Participants in a Focus Group 4

Who should be invited to a focus group? How many people should participate? How should participants be identified? What does it take to get people to attend?

Market research firms spend sizeable amounts of thought, time, and money refining their recruiting efforts. They know if they don't deliver enough of the right people for a focus group, their reputation in the business world suffers. They know the art of recruiting.

In contrast, public sector organizations tend to underestimate the importance and difficulty of recruiting participants. Public and nonprofit organizations operate within a different environment. Most can't spend huge amounts of money on recruiting. They operate under different traditions, constraints, rules and procedures.

Not-for-Profit Organizations Often Have Difficulty Recruiting

CAUTION

Nonprofit and public organizations that do their own focus group recruiting often have difficulty, because they assume focus group participants are like volunteers. However, volunteers are typically more aware of and committed to the organization's mission than are others. Yet, these organizations often need to recruit people who aren't already committed to the issue and who have other interests and responsibilities competing for their time. Organizations underestimate how difficult it is to get participants to agree to attend, and they overestimate the likelihood that those who agree to attend will actually show up at the appointed time.

Employees in public organizations may feel that their traditions and values require them to conduct meetings open to the public. In some instances, decision makers may want to allow anyone and everyone to participate in a group discussion. These sessions resemble public hearings, where citizens come to ventilate or to watch others as they share their enthusiasm or wrath. But focus groups are not open public meetings, because this runs counter to critical characteristics that are essential for the focus group to work, such as having homogeneous participants, a permissive environment and a limited number of people.

To illustrate the difficulties that can occur, consider the story of a suburban community. The city council wanted to build a new fire station. The old station needed major improvements in communications, storage, heating and electrical. It would cost more to repair the old building than to build a new station. The city needed to pass a bond issue to build the new station—a tough task. Twice before, the city council had placed the bond issue on the ballot, and twice the referendum was defeated. To avoid an embarrassing third defeat, the officials commissioned a research firm to study the possibility of a favorable vote. The research firm conducted "focus groups" within the municipality. The public was invited to attend any or all of the discussions held in various places in the community. Announcements about upcoming "focus groups" were made on cable TV; posters were placed in public buildings and on bulletin boards in grocery stores and pharmacies; and special ads were placed in newspapers. Naturally the attendance varied and the discussions were more like town meetings. The research firm's findings indicated that the vote would now be favorable, and the city council decided to move ahead with the election. The election results were a huge disappointment to the elected officials. The bonding bill was resoundingly defeated. In hindsight, the city council discovered the opponents to the fire stations were largely senior citizens who were quite concerned about increased property taxes. Seniors didn't attend the open meetings, but they did vote!

Those who supported building a new fire station showed up at the "focus groups." Residents who were against the new station just ignored the meetings but showed up for the election. In this situation, the lack of careful procedures for selecting respondents produced embarrassing and erroneous results. Also, generalizations or projections to a population based on limited focus group interviews are risky.

Successful recruitment requires special efforts. When working with focus groups, nonprofit and public organizations should forget their traditional means for recruiting and substitute instead a systematic and deliberate process. Nonprofit employees regularly invite people to participate in meetings and events. These employees figure they can use these same techniques to get people to attend focus groups. But conventional methods such as newsletters, form letter invitations or announcements at meetings just don't work well. If the organization is truly interested in getting quality information, then these methods should be set aside, because they will not be effective in getting the right number of the right people to attend.

The Purpose Drives the Study

To decide who should be invited to the group interview, think back to the purpose of the study. Usually the purpose is to describe how certain people feel or think about something—people who have certain things in common. What kind of people do you want to make statements about? What kind of people can give you the information you are looking for? The purpose should guide the invitation decision. The statement of purpose may require some additional refinement and clarification to ensure that the participants have the degree of specification needed for the study. For example, the researcher might have initially identified community residents as the type of participants to be invited, but later, after some thought, restricted participants to unmarried residents between the ages of 18 and 40. In other situations, participants might be identified in broad terms, such as homemakers, teenagers or residents of a geographic area.

The *purpose* of the study is the first of three ingredients that influence the decision of whom to invite. The second includes everything your team *knows* about the type of people you intend to recruit and groups that are close to them. Are the types of people you intend to recruit distinctive, identifiable and reasonable to locate? In focus groups, the goal is to have a homogeneous audience. There are no precise rules that determine homogeneity, but rather it is a judgment call based on your available knowledge about the type of participants and the situation.

