Planning the Focus Group Study

Planning is a task that helps the researcher, the research team, and the client or sponsor of the study. It ensures that everyone on the team is aware of the purpose of the study, that the expected outcomes of the study are identified and that the study design matches the available resources.

Successful planning requires that we commit our thoughts to paper and invite others to provide feedback. It forces us to go beyond our own thinking and seek the insights of colleagues. Successful planning keeps promises reasonable, timelines efficient but doable, and budgets balanced. Think of the plan as an investment that is intended to prevent costly mistakes.

Determining the Purpose

Planning is crucial, but sometimes people quickly skip over it. In fact, people often begin focus group studies by drafting questions. It is better to back up, think about your purpose and ask some fundamental questions.

Planning begins by being clear about the purpose of the study. At times the request for the study might originate from someone relatively unfamiliar with focus group interviews. For example, a director of an educational organization might want to find out how to reach new clientele; a curriculum coordinator might want to test ideas for new programs; or a coordinator of county human services may want to get residents’ perceptions of the organization. When the idea or request for a study is handed to a research unit, the researchers often need more information on the nature of the problem, what information is being requested and how the information will be used. Failure to clarify the problem can result in a study that misses the mark.

We begin planning by meeting with the person requesting the study, and we encourage this person to bring along several colleagues. Typically the meeting involves people who will be on the research team and people who will be
responsible for doing something with the results. This meeting usually includes two to seven people. We begin by having the people in the meeting discuss questions like:

- What is the problem that the study is to address?
- What led up to the decision to do this study?
- What is the purpose of the study?
- What kinds of information do you want?
- What types of information are of particular importance?
- Who wants the information? (Or, who do you want to give the information to?)
- How will you use the information? (Or, what do you want others to do with the information?)
- Are there any ethical, legal, economic or social considerations that lead researchers to favor one research procedure over another?

The goal is for us to clearly understand what the client wants and to make sure the people requesting the study agree on the nature of the problem and the types of information needed to address the problem. Sometimes we work on projects where the decision makers are extremely clear about what they want, why they want it, and what they intend to do with it. These meetings are straightforward. Other times the meetings are messier, and it takes more effort to arrive at agreement on the purpose of the study. This happens when the people requesting the study have different visions of the purpose of the study, the kind of information they want, and what they intend to do with the information. This is particularly true when working on community issues. For example, after several fatal drinking and driving accidents a group of community members came together to do something about “the problem.” But people didn’t agree on what the problem was. Was it drinking? Or was it drinking and driving? Some people thought the purpose of the study was to get information to help design programs to decrease teenage drinking and driving, while others felt the purpose should be to design programs to decrease teenage drinking. These different purposes would take the study in different directions. If the decision makers aren’t in agreement about the purpose of the study, someone is going to be disappointed with the results.

It may be beneficial to ask why the information is needed in several different ways. For example, “Tell me about the background of the proposed study.” “What prompted you to consider the study?” “Who is interested in the study results?” “What do you want those individuals to do with the study results?” This pattern of questioning lets the researcher get a better picture of the information needs of intended users and thereby keep the study on target. It can also help highlight differences and similarities in people’s thinking about the study. Sometimes part of the researcher’s role is to help people see differences in their thinking about
the project and come to agreement. Hidden agendas, organizational politics, and fuzzy thinking are obstacles to achieving agreement.

Two challenges regularly occur in the public and nonprofit environments. Watch for them. First, don’t be surprised if the sponsor is unclear or fuzzy about what they want, especially in exploratory studies. It sometimes takes time and several meetings to clarify the purpose. Second, the sponsor may have exaggerated expectations of what can reasonably be delivered.

Deciding Whether Focus Group Interviewing Is the Right Method

Once you determine the purpose of the study, you can begin thinking about what methods to use. People come to us and say they want to do focus groups. After talking with them about the purpose of their study and the resources they have, we sometimes recommend that they use another method of data collection that is better suited for their situation. Just because someone wants to do focus groups doesn’t mean it’s a good idea.

Before launching a focus group study, it may be helpful to think about when focus groups work well and when they don’t.

