. *Observing the User Experience*. San Francisco, CA: Morgan Kaufmann, 2003.

Further Reading

Krueger, R. A., and Mary Anne Casey. *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*, 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008.

Morgan, David. *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996.

Behavioral
Attitudinal

Quantitative
Qualitative

Innovative
Adapted
Traditional

Exploratory
Generative
Evaluative

Participatory
Observational
Self reporting
Expert review
Design process



BIRD'S-EYE VIEW OF A FOCUS GROUP

A common setup for a focus group involves people sitting around a table, with name cards, and an unobtrusive microphone and camera recording the session. Oftentimes, there is a side room with flatscreens or a one-way mirror where observers and stakeholders can watch the session as it plays out. One of the

criticisms of focus groups is the sterile, formal environment in which the sessions often take place. It is important for researchers to be aware of the bias that the setting can introduce, and how it may influence the responses of the participants and, as a result, the analysis of the research data.

See also 31. Directed Storytelling • 52. Laddering • 83. Surveys