Third, the *budget* influences the degree of specification. Simply put, how many different groups can you afford to conduct? Or another way of asking the question is, How much are you willing to invest in this study? If resources are scarce and only three focus groups can be conducted, you will need to decide what type of people will give you the most meaningful information.

Caution is needed when the focus group participants represent diverse categories of people. It is a fallacy to assume that any one individual can "represent" his or her neighborhood, race, gender or culture. Each person speaks for himself or herself. When asked, however, these individuals may attempt to offer insights about the opinions of an entire category of people. If you want to capture the opinions of a certain category of people, then you'll need to conduct a sufficient number of focus groups with that particular category of people. A focus group comprised of diverse people is not sensitive enough to pick up trends of subcategories of people.

Let's suppose that a religious group wants to attract new members. They decide to use focus groups to discover what would prompt new people to attend. The religious group would need to decide what type of members it wants to attract: teenagers, young families, single-parent families, seniors, residents living within a geographic area, etc. If several different audiences are sought, then it is advisable to conduct a series of focus groups with each audience category: teens, single-parent families, etc. A strategic decision is needed regarding the research budget. What is this information worth? With

Market segmentation: An idea to consider

TIP

Market segmentation is a concept regularly used by market researchers to identify a specific consumer and then to develop messages and advertisements targeted to these individuals. What is persuasive to a teenager may be different from what appeals to a young parent. What appeals to someone in one income category may be quite different from that which appeals to people in different income categories. The idea is to identify carefully the audience you want to reach and then seek out that audience and listen to them. After listening is completed, the marketing messages are designed to appeal to a particular audience. Public and nonprofit organizations tend to use mass communication, whereby the same message goes out to everybody. But mass communication messages aren't as effective as messages targeted at specific audiences. Public and nonprofit organizations ought to consider segmenting their markets.

X resources, one audience category might be investigated, but 2*X* resources are needed to include two audiences, 3*X* for three audiences, and so on. The research budget should include the actual costs of conducting the focus group and the volunteer time needed to conduct the study.

Sampling Procedures for Focus Groups

When researchers approach focus group interviewing, they carry with them many of the traditions, wisdom and procedures that were intended for experimental and quantitative studies. Some of these procedures readily transfer; others do not.

Many researchers have had the importance of randomization ingrained into them. Because it served them well in some arenas, they may assume that randomization is appropriate for qualitative studies, including focus group interviews. Randomization essentially removes the bias in selection—that is, all participants possess an equivalent chance to be involved in the study. Random selection is particularly appropriate when inferences are made to a larger population because of the assumption that opinions, attitudes or whatever is being studied will be normally distributed within that population. Therefore a random sample of sufficient size will be an adequate substitute for surveying the entire population.

Keep in mind that the intent of focus groups is not to infer but to understand, not to generalize but to determine the range, and not to make statements about the population but to provide insights about how people in the groups perceive a situation. While a degree of randomization may be used, it is not the primary factor in selection. When randomization is used in focus groups it is often for the purpose of elimination of selection bias inherent in some forms of personal recruitment.

With all sampling strategies, you must be concerned about the degree to which that strategy could lead to distortions in the data. Anticipate questions about the means of selection and be able to provide the rationale for those decisions.

The Composition of the Group

The focus group is characterized by homogeneity, but with sufficient variation among participants to allow for contrasting opinions. By *homogeneity*, we mean they have something in common that you are interested in, like:

- An occupation (You want to explore professional development needs of practicing dentists in the state.)
- Past use of a program or service (You want to evaluate an educational program, so you decide to conduct groups with people who completed the program in the past year, groups of people who dropped out of the program in the past year, and groups of program staff.)
- Age (You want to talk to 14- and 15-year-old smokers to find out how they get cigarettes.)

- Gender (You want to talk to men who have had false positives on prostate screening tests to find out how this impacted their quality of life.)

- Family characteristics (You want to talk to women who have had babies in the past year to get help in designing a program for new moms.)

The guiding principle is the degree to which these factors will influence sharing within the group discussion. Some mixes of participants do not work well because of limited understanding of other lifestyles and situations. Care must be exercised in mixing individuals from different life stages and styles unless the topic clearly cuts across these life stages and styles. For example, we conducted focus groups with women who were pregnant to get their help in designing a health and education program for new moms. Our only screens were that they be pregnant and from the participating county. We had teenagers who didn't want to be pregnant in the same groups with 40-year-old women who were ecstatic about being pregnant for the first time. The young women tended to be quiet and deferred to the others in the group. In hindsight, it would have been better if we had held separate groups for the teenage moms. You strive for a balance between having enough variation within the group to get contrast and yet not so much variation that participants are inhibited and defer to those whom they perceive to be more experienced, knowledgeable or better educated.