When to Use Focus Group Interviews

Focus group interviews should be considered when:

- You are looking for the range of ideas or feelings that people have about something.
- You are trying to understand differences in perspectives between groups or categories of people. People in decision-making positions may see a situation or issue differently than those who are not. Professional people (medical, educational, scientific, technical, business, legal) can lose touch with the very people they are trying to serve. And top management often sees issues differently than front-line providers. These differences can cause major problems, particularly when they aren’t recognized and understood.
- The purpose is to uncover factors that influence opinions, behavior or motivation. Focus groups can provide insight into complicated topics when opinions or attitudes are conditional or when the area of concern relates to multifaceted behavior or motivation. Under what conditions would a health care provider admit a mistake? What factors influence a new mom’s willingness to have a home visit from a public health nurse? What makes a successful smoking cessation program?
- You want ideas to emerge from the group. A group possesses the capability to become more than the sum of its parts, to exhibit a synergy that individuals alone don’t possess.
Focus groups provide researchers with valuable insights into conducting complicated quantitative investigations. What words do people use to talk about this issue? What do they see as the range of options for answering a question?

The researcher needs information to help shed light on quantitative data already collected. Annual measures show employee satisfaction to be decreasing. What do employees attribute these changes to?

The clients or intended audience places high value on capturing the comments or language used by the target audience.

**When Not to Use Focus Group Interviews**

Focus group interviews should *not* be considered when:

- You want people to come to consensus.
- You want to educate people.
- You don’t intend to use the results but instead want to give the appearance of listening.
- You are asking for sensitive information that should not be shared in a group or could be harmful to someone if it is shared in a group.
- You need statistical projections. Findings from a focus group study can’t be used to make statistical projections. There aren’t enough participants involved, and sampling isn’t done in a way to support projections.
- The environment is emotionally charged, and a group discussion is likely to intensify the conflict. This is likely to occur in situations where the people are polarized on an issue, trust has deteriorated and the participants are confrontational.
- The researcher will not have control over critical aspects of the study. When control is relinquished to other individuals or groups, the study may be prone to manipulation and bias. The researcher should monitor such critical aspects as participant selection, question development, and analysis protocol. This will be a constant challenge when conducting focus groups in a participatory mode within communities. For more discussion, see *Involving Community Members in Focus Groups* (Krueger & King, 1998).
- Other methodologies can produce better-quality information.
- Other methodologies can produce the same quality information more economically.
- You can’t ensure the confidentiality of sensitive information.
Determining What Types of People Can Give You the Information You Want

Another part of planning is figuring out what types of people could give you the information you want. At this point we aren’t thinking of names of individuals, we are thinking of what characteristics the people should have. For example, suppose a college is interested in attracting students. On the surface this might appear straightforward: just talk to students. But it may be more complex. Are decision makers interested in current students, students who have tried the programs and left, potential students, parents of students or employers who hire their students? Are the perceptions of students with certain demographic characteristics more critical than others for this study? A precise definition of what type of student they are trying to attract is essential to get the needed information.

It sometimes helps to think of this as identifying the “information-rich” cases. Patton (2002) describes these information-rich cases as “those from which one can learn a great deal about the issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (p. 46). The question the researcher asks is, “Who has the greatest amount of insight on this topic?” In the previous example, potential customers—perhaps people who requested information but never enrolled—may not know many specifics about attending the college. However, they would be rich with information about their perceptions of the college, what keeps them from enrolling, or what might get them to enroll.

In some studies there are several different types of people who can give you information from different perspectives. For example, a public health agency and a school were working together to figure out what it would take to get elementary school children to eat more fruits and vegetables while at school. They conducted focus groups with parents, teachers, food service workers, and second and fourth grade students. Each type of participant was able to give a different view of the problem and offer potential solutions.

Determining How Many Groups to Conduct

The accepted rule of thumb is to plan three or four focus groups with each type or category of individual. Once you have conducted these first three or four groups, determine if you have reached saturation. Saturation is a term used to describe the point where you have heard the range of ideas and aren’t getting new information. If after three or four groups you were still getting new information, you would conduct more groups. The reason you plan three to four groups is that focus groups are analyzed across groups. The analyst looks for patterns and themes across groups.

If you want to be able to compare and contrast how certain types of people talk about an issue, you must separate these people into different groups. For example, if we wanted to know how men’s and women’s opinions are similar or different on a certain issue, we would conduct three groups with men and three
groups with women. That way we can analyze across the men's groups, analyze across the women's groups and then compare and contrast the findings. If we mixed men and women in the same groups, it would be much more difficult to analyze based on gender.

