A brief guide to 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 are 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 the small business as they are relatively inexpensive to carry out and allow direct contact with customers.

Advantages of Focus Groups

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, in order to ensure that the research is thoroughly carried out;
- They are a more personal means of data collection, providing personal contact with consumers, clients or staff;
- Qualitative data can rarely be used to forecast sales, but does give very current views and perspectives;

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Disadvantages of Focus Groups

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 give 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 a number of 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. An 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 they 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.

Organising a focus group

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

Preparation

Information requirements must be identified and a list of objectives drawn up. It will be necessary to identify discussion topics and to then formulate a number of set questions. 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

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, clients/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 in. Groups often consist of people with similar backgrounds, as conversation is more likely to occur between like-minded people. 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 a few decide not to show up. In order to ensure attendance, participants should be informed of the date, time and location on more than one occasion. This can encourage them to come.

Planning the session

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. 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 popular focus group device is to ask what participants think people 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 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 questions, in order to clarify their meaning in a group situation.

Environment

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

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

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 in order 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 a tape recorder can be invaluable. Results are conclusive and not as open to interpretation when recorded on audio or video tape. 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 can also be helpful, however, for a researcher to take notes as this may help later in interpreting the meaning of words from the tape if the session is audio recorded or it may be the only record of the discussion.

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

If the only record of the session is written notes, then the researcher should aim to quote some people directly, especially where they seem to be making insightful comments, or else making comments which seem to sum up a group view.

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. A full transcript could also be provided, but the spontaneous nature of group discussion could make this time consuming.

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, 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.