At times it is unwise to mix genders in focus groups, particularly if the topic of discussion is experienced differently by each gender. Men may have a tendency to speak more frequently and with more authority when in groups with women—sometimes called the "peacock effect." This can irritate women in the group.

A related topic is the involvement of both husband and wife in the same focus group discussion. There is a tendency for one spouse to remain silent and defer to the talkative spouse. Even if the silent spouse disagrees, it appears that he or she is reluctant to comment even when such comments are solicited from the moderator. As a result, we have found that focus groups of four married couples tend to be a discussion of four people with four quiet partners.

The Size of a Focus Group

The traditionally recommended size of the focus within marketing research is 10 to 12 people. This is too large for most noncommercial topics. The ideal size of a focus group for most noncommercial topics is five to eight participants. Don't plan focus groups with more than 10 participants because large groups are difficult to control and they limit each person's opportunity to share insights and observations. In addition, group dynamics change when participants want to but aren't able to describe their experiences. For example, if people do not have an opportunity to share experiences in the total group, they may lean over to the next person to whisper. This phenomenon is a signal that the group is too large. Small focus groups, or mini-focus groups, with four to six participants are becoming increasingly popular because the smaller groups are easier to recruit and host and are more comfortable for participants. The disadvantage of the mini-focus group is that it limits the total

Determine the ideal size of your focus group

TIP

The ideal size of a focus group is usually between five and eight participants.

If the topic is of minor concern to participants, and if they have little experience with the topic, then a group size of 10 could be productive. But, as the topic becomes more important, or as people have more expertise on the topic, or when they are likely to have strong feelings about the topic, then the group size should be restricted to five or six people.

range of experiences simply because the group is smaller. Four people will have had fewer total experiences than a dozen people will have.

The purpose of the study and participant characteristics yield clues as to the ideal size of the groups. If the study is to gain understanding of people's experiences, the researcher typically wants more in-depth insights. This is usually best accomplished with smaller groups. Also, smaller groups are preferable when the participants have a great deal to share about the topic or have had intense or lengthy experiences with the topic of discussion. For example, parents of children in special education programs have a lot to share when talking about special education. They feel strongly about this experience. And they often want to share tips and information with the other participants. Because of their passion and experience, it is wise to plan for smaller groups so everyone has a chance to share. Larger groups (eight people) work well when the study is designed to pilot-test materials or ideas and when the participants don't have a lot of knowledge about the topic. For example, users of a program will have more to say about a program than nonusers will. Therefore, you can recruit larger groups of nonusers than users.

So consider these factors when deciding how many people to recruit to a focus group:

- *The purpose of the study.* If the purpose is to understand an issue or behavior, invite fewer people. If the purpose is to pilot-test an idea or materials, invite more people.
- *The complexity of the topic.* More complex, invite fewer people.
- *Participants' level of experience or expertise.* More experience, invite fewer people.
- *Participants' level of passion about the topic.* More passionate, invite fewer people.
- *The number of questions you want to cover.* More questions, fewer people.

Strategies for Finding Participants

Once you know what type of participants you want, you need to find individuals who fit those characteristics. Several strategies are used to identify participants for focus group interviews. These include:

Lists

The best way to begin is to think about whether there is an existing list of people fitting your screens. A list is fast and economical. This could include existing lists of clients, members, employees or those who use services of the organization. If the information is needed, try to get more than the name, phone number and address. The organization may have a database of customers' socio-demographic characteristics, or employees with years of experience, age and educational level. These additional demographics may be of use in screening participants. Make sure the list is up to date. Some preexisting lists are well maintained to reflect changes, but other times the lists contain substantial errors. It is embarrassing to call for dead people.

Once the characteristics for selection have been determined, the researcher might contact organizations in the community to find if they have members with these characteristics. Are there religious groups, recreational groups, community groups who might have members like the people you are seeking? Most groups will be reluctant to release names or will have restrictions on releasing member lists. Organizations are more cooperative when the researcher explains the study and how the participants, the organization or the community will benefit from the study. Explain that there is no selling, that people can decline to participate, and that participants will receive something for their time. In some situations in the nonprofit environment a contribution to the organization's treasury, tactfully offered, can be a reflection of the value placed on assistance in obtaining names of potential focus group participants.