If you want to ask slightly different questions of different types of people, divide them into different groups. For example, a university wanted to evaluate a model of public engagement. It wanted feedback from faculty, community board members and grant recipients who often worked together and were comfortable with one another. However, administrators wanted to ask slightly different questions of these different types of participants. So, faculty, community board members, and grant recipients were divided into different groups.

Sometimes we divide groups based on certain characteristics just to create a more comfortable environment for participants to share. For example, in a study examining barriers to colorectal cancer screening, we divided men and women into different groups because people would be more comfortable discussing the topic with others of the same gender.

If we believe different types of participants have strong but conflicting opinions on the topic, we may conduct a study in two stages: an early stage in which different types of participants are separated, and a later stage where they are brought together. For example, a state was getting complaints from different users of its recreational paths; some users felt others were not being respectful. So initially, hikers, bikers, and horseback riders were divided into separate groups so researchers could hear different perspectives and limit confrontation. Based on what they learned in the early focus groups, they developed plans to address the problems. They then mixed groups of hikers, bikers, and horseback riders to get their reactions to the new plans related to mixed-use trails.

Also, when planning groups we avoid mixing people who may feel they have different levels of expertise or power related to the issue. We want to create an environment where all participants feel comfortable saying what they think or feel. If there is a power differential, some participants may be reluctant to talk. When structuring groups, we probably wouldn’t include supervisors and their employees in the same group. We probably wouldn’t include teachers and students or teachers and parents in the same groups. We probably wouldn’t mix seventh grade boys with eleventh grade boys. We are saying probably because our experience tells us that in most cases it isn’t a good idea, but we wouldn’t say that we would never do these things. Again, the study and situation would dictate what we would do.

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**Market researchers use terms like screens and screeners**

In the environment of market research the word screen is used to identify the factors used to select participants in a focus group. A screener is a set of questions in a script form that is used either in-person or over the telephone to select participants. The challenge is to use just a few questions and to complete the process quickly. For example, the screener survey might use either open-ended or closed-ended questions that seek to identify a mother:

- Who works outside the home at least 20 hours per week
- Who lives in an identified geographic area
- Who has a child who wears disposable diapers
- Who has a family income of over $40,000

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You can see that the number of groups could grow rapidly. Recently a state agency was interested in finding out how people with diabetes from different communities of color felt about their diabetes, how they coped with the disease, and what they thought their health care providers could do to help them stay healthy. The agency conducted 16 groups—four focus groups with each of the following types of people: African Americans, American Indians, Hispanics, and Southeast Asians. This decision came after considerable discussion about the pros and cons of additional subdivisions, such as urban versus rural, age, gender and fluency in English. Each decision influenced resources needed, the timeline required and the skills needed by the research team.

Nonprofit and service organizations typically have three categories of people who are especially important to listen to: advisory groups, employees and clients. Each of these can be subdivided into additional categories. These organizations often conduct focus groups with clients to find out how to design new programs or services, but they forget to ask front-line employees for their input about what it will take to make the program or service work.

Balancing the Design With the Resources Available

One of the challenges in conducting focus group research is to balance what you ideally might like to do or are asked to do with the realities of time and budget. In some studies this decision is straightforward because the budget and timeline are fixed and the challenge is to produce the best study within these constraints. It gets complicated when the sponsor isn’t clear about the budget or timeline.

A planning strategy that we recommend is to develop a preliminary plan that fits the best estimates of existing resources and then to offer incremental additions that enhance the study, plus estimates of additional costs and time needed for those additions. For example, suppose you were asked to submit a proposal to examine factors that influence upper-elementary students to eat healthy lunches in the school cafeteria. Those who requested the proposal asked for focus groups with children. After some reflection, you believe the study would be stronger if additional focus groups were conducted with others. You prepare a proposal that presents the cost of the study that was requested, and attach a rationale for and additional costs of conducting focus groups with parents, or teachers or others who might have insight into the behavior.
Planning is a balancing act between what would be nice to do and what is doable with the resources at hand. Resources include the time available for the project, the financial resources available, and the talent and creativity of people on the study team. If resources are limited (short timeline, limited dollars or few staff or volunteers who can work on the project), then fewer groups can be conducted. Usually we are working with not-for-profit groups where financial resources are limited. In contrast, just because resources are plentiful doesn't mean one should conduct more groups. We have heard of organizations that have conducted 60, 70 or 80 focus groups on one topic using the same questions. In our opinion, that's a waste of time and money. Seldom do we conduct more than 30 groups on a topic, even for national studies.

