

Attributes of Focus Groups

Focus groups are group discussions conducted in person with a limited number of stakeholders, to gain information about their views and experiences about a topic. Focus group interviewing is particularly suited for obtaining several perspectives about the same topic. A focus group can be highly useful for planning a needs assessment because you can learn a great deal about attitudes and beliefs. It is also a useful method to gather detailed information as follow-up to a survey. The focus group, however, is less useful as a primary tool for needs assessment compared to more structured interviews and surveys.

Focus groups are a form of group interviewing with important distinctions. Group interviewing involves interviewing a number of people at the same time, the emphasis being on questions and responses between the researcher and participants. Focus groups are distinctive because they rely on interaction within the group based on topics that are supplied by the researcher.¹ Hence, the key characteristic which distinguishes focus groups is the insight and data produced by the interaction between participants.

The *purpose* of focus groups, then, is to promote disclosure among participants. It is important to allow individuals to express their perceptions, attitudes, and points of view about a specific topic in a friendly, relaxed, and comfortable atmosphere. Focus groups allow comments, explanations and shared experiences.

Focus groups are useful tools to gather detailed information about a narrowly defined area of interest. Focus groups are indicated when the goals for your inquiry include:

1. To gain information from a selected group of individuals about their views and experiences of a topic; the use of open-ended questions allows individuals to respond according to their own experiences and interests.
2. To gain insights into people's shared understandings, rather than individual thoughts and interests;
3. Insight and data produced by the interaction between participants; including new ideas and perspectives drawn out because of the interaction among participants.
4. Gathering of qualitative data, where use of statistics is not needed to verify confidence.
5. Building relationships or buy-in from stakeholders.

Focus groups are suited to analysis of a group view, but are problematic when the goal is to identify knowledge or experiences based on the individual. Logistics for focus groups may be challenging, and the personalities of both the participants and the moderator introduce variability. The role of the moderator is especially significant. Strong group leadership and interpersonal skills are required to moderate a group successfully, but the moderator must exercise discipline to keep from swaying the discussion. Moderator training is available and trained moderators/facilitators are highly recommended.

Advantages of focus groups include:

1. Relatively easy to set up.
2. The actual data collection step is fast and relatively inexpensive.
3. Can bring project personnel and beneficiaries together.
4. Stimulates dialogue and new ideas.
5. Generates ideas for evaluation questions to be included in other survey methods.
6. Socially oriented "synergism" (people respond in natural situations).
7. Format allows the moderator to probe (flexible).
8. High face validity (credible questions result in easily understood quotes and comments).
9. Good public relations activities.

Disadvantages of focus groups include:

1. The format is easily misused; purposes must be consistent with the attributes of the method.
2. Requires special moderator skills; moderator has less control over the group and the direction of the discussion than for a group interview; groups are highly variable, some are talkative, others not.
3. Data interpretation is tedious and there are risks with lifting comments out of context.
4. Not suitable for generating detailed information.
5. Avoiding bias can be difficult, both in the conduct of the group and in data interpretation.
6. Capturing major issues can be difficult.

7. Results cannot be generalized to apply to the entire target population.
8. Work to identify, prepare, and assemble participants can be time consuming.
9. Requires an environment that is conducive to conversation and candor.
10. Cannot be used to resolve conflicts or generate consensus.

ⁱ Morgan D.L. 1997. Focus groups as qualitative research, 2nd Ed. Sage Publications. London.