Because of the sensitivity of releasing names on lists, be thoughtful about how you make the request. Sharing a list of names is a major policy decision and is typically not made by secretarial or support staff. Often the decision is made by the chief executive or the organizational board. If you seek cooperation on a list, make your request at the upper levels of the organization.

Nominations

Perhaps the most effective strategy in community studies is to ask neutral parties for names. These neutral parties are often people who have an opportunity to get to know a number of other people. They might be local merchants, clergy, elected officials or influentials, or they could be local residents selected at random. The first step is to identify the specifications for participants in observable terms and then use multiple sources for a nomination list. Only a few names are sought from each source to ensure an adequate mix of participants. Names are then randomly selected from this nomination list for the invitation to the focus group. For example, if you wanted to find senior citizens who live within a community and who own cars, you might seek nominations from local service stations, other senior citizens or merchants who do business with seniors. If you wanted to find parents from the community who have at least one child in high school you might ask park and recreation staff, clergy, or perhaps randomly selected teens. In these studies, it is often advantageous to have the identification of focus group participants conducted by local residents who are trusted in the community. When asking for nominations, make sure to briefly describe how the results of the study will benefit the participants or the community. Also ask the nominator for permission to mention his or her name when making the invitation. This makes recruiting much more effective. When inviting participants, we tell them who recommended them, and that this person thought they had valuable insight on the topic and recommended that we invite them.

A variation of the nomination process is the snowball sample. In a snowball sample, you ask those who have already passed through the selection screen for nominations. The logic is that people know people like themselves. The study must have obvious benefit to the community or individual or another type of incentive to participation must be used. Snowball sampling could be used at two different times: (1) when making initial contact with the potential participants, you might ask if they know of others who meet the qualifications, or (2) you might ask at the conclusion of the focus group.

Piggyback Focus Groups

Piggyback focus groups are added to another event, meeting or occasion. The participants are gathered for another purpose and the focus group is held during free time, during a meal or after hours so as not to interrupt the primary purpose of the gathering. This strategy works well with professional associations or special interest associations, especially when national representation is desired. For example, if you want to conduct focus groups with school principals from around the state, find out when principals get together for regional or statewide meetings. Then arrange to conduct the focus groups while the principals are at the meetings.

On Location

Increasingly focus groups are being held on location—at the place where the participants come for recreation, shopping or other purposes. Recruiters stop participants as they pass through a gate, turnstile or hallway, ask several screening questions, and then offer an invitation to the focus group. The focus group is then held soon after recruitment in a convenient location. Care must be exercised in using this method so that those selected have the requisite characteristics. This is the method of choice when the purpose of the study relates to their attendance. Some nonprofit organizations are able to recruit "on location" by inviting people using the services to participate in a discussion. For example, a nature center, zoo or recreational center might intercept a random assortment of people passing through the gate and invite them to a special discussion. The incentive for participation might be free tickets for another visit.

A state department of natural resources wanted to learn more about visitors' experiences at state parks. Park employees were trained to conduct focus groups with park visitors. At designated times when a vehicle entered the entrance to the park, a park employee offered a special invitation. "We'd like to invite one adult from your party to join us for an hour discussion at 7:00 p.m. tonight. We will be talking about the park and we would like your suggestions. If someone is willing to join our discussion, we'll give you a free bundle of firewood."

Screening/Selection Services

These services are located in most metropolitan areas around the country and are used by commercial market research firms. These agencies usually have an existing database of potential focus group participants categorized by sociodemographic characteristics. In addition, they are often able to supplement their existing lists with telephone screening if needed. These agencies are often listed in the "Market Research" section of the telephone book. Screening and selection services can be expensive.

Random Telephone Screening

In the past, commercial market research firms used random telephone screening. The procedure typically begins with a random selection of names from a telephone directory. A series of screening questions are used to determine if those called meet the criteria established for the focus group. In the past decade, telephone screening has become increasingly difficult. More people have unlisted phone numbers or use caller ID or answering machines to screen incoming calls. And many people are on a "do not call list." As a result "cold" calling on the phone is an inefficient way of recruiting.

Ads or Announcements in Newspapers and on Bulletin Boards

A recruitment strategy that is used by some marketing agencies is the media ad. For example: "Bought a new car lately? If so, call Debbie at 765–4321." Or an ad placed on the apartment bulletin board: "Wanted: Apartment residents who recycle cans, glass, and paper to participate in a market research study. No sales. $25 if you qualify. Call 876–5432 for more information."