Think about what is an appropriate amount of resources to spend on a project. Try to fit the resources to the decision being made. One can usually conduct fewer groups when there is little risk to making the decision, such as whether to change the format of your newsletter. The decision to change the newsletter is easily reversible, people won't be seriously affected by the change, and it doesn't involve big expenditures. If the decision involves a great deal of risk, one would increase the number of focus groups and consider enhancing the study with quantitative data.

Often we decide how many groups can be conducted with the resources available, and then decide how we should configure the groups. If we have the resources to conduct 10 groups, how many different types of participants should we listen to? How many groups should we conduct with each type of participant? What configuration will give us the most useful information?

Here is an example. In the study designed to find out how to get kids to eat more fruits and vegetables while at school, there were enough resources to conduct 12 groups at the pilot elementary school. The planners decided it was most important to listen to the kids because they had the most information about what it would take to get them to eat more fruits and vegetables. They decided to conduct three groups with second graders and three groups with fourth graders. They also knew input from food service workers was crucial to making changes. There were only a handful of food service workers in the school, so they could all participate in one group. The researchers also wanted to hear from teachers and parents. They decided to conduct two groups with teachers and three groups with parents.

Expect to struggle with the design a bit. It takes time to figure out how to configure the groups.
Designing the Focus Group Study

**Single-Category Design**

The ideal design for a focus group study is to conduct focus groups until you have reached the point of theoretical saturation—the point where you are not gaining new insights. The number of groups needed to reach saturation can vary, but usually the researcher will plan for three or four focus groups with a particular type of participant and decide if adequate saturation has been reached or if additional groups should be conducted.

Although theoretical saturation is a great concept and useful in academic work, as a consultant you won’t land many contracts if you say you plan to conduct groups until you reach theoretical saturation. Clients want to know how many groups are needed, how long the study will take, and how much it will cost. Few clients will give you a blank check to conduct as many groups as needed until saturation is achieved. Therefore, we typically plan at least three or four groups for the most important groups we want to listen to. Veteran focus group researchers have discovered that after three or four groups they have a much clearer idea if and when saturation might occur.

**Example of Single-Category Design**

Let’s say you wanted to use focus groups to evaluate a leadership development program for youth. You decide the information-rich people are youth who have completed the program in the past two years. You don’t want to compare or contrast based on any other features. So you use a single-category design (see Figure 2.1). You conduct three or four groups with youth who completed the program in the past two years and determine if saturation is achieved. If saturation is achieved, then the study is completed and reports are prepared. However, if critical new information is being obtained after the third or fourth group, the researcher will need to decide if additional groups should be held or if the report should indicate that saturation was not achieved. Perhaps it is enough to know that people hold widely different views on the topic.

**Figure 2.1 Single-Category Design**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Participant</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>Saturation?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

0 represents one focus group.

**Multiple-Category Design**

A variation of the traditional design is to conduct groups with several types of participants, either sequentially or simultaneously. This design allows the
researcher to make comparisons in two ways: from one group to another within a category (younger youth to older youth) and from one category to another category (for example, comparing what youth said to what parents said).

Example of a Multiple-Category Design

Let's continue the youth leadership example but make it more complex. Let's say it is important to hear the reactions of youth who have completed the program, as well as parents of youth who have completed the program, mentors involved in the program, and staff members. It is important to be able to compare and contrast the reactions of these different groups. Let's suppose that you only have enough resources to only conduct 10 groups.

You believe feedback from youth and parents will be most useful for your study, so you place more emphasis on getting information from them. You conduct four groups with youth because their feedback is most important. But you divide the youth into groups by age, knowing that younger youth are often intimidated by older youth or simply defer to them. You conduct three with parents. It is important, but not critical, to get feedback from both mentors and staff. You decide to conduct two groups with mentors. There are so few staff members that you are able to get their input in one focus group.

This multiple-category design would look like Figure 2.2.

