



## Focus Groups.

Focus groups and group discussions may be used to gather research information on a predetermined topic or to check information gathered from other sources. Whilst this method is similar to interviews it may need even more skill from the researcher. In essence focus groups are a kind of group interview. The Focus Group can be a quicker means of determining views and allows others in a group to test or build upon them.

The researcher needs to create a relaxed atmosphere and record what is being said. It may be better to split this into two roles to make it more manageable. The focus group begins with the researcher introducing the purpose of the discussion and ground-rules that will be followed. Here is where free discussion should be encouraged but clarify that interventions will be made to ensure ground rules are maintained and that all participants are given time to speak. Focus groups can be useful as an initial way to help the researcher to identify issues and for questionnaire design or in developing an interview strategy. Focus groups can also be useful to test and support findings from other research data.

Originally, Focus groups were used in marketing to discuss customer views of products and services. They have also been used in television to assess programmes and in advertising to test the quality and impact of ad. campaigns. Focus groups also lend themselves well to community projects and issues as they can 'empower' people to become active and develop their views as a consequence of hearing people who have had similar experiences. The focus group may also give individual's a feeling of being listened to and of hope that their issues and needs may be addressed.

### **Advantages**

- Focus groups enable people to test, explore and clarify their views in ways that are not available in an interview. The group may also question the views of outliers in ways a researcher cannot.
- Discussions in focus groups may take the research in new and unexpected directions that the researcher may not have been aware of.
- Focus groups also allow researchers to view how people interact everyday joking, telling stories, arguing, disagreeing and using jargon. This provides an additional data collection opportunity such as an understanding of culture and social norms and processes.
- Focus groups may also allow for certain topics to be raised and discussed that may be too sensitive for interviews. More vocal group members may break down barriers to taboo subjects that allows those who are more reticent to speak up.
- Focus groups can sometimes allow more critical comments to be made as participants have strength in numbers and feel more confident in raising issues collectively.

### **Disadvantages**

- Focus groups can sometimes silence those with different views or dissenting voices due to group norms.



- Focus groups do not offer the same levels of confidentiality and anonymity and some participants may fear reprisals once the focus group is over.
- Focus groups can get out of hand with the group heading off on a tangent, turning into a moaning and whinging session or one or two people doing all the talking and stealing the 'airtime'.

## Running a focus group

### *Forming groups*

Participants need to be selected as a representative sample of the wider research population. This means covering ethnicity, class, age, gender and other demographic variables.

Homogeneity within a focus group may be important to enable people to feel confident to air their views and draw upon similar life experiences. This does not exclude others, as they will be invited to a group which shares their characteristics. However, it is important not to have any variation in hierarchy such as an employee and their boss as this can cause power relations issues. Alternatively, groups that occur naturally or are selected at random might be used.

Regardless of how a group is constructed the researcher needs to encourage group members to engage with one another and in a respectful manner, formulate ideas and collective views together, and draw out themes, generic issues and needs.

### *Focus group sessions*

Focus groups need to be comfortable and as relaxed as possible. Usually between 4 and 8 people sit around in a circle. The researcher begins by explaining the purpose of the session and ask them to talk to each other.

Initially, the researcher should let the conversation evolve and take a back seat to encourage interaction. As the discussion develops the researcher can then start to intervene in order to get debates to go deeper and to explore differences between group members opinions and experiences.

Using flip charts to capture ideas and views is an open way of taking notes and sharing them with the group. The flip chart also allows the researcher some level of control in that they can stop the conversation and take the group back to a specific point or idea.

Asking open questions such as what do you think, what do you feel, how might that be achieved etc. encourages conversation to develop and evolve.

Ideally the group discussions should be tape recorded and transcribed. If this is not possible then it is vital to take careful notes and researchers may find it useful to involve the group in recording key issues on a flip chart.



At the end of the focus group, it is a good idea to have a brief review questionnaire for participants to feedback how they feel the process went and whether there is anything else they would like to add or develop. Participants can also be asked if they would like a one to one follow up conversation to discuss things.

### Analysis

Analysing focus groups involves drawing out themes and generic ideas and looking for trends and variances across groups. Variance may also be important in identifying minority group opinions and needs.

If quotes are used in the research data they should be anonymised to ensure that others are not able to attribute the comments to a specific person.

Some of the data may also give a wider insight into the culture, behaviour and norms of a group or community. For example, a small community may give indication that it does not like outsiders to run services or it might be very welcoming of new people and ideas.

Whilst focus groups may appear to be a quick and easy option to set up, they involve a great deal of interpersonal awareness, skill and concentration on the part of the researcher. The outcome of several focus groups can be large amounts of research data that can prove to be unwieldy and complex in nature. However, done well this form of research can be very rewarding and may empower others to get involved with or champion your project.

### Activity



Consider whether using Focus Groups will help your social enterprise.

### Other related information

SEDG Resource – Developing Your Marketing Strategy

SEDG Resource - Understanding Your Market

SEDG Resource - Developing Digital Capabilities

SEDG Resource – Undertaking Market Research

SEDG Resource – Questionnaires and Surveys

### Need help?

You can contact at us and arrange a call at: [sedg@tsdg.co.uk](mailto:sedg@tsdg.co.uk)