

## Focus group discussions

### Introduction

Focus groups are group discussions which are 'focused' on a single or narrow range of topics. They are widely used by professional market researchers as a mechanism for gathering customer views and market intelligence. They are often a more useful marketing tool than surveys and questionnaires, as they are more flexible than set questions and encourage group interaction. The information gathered will be qualitative (opinions, insights and personal responses) as opposed to quantitative (uniform facts). They provide an opportunity to gather and probe insights of participants.

Focus groups are commonly used by businesses to research new product or packaging approval; consumer habits and usage; customer attitudes (to corporate image, products etc); promotion evaluation (both pre and post event); new ideas and problem and needs identification. In our case, they will be used to gather views from business about the enabling environment and the narrower regulatory environment and to seek ideas for potential improvements to regulatory requirements.

A typical focus group session will last for 90 to 120 minutes, including a summing up session at the end. The ideal group will have 6-10 participants – too few and you will not get the interaction that adds value over individual interviews; too many and people will not be able to participate fully. Groups can either be held on a one-off basis or as part of continuing data collection. Groups can be held on a regular basis to record changing viewpoints and to re-evaluate a product or service after changes have been made. Focus groups are particularly useful for business membership organisations to keep in touch with the views of members as they are relatively inexpensive to carry out and allow direct contact.

Whilst focus groups are generally used to explore specific topics, such as the impact of regulation on business, they can also be used to provide feedback on survey questionnaires. In such cases, the objective is not to answer the questions set out in the questionnaire but rather to determine whether the language is simple and understandable, whether the answers for multiple choice questions covers the universe of possible answers, and whether respondents are likely to be able easily to answer the questions.

### Advantages of focus group discussions

Focus groups are a useful means of data collection:

- A large amount of information can be collected in a relatively short time. Information can come from a variety of perspectives and sources, covering a wide range of target audiences;
- They can be used for trouble shooting, or as a control – to iron out any initial problems or unforeseen issues before an operation is carried out on a more extensive scale;
- Groups can be used to complement other forms of research, eg surveys and questionnaires (either as a pre-cursor to a survey to understand the issues to explore further in the survey, or post-survey to explore issues that arose from the survey but which are more difficult to assess through the typical survey questionnaire) to ensure that the research is carried out in enough detail to be able to draw sensible conclusions;

- They are a more personal means of data collection, providing personal contact with members, consumers, clients or staff; and
- Qualitative data can rarely be used to forecast sales, but does give very current views and perspectives.

### Disadvantages of focus group discussions

Problems can occur when:

- The group dynamic, environment, etc is not quite right and participants feel inhibited. People often feel nervous when placed in an open discussion group and this may affect the result. When placed under perceived threat or pressure, people may try to articulate what they believe are the 'correct' answers or try to impress their peers by being over-opinionated. The facilitator needs to be alive to this and to endeavour to encourage people to be open and honest.
- Organising the focus group proves problematic. It can be difficult to arrange for enough people to give up their time to participate.
- Analysis of the data collected is time consuming. The ideal is to record the session and then transcribe. A good alternative is to ensure that there is someone available who can take detailed notes. These do not have to be verbatim, but they need to be comprehensive. It is important that the note taker does not attempt to interpret remarks but simply to record them. Information can be lost or taken out of context if not carefully recorded. The notes can be reviewed using 'thematic content analysis'. This is easy to do by hand for a small number of notes but good software is available if there is a large number of notes to analyse.

### Organising a focus group discussion

The key issues to consider are preparation, questions, recruitment and environment.

#### Preparation

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Information requirements must be identified and a list of objectives drawn up. It will be necessary to identify discussion topics and to then formulate set questions, ideally complete with possible probing questions to ask depending on the discussion. This will be especially applicable if more than one focus group is to be held in quick succession – to ensure consistency between the groups.

#### Recruitment of participants

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The success of the focus group(s) will be dependent on successful recruitment of participants. Selection may depend on the product or service. Participants can be a targeted audience, members or clients or customers (either prospective or existing), a random selection or members of staff. Establishing a group dynamic can be problematic. In a mixed group, women will often concede to men so the facilitator needs to be alive to this possibility and minimise it. You need to consider whether to have a number of groups each of people with similar backgrounds or groups of people with diverse backgrounds. Conversation is more likely to occur between like-minded people but may not lead to the debate required to secure real insights. The size of the group will be important, smaller groups can be more easily focused and information is easier to assimilate. The smaller the group, the larger the percentage of time available for each person to contribute; a broader perspective will be gained if more people take part. A small group of people could run into difficulties if several invitees decide not to show up. To ensure attendance, participants should be informed well in advance of the date, time and location. Send them a reminder closer to the date. This can encourage them to come.



## **Planning the session**

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Pre-set questions are essential to allow the moderator to keep the discussion focused and to keep the session within the time limit. Questions should be open-ended to avoid 'yes or no' responses. Beginning a question with 'Why?' will often result in a presumed response, while asking 'How?' or 'What?' often provokes a more detailed and spontaneous response. You also need to be careful not to ask leading questions. For example, 'What do you think of this service?' will give a more personal response than asking 'Why do you think this service is popular?' A good technique in focus group discussions is to ask what participants think people in general would do in a particular situation. This takes the attention away from the individual, allowing them to give a hypothetical but truthful response. Questions should be limited to no more than ten and ideally rather fewer, and should follow the rules of a natural conversation, ranging from broad to narrow subject matter.