Figure 2.2 Multiple-Category Design

| Type of Participant 1 (Youth, ages 14–15) | 0 0 |
| Type of Participant 1 (Youth, ages 16–18) | 0 0 |
| Type of Participant 2 (Parents) | 0 0 0 |
| Type of Participant 3 (Mentors) | 0 0 |
| Type of Participant 4 (Staff) | 0 |

0 represents one focus group.

Double-Layer Design

A more complex version of the traditional design involves multiple layers, which might involve geographic areas as one layer and different participant types as another layer. With this design the researchers can make comparisons across any of the layers in the design. (The analyst can compare and contrast based on geographic regions and can compare and contrast between participant types.)
Example of a Double-Layer Design

Suppose that a nationwide health service wants to better understand what patients who suffer from severe depression consider to be good health care. The results of the study are to be used, along with numerous other sources of data, to develop clinical guidelines for care of patients who suffer from depression. The study team decides it is most important to talk with patients who are being treated for severe depression but who are not currently hospitalized. They also want to listen to family members who are close to these patients. This might include spouses, parents or adult children of patients. The health service has four geographic regions that they want represented in the study. One facility is selected to participate in each region. This is called a double-layer design because it allows the research to compare and contrast results by geographic region as well as by the participants’ relationship to the health service (see Figure 2.3).

**Figure 2.3 Double-Layer Design**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Layer 1 (East)</th>
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<th>0</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant Type 1</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patient Type 1 (Patients)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Type 2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patient Type 2 (Family members)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Layer 2 (West)</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant Type 1</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patient Type 1 (Patients)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Type 2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Type 2 (Family members)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Layer 3 (South)</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant Type 1</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Type 1 (Patients)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Type 2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Type 2 (Family members)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Layer 4 (North)</th>
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<th>0</th>
<th>0</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant Type 1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Type 1 (Patients)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Type 2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant Type 2 (Family members)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

0 represents one focus group.

**Broad-Involvement Design**

Occasionally studies are conducted that have widespread public interest. In these studies, some people with interest in the study may be concerned if people like themselves are left out. The design strategy consists of first anchoring the study with the groups of the primary type of participant. In fact, this information-rich source is often purposefully oversampled and exceeds the point of saturation. This is often done to include geographic representation (for example, a state agency wants one group done in each of its seven regions). After patterns are
detected across groups with the primary type of participant, later analysis compares each additional participant type back to the primary type of participant. If a particular type of participant provides key information that is not included in the analysis of the primary groups, then the researcher might add a second or third group to that particular secondary type of participant to determine if the pattern appears again in similar groups.

Example of a Broad-Involvement Design

Let’s say a state department of education is proposing policy changes in special education. They want to know what kind of implications the proposed changes may have for what takes place in the classroom. The proposed changes directly affect special education teachers; therefore the study team believes special education teachers are the people who can best provide the needed information: how the changes will affect the classroom. Yet, the team knows that other people can also provide feedback: regular education teachers, parents, students, advocates, school administrators. In some studies, particularly in the public sector, there are groups that feel they must be listened to before decisions are made or policy is established. These groups may feel that the study would be incomplete unless their views are heard and recorded. The study team may agree that listening to these groups would enhance findings, but they have limited time and resources. In these situations, the strategy begins with the primary type of participant (special education teachers) and listens broadly to establish a clear baseline. Perhaps they conduct one group with special education teachers in each of seven education districts in the state. Then one or two focus groups are conducted with each of the additional types of participants (regular education teachers, parents, students, advocates and administrators). Results of these groups are compared back to the baseline established by special education teachers. Occasionally, unique and crucial information may emerge from the focus groups with these secondary groups. Then additional focus groups can be conducted with that type of participant.

This design might be depicted as shown in Figure 2.4.

