

Using focus groups to collect helpful information

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WHY SHOULD YOU BOTHER TO DO FOCUS GROUPS?

- ✓ To get to know your target population better so that you can develop useful and appropriate resources, programs, surveys, etc.

INFORMATION GATHERING: Using a focus group interview can help you:

- Assess perceived needs and barriers; identify limitations of your target group,
- Obtain opinions about, or evaluate interest in, a health issue, and
- Close the gap between how things are and how they should/could be.

CHECKING INFORMATION: To clarify or help you understand info/data you already have.

- Help you interpret and understand information you already have (like from previous data collection, but don't understand or that you need to clarify).
- Give you feedback on your "draft" plans, materials, data collection procedures, etc.

HELP YOU DEVELOP BETTER strategies, messages, materials, methods and evaluations.

- Check terminology/language used (Do people interpret it the way you mean it? Is it "dated"? Can they read it?).
- Check formatting (Is it boring? Too long? Too wordy? How about the graphics?).
- Give you input on messages, lessons, planned activities/events, strategies, and methodology BEFORE you move ahead.

A focus group interview should not be used:

- If there is a better/easier way to collect the same information.
- When you need input from many people.
- As an educational session (you are there to learn, not teach).
- If the topic is too emotional/sensitive.
- If you are not really open to input or can not really use their input.

Forming the Group

Should people be alike or different?

- ✓ Alike in ways that relate to your topic/goal.
- ✓ Different within that sub-group (diversity within a homogeneous group!).
- ✓ Consider differences that might affect participation/responses (e.g. gender).

How many people? How many groups?

- Recommendation = 8 to 12 people; reality = whatever you can get; whatever works.
- Conduct groups until questions are answered and no new information emerges.
- Use a "close-down" interview to help you make "final" decisions.

How do I recruit? (Is it OK to beg? Bribe?)

- Offer incentives that are meaningful (not just what you have handy to give away).
- Convey importance of the interview and how results will be used (give examples).
- Tack your group onto another activity or include in an existing meeting.
- Use a convenient location; offer transportation and child care; send reminders.

The Interview Session

How should the room/environment be set up?

- You need to have eye contact with everyone (1/2 circle, horseshoe).
- Control temperature, noise level, distractions and interruptions.
- Use name tags.
- Provide a healthy snack and beverage.

Should I take notes...or tape record?

- The interviewer should not take notes; h or she needs to focus on questions, responses and expressions. Use one or two experienced note takers.
- Tape recording is handy to re-check your notes but can cause anxiety for participants.
- Note multiple agreement or disagreement (in your notes) and whether there are differences by gender, age, or other demographic characteristics.

How do I start?

- Thank and welcome them, introduce self and the note taker, describe the purpose.
- Say how results will be used...who they will benefit (give specific examples).
- Discuss ground rules, confidentiality and ask if they have questions.

What should I ask? Is there a "right" order for questions?

- Prepare questions ahead, but be flexible; move from general to specific questions.
- Use open-ended questions when you are seeking general/preliminary input.
- Close down the questions when you need more specific information.
- Do not show approval or disapproval of any response. Control bias!
- Consider use of a survey in conjunction with the interview to gain input from everyone.
- If you need group consensus, take a vote or summarize your "take" and ask for input.

How do I get people to talk? To stop talking?

- Ask non-talkers what they think; use round robin if you need input from everyone but allow people to "pass" if they choose.
- If no one responds...repeat or reword your question. Use probes. Ask for examples.
- For chatters, ask them to explain this to you later; protect the talking rights of the group. For ramblers ask, "What is the most important part of everything you just said"?

What do I do with my notes?

- Do not embellish or make them more right or consistent with what you wanted/expected.
- List all comments but indicate multiple agreement; summarize soon so you don't forget.

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