A preliminary questionnaire can be a good way of identifying both possible participants and questions. Questionnaire results can be a useful point of interest and can be used to initialise group conversation. Other stimuli can be useful such as an advert, video, product, etc. As with questionnaires, it is a good idea to pilot the focus group questions and then to review. This will be especially useful for spotting contradictory or repeated questions. Moderators must be comfortable and familiar with the questions and be ready, if necessary, to clarify their meaning in a group situation.

## **Environment**

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The environment should be conducive to conversation and the exchange of ideas and observations. Group conversation will only occur if people are feeling comfortable. A successful outcome can often depend on simple things such as temperature, noise levels and comfortable seating. Timing and location are often important. Evening focus group sessions are popular in the UK, with groups often held between 6 and 8 o'clock. Location can be either neutral to avoid negative associations, or familiar to encourage instant feelings of relaxation and informality. Starting a session off with refreshments can be a useful way of relaxing participants and encouraging initial small talk.

## **Costs**

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Businesses should budget for any form of market research and decisions regarding cost will need to be considered early on. The cost of a focus group will depend on the choice of participants and whether an incentive is required to encourage participation. If payment is not offered, a hidden cost may be the non-attendance of participants, leading to cancellation. Other costs may include the hire of a suitable room, employing an external moderator, tape recording equipment and transcription costs. If the budget does not run to an external moderator, does a member of staff fit the required criteria and how should they be rewarded for their time?

## **Moderation**

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The main role of the moderator (or facilitator) is to maintain the focus of the group. Although the session should appear to be unstructured to participants, the moderator needs to direct the discussion to gather the information required. They will also be expected to introduce and explain the purpose of the group without influencing the results. Ideally the moderator will have a thorough understanding of the topic being discussed and will be able to answer any questions which arise. However, it is also important for them to be completely unbiased and open to information, allowing participants to express their views freely. An in-depth knowledge of the objectives and desired results of data collection are essential, so moderators should be involved in every stage of preparation.

As part of the introduction, the moderator will need to reassure participants of the confidentiality of responses and make participants feel comfortable enough to converse with each other. Trust must be established at the very beginning. To do this, the moderator will need to be personable enough to empathise with each member of the group in a very short time span. Throughout the discussion, they will need to remain neutral and avoid favouritism, giving their personal opinions, or criticising individual answers. The conversation must be kept flowing, ensuring that everyone has their say and single speakers must not be allowed to dominate. One to one discussion between the moderator and group members should be avoided.

Moderators can be hired either internally or externally. Internal moderators can occasionally be too close to the subject, but are often in a better position to answer queries and may also pick up on problems which an external moderator may overlook. However, a trained external moderator may obtain the best results, as people skills will rate above product knowledge. Moderators will need excellent interpersonal, communication and listening skills, a good memory, and be organised, sympathetic, energetic, intelligent, observant and firm. They should also be a clear and precise speaker. A good moderator will ask questions in a natural progression, and limit their contribution to the introduction, occasional prompting and the summing up session. A summary of the topics discussed will give participants a further chance to air their views. Summing up sessions can also be used to elaborate on topics raised but not pursued at the time.

### **Collating and analysing results**

It is important not to prejudge conclusions, but simply to interpret data, even when outcomes are surprising. For this reason, recording sessions can be invaluable. Results are conclusive and not as open to interpretation when recorded. However, some participants may feel uncomfortable when sessions are recorded and may be less open than they would otherwise be. Moreover, transcribing discussions can be quite time consuming. A good alternative, therefore, is to have someone, who is not a participant and not the moderator, take detailed notes, ideally including at least some verbatim quotations where participants say something that is particularly interesting or insightful or makes a comment which seems to sum up a group view. Even if the session is being recorded, you should still arrange for someone to take notes, which may help later in interpreting the meaning of words from a recording or in case the recording fails.

If the discussion is to be recorded, the moderator should inform the group, without making them overly conscious of the recorder's presence. It is important for transcribers to avoid editing transcripts and to ensure that any spontaneous comments and insights are retained.

Interruptions should be kept to a minimum. Introducing new people into a group that has already started is likely to be disruptive to the group dynamic and should be avoided. It is important that the moderator listens carefully to what is being said by the participants in order to interpret their views accurately. For this reason, it is unusual for the moderator to take anything more than brief notes during the session as this can distract them.

It is common for moderators to produce a short report, complete with selected direct quotes which illustrate the direction of overall group thought and any interpretations the moderator has made.

### **Hints and tips**

- The number of questions in one session should be limited to keep results focused.
- It is essential to avoid hinting at the required responses, or using leading questions to influence answers.



- Physical details can influence results, for example, providing comfortable seating and avoiding interruptions. Providing refreshments in order to relax participants may also be worthwhile.
- Groups should be conducted in out of work hours where possible, as this gives a more relaxed atmosphere to proceedings.
- As with other forms of qualitative data, attendees may give quite varied responses to questions. Alternatively, a group of like-minded people may give similar responses. For a wider representative perspective, groups with more diverse participants or perhaps other forms of data collection should be used.
- A contingency plan should be made to allow for any no-show participant or late arrivals.
- If more than one group is to be held, it is important to ensure that the environment, moderator and questions asked are as consistent as possible. However, each group dynamic and chemistry will be different for each group, so comparison between sessions can be limited.



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