Figure 2.4 Broad-Involvement Design

| Participant Type 1 (Special education teachers) | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Participant Type 2 (Regular education teachers) | 0 | 0 |
| Participant Type 3 (Parents) | 0 |
| Participant Type 4 (Students) | 0 |
| Participant Type 5 (Advocates) | 0 |
| Participant Type 6 (Administrators) | 0 |

0 represents one focus group.
Listening to Your Target Audience

Once you have a plan in mind, seek out and visit with several people who have the characteristics of your participants. For example, if you’re going to listen to special education teachers, find some special education teachers and get their advice on your plan. (It would be even better to have a special education teacher or two on your research team. But if that isn’t possible, make sure to do the listening step.) Perhaps share a meal with them and ask their advice on how to undertake the study. Describe the purpose of the study and the design. Ask questions like:

- How can we get the names of people like this?
- How do we find people like this?
- How are people in this general category alike or different? If we want to invite people who feel like they have this in common, what advice do you have?
- What would it take to get people to come to a discussion like this?
- Who should invite people to participate?
- When would it be easiest for these people to come? (Time of day, day of week)
- Where would be the best place to hold the discussion?
- What would be some good questions to ask?
- What do you think of these questions? (Try out a few questions.)
- What kind of person should ask the questions?

Listen. You’re trying to find out what it will take to make this study work. You are looking for pitfalls or roadblocks. This is really important if you are working with a type of participant with whom you are unfamiliar. Perhaps you want to conduct focus groups with migrant workers or teenagers who smoke or men with prostate problems. Conduct several informal conversations with your target audience or with community “gate-keepers” and ask the questions listed. It is amazing what you can learn.

Considering Consent, Human Subjects and Ethics

When focus groups are conducted in the public arena for a research institution, there is often the need for approval from institutional review boards (IRBs) or human subjects committees. This process involves submitting your proposal along with details of the study for review to ensure that the standards of human subject research are met. In essence, the study must involve research (which is precisely defined) and human subjects. Those who participate in the study must
be informed of the study’s rewards and risks, told the study is voluntary and confidential, and told they can quit participating at any time. In addition, the participants sign a statement that they are aware of these features.

Focus groups present some unique concerns in human subject research. In fact, increasingly, academic researchers are questioning the role of IRBs in naturalistic research (Church, Shopes, & Blanchard, 2002; Tierney & Corwin, 2007). Human subject protocol may not apply in all settings. A careful examination of the rules and history of your institution can shed light on this issue. Human subjects committees operate differently across institutions, and it is impossible to make generalized statements about how they operate and how they interpret their mission. Here are some tips that may help you as you work with human subjects committees:

1. Human subjects committees and procedures seek to protect human subjects. However, they may be unaware of what is in the subject’s interests. The IRBs carry out this function by ensuring that participants are informed about the nature and conditions of the research project. The IRBs want to make sure the subjects know what they are getting into, but these committees may lack the experience, grounding and ability to know what is, or is not, in the interest of the participants. This means that the propriety or ethics of the study is really in the hands of the researcher. Approval from a human subjects committee doesn’t mean that the study ought to be conducted, or that participants won’t be harmed directly or indirectly. Conversely, disapproval from human subjects committee doesn’t necessarily mean that the study shouldn’t be done. You as the investigator, researcher, evaluator—along with your colleagues—must make this decision. We have found that savvy, experienced professionals have valuable insight on questions of ethics and propriety, and these insights will be helpful in your conversations with the IRB.

2. When using human subjects forms in a focus group, we recommend presenting these materials when participants first arrive for the discussion and before the focus group begins. We set up a special registration table where we can gather important background information about the participants and discuss human subjects protocol. Sometimes human subjects committees recommend that the forms be discussed and questions answered in the total group at the beginning of the focus group. However, this process tends to be difficult to manage and detracts from the momentum of the focus group. Moreover, by having the forms and materials available when the participants arrive, a member of the research team can individually explain the protocol orally and answer questions in a confidential manner. Occasionally the participants might have literacy concerns and prefer that a member of the research team explain the procedures. This discussion before the focus group is more sensitive, more appropriate, and doesn't interrupt the focus group. If someone comes late, a member of the research team steps outside and provides the individual briefing before escorting the participant into the focus group.
3. Human subjects committees often want participants to have a clear picture of how the results might be used. Ordinarily this is a sound idea, but in some cases we have opted to be a bit cryptic as we describe the study to the focus group participants because of the tendency for participants to jump to solutions without an adequate discussion of the problem.