These ads can be effective in certain situations, but the primary draw is often the financial incentive for participation. As a result there is a slight risk that those motivated by the $25 incentive are different in some way from those who do not call.

The process of identification and recruitment for focus groups is considerably easier when you have names, phone numbers and background information about potential participants. Existing directories, membership lists or organizational records can help identify potential candidates. If you don't have a list, recruiting may take more time and effort.

Selecting Participants

We offer the following general steps to guide the selection process.

Step 1. Set Exact Specifications: The Screens

As precisely as possible, identify the demographic and observable characteristics of the people you want in the group. These characteristics are called the "screens." Here is an example of screens: A participant must be a woman (screen 1) from

Dakota County (screen 2) with a baby under the age of one (screen 3) and who is a first-time mom (screen 4). Be cautious when making selections on nonobservable factors such as attitudes, opinions or values. Use these nonobservable factors only if you have nonbiased empirical data with which to make your decisions. And remember, the more screens you use, the more difficult it will be to locate people.

Step 2. Carefully Design the Recruiting Process

The researcher should carefully design and outline the recruiting process. At times the researcher won't be doing the recruiting and must rely on others to invite participants. When others are doing the recruiting, they should fully understand the purpose of the study and the strategy they should use for selecting and recruiting participants. Give precise directions.

Sometimes we work with health care providers who want to listen to their customers, but they can't give out the names of those customers. Therefore, we can't do the recruiting—they must do the recruiting.

In addition, it is often less expensive for organizations to do their own recruiting rather than hire researchers to do the recruiting.

We always outline a recruiting strategy, but when we are relying on others to carry out the strategy, we are even more explicit. We describe:

Background
- The purpose of the study
- Who wants the information
- What they will do with the information

Who we want to listen to

The screens
- How to select names from the pool

Procedure
- Dates of groups
- Dates for calls
- Times for calls
- Whether to leave phone messages

Script of what to say
- Strategies for filling groups
- Answers to frequently asked questions

Follow-up

Draft of follow-up letter to be personalized
- Dates for when follow-up letters should go out
- Dates and script for reminder phone calls

Contact
- Contact information for us for questions

Suppose a college wanted to conduct focus groups with alumni to discover the ways alumni prefer to be informed about developments at the school. Also, suppose that the budget is tight and the college could contract for additional focus groups if their alumni office did the recruiting. The researcher might want to use the resources of the alumni office: the class lists by year with demographic data to screen the participants; the clerical staff to make the telephone contacts; the name of the school and the alumni office to establish credibility and legitimacy. While a research firm could do all of these tasks, the costs would be greater. However, the researcher must be explicit in laying out the steps needed for selection, giving instructions to staff about how to make the telephone request and preparing the official letter of request.

Step 3. Generate a Pool of Names of Potential Participants

A pool is the list of names of people who fit your screens. You might have generated your pool through a list, nominations, ads or announcements.

Step 4. Randomize Names in the Pool to Reduce Bias

Randomization helps ensure a nonbiased cross-section, essentially giving everyone in the pool an equal chance of selection. Randomization is an effective strategy to minimize selection bias. Randomization is rarely done of the entire population, but rather of those passing the selection screens. Typically, lists provide more names than needed, and either a systematic or random sampling procedure should be used in picking the actual names to recruit. In a systematic sample, each "*n*th" number is picked. For example, if 10 names are needed from a list of 200, every 20th person on the list is selected. A random sample consists of drawing names or ID numbers out of the hat or using a random number table to select from the list of 200 people.

No Selection Process Is Perfect

We make the best choices we can with the knowledge we have available at the time of decision. Selection is limited by our human capacities. We may overlook certain aspects of the problem and inadvertently neglect individuals with unique points of view. A test of the selection process is whether you are able successfully to defend the selection process to colleagues and clients. Trade-offs continually occur and require weighing a possibility of bias or perception of bias against costs.

Recruiting Strategies

Some of our first experiences with focus groups were disastrous because so few people showed up. We invited people the same way that we had invited people to other types of meetings seminars or workshops. As we analyzed what was wrong, we compared our strategy with the strategies used by market researchers. We discovered our flaws: we were asking people to take a leap of faith and commit time to a topic that wasn't a priority for them, our invitations weren't personalized, we had no follow-up, we ignored the seasonal time demands on some audiences, we didn't build on existing social and organizational relationships and we didn't offer incentives. It is surprising that anyone showed up.