In market research the permission process is quite different. In market research focus groups there are two types of permission that are routinely used. Interestingly, neither of these exist for the protection of the focus group participant. They are aimed at protecting the sponsor. The first type of permission grants to the sponsor any ideas, suggestions or artwork that emerge from the focus group. In effect, all ideas become property of the sponsor. Moreover, the participant is informed that they are being recorded and that this recording can be used by the sponsor for advertising, research or in client presentations. The second type of permission applies to the moderator and indicates that the moderator is a consultant and that information received before, during and after the focus group is regarded as confidential and that the moderator is restricted from sharing this information with outside parties or from publishing results without permission of the sponsor.

**Developing a Written Plan and Determining Resources Needed**

After we have discussed the purpose, talked about who to listen to and gotten advice from people like the audiences we want to listen to, we develop a written plan. The value of the written plan is threefold. First, it forces the researcher to think through the study in a logical manner and clarify ideas. Ideas that make sense in discussions sometimes have glaring shortcomings on paper. Second, the written plan allows decision makers to provide feedback. Written plans can be circulated and discussed. Plans can also highlight differences in understanding—such as different views of the purpose of a project—before the project goes too far. The plan helps us make sure everyone is in agreement and that we understand the client’s needs. Third, plans ensure that adequate resources and time are available to obtain needed information.

Our plans include the purpose, background information, types of information needed, types of participants to be invited, number of groups to be conducted, plan of action, products or deliverable, timeline, and budget. A timeline should contain the following elements: dates, steps, persons responsible, people assisting and comments. The timeline presents the sequence of steps and identifies which tasks are to be completed by which team members. Administrators have regularly criticized evaluators and researchers for not respecting the time requirements of decision making. At some point a decision will be made, regardless of whether the findings are available. The timeline provides decision makers with a timetable for information—a timetable that must be prepared in advance and then respected by both the researcher and the decision maker.
The plan should be shared with colleagues, particularly those who are familiar with the issue or program being studied. It is also helpful to share the plan with colleagues or professionals familiar with focus group interviewing procedures. When we ask others to review the plan, we ask them to point out areas where things could go wrong—aspects that are illogical, impractical or unclear.

**Anticipating Problems**

When planning it is wise to reflect on what will take time and be challenging as you engage in a focus group study. Veteran moderators often learn this by experience and then incorporate strategic shortcuts into their planning.

Beginning moderators report that the most challenging part of their first focus group study was the recruiting. It takes considerably longer than they anticipated. There are two challenges regularly encountered by novice moderators: getting people to agree to attend and then getting those people to show up for the focus group. Solutions to this problem are discussed in Chapter 4.

A second task that is challenging for novices is in planning for analysis. At first it is difficult to anticipate how long analysis will take. With experience, analysts become better able to anticipate how much time a study will require. They develop strategies and become more efficient in completing the complicated tasks of analysis. They learn how the purpose of the study, design of the study, types of questions asked, and types of reports required influence analysis time. Plans can be difficult to create without coaching from veterans. See Chapter 6 for insights about analysis.

A third challenging task occurs primarily when working with community groups. In these groups the decision making may be rather informal and fluid and involve consensus of the currently convened task force. This decision making is in sharp contrast to that involving commercial products in the private sector or even in traditional organizations with clearly delineated decision making. The scenario that sometimes occurs is that the researcher is invited to meet with a community group that is interested in conducting a focus group study. After listening to the community group, the researcher prepares a plan and returns in a few weeks to present it at the next meeting. But the attendance has changed slightly and some people who weren’t present at the first meeting raise additional suggestions that need attention. Again the researcher revises the plan and returns in a few weeks to discover that the group continues to change. It is about this time that the researcher considers other careers! Community groups are notorious for having fluid membership and consensus decision making. Veteran researchers learn to diplomatically point out that planning and then revising the plan requires resources that must be compensated.
Summary

Don’t overlook the critical importance of planning. The planning process begins by identifying the purpose of the study. Then we decide whether focus group interviewing is the right method for the study. If it is, we identify information-rich types of participants and decide on the number of focus groups to be conducted. Idealistic designs are easy. Far more difficult is the challenge of developing an effective design using scarce resources. Feedback from colleagues, researchers, clients and your target audience help you identify problems before they occur.
What Lies Ahead

In this chapter we describe:

Qualities of Good Questions and a Good Questioning Route
Categories of Questions
Questions That Engage Participants
Listening to the Brain or the Heart
The Process We Use to Develop a Questioning Route
Changing Questions: The Importance of Consistency