1. Think Through and Practice the Invitation

Before starting to recruit, be ready to clearly and conversationally describe:

- The study
- Who is sponsoring the study
- Why the study is important
- What will be done with results; who will benefit from the study
- How you got that person's name
- Why you are inviting them
- How they might benefit from participating (what is the incentive for participating?)

These are topics that recruiters need to discuss easily when recruiting participants for public sector focus groups. Test the invitation by practicing on colleagues or neighbors or relatives. How does the explanation sound? Honest? Straightforward? Intriguing? Complete enough to make me feel comfortable?

Invitations should be personalized. Participants should feel that they are personally needed and wanted at the interview. Recruiters should practice so they are completely comfortable explaining the study and making the invitation. Calls (or in-person invitations) should be warm and sincere. While we may prepare talking points (see Appendix 4.1), we want recruiters to use them only as an outline. We don't want them to read the points, because that sounds insincere and disengaged. The invitation should stress that the potential participant has special experiences or insights that would be valuable to others.

BACKGROUND

Telling About the Sponsor

Market research firms traditionally don't reveal the sponsor of the study for two reasons: they are often comparing products and don't want to bias participants, and their research is proprietary. Instead, they describe the type or category of product, such as soft drinks, credit card services or automobiles. Often the client wants to find out how their product, service or organization is positioned in relation to the competition. If the participants knew the sponsor of the study, they might be biased in their rankings. Market researchers anticipate that people will ask about the sponsor of the study, and they have a generic response that provides an answer without influencing later responses. At the end of the focus group session, the participants might be provided more specific information on the sponsorship and purpose of the study.

Nonprofit and public organizations need to be much more transparent. In most situations, complete openness is preferred. While it might be acceptable for a private corporation to be coy about sponsorship or purpose, this approach can backfire in the public environment. The public does not respond favorably when a public agency is evasive or appears to be deceptive.

2. Set the Meeting Date, Time, Location

Select dates, times, and places that are convenient for the participants. Select meeting dates that don't conflict with popular activities or functions. Some people have schedules that change on a predictable basis. Farmers, tax consultants, certain small businessmen in rural communities, and teachers are a few examples. Focus groups are best conducted during their slack or off season. For example, we avoid conducting focus groups with midwestern farmers from mid-April to early August, and again from early September to late October. We also avoid dates that conflict with popular sporting events (local or college teams, the World Series, Monday Night Football, etc., national events (political conventions, elections, etc.) or periods of high television viewing (rating weeks, beginning of fall network shows, etc.). We typically avoid Mondays and Fridays in work settings.

Think about what time of day will work best for the type of people you are recruiting. Faculty members are easier to recruit over lunch time, especially if a box lunch is provided. It may be easier to recruit small business owners to breakfast sessions. New moms might prefer late mornings. Seniors might be more willing to come to a focus group held during the day than one after dark.

Think about locations that are easy to find and comfortable for the type of people you want to invite. Think about where people generally gather to talk in the community. You might gather in the back room of a local restaurant, the community room at the library or someone's living room. You want a room that is big enough for everyone to be comfortable, but not so big that your group seems dwarfed. Participants should be able to see one another easily. Think of a room about the size of a typical conference room. Look for a quiet place with few distractions.

Remember, you are trying to create a comfortable, inviting situation. You are trying to decrease any barriers that would keep people from attending and increase incentives for people to attend.

If we haven't worked with a certain type of participant before, we seek advice on what will work. We ask a few people who meet the screens to meet with us while we are planning the focus groups. We ask them for advice on when and where to hold groups. We ask what will keep people like them from participating and what it will take to get them to attend.

If we are conducting three focus groups with a particular type of participant, we will set the date, time, and place for each group. Then start making contacts. Some people try to contact people first and then come up with a date and time that works for everyone; this is a scheduling nightmare! It is far more efficient to select your focus group times and invite people to one of those sessions.

When recruiting, we start by inviting participants to attend any one of the scheduled times. "We have three dates scheduled. Which one of these would be most convenient for you?" When one group is filled, we continue recruiting for the other two groups.

3. Make Personal Contacts With Potential Participants

Once you have set the meeting times, contact potential participants. It is important that this contact be direct and personalized. Usually this first contact is two weeks before the focus group session. If you are contacting professionals or other people with busy schedules, you may need to make this contact a month or longer in advance.

People are leery of cold calls these days. It helps if you can make a personal connection with the potential participant early in the call, such as, "Jim Smith of Neighborhood Connections said you might be interested in helping us . . . ," or "I got your name from Sue Turner. She is helping us with this project. . . ."

Give thought to who extends the invitation to the focus groups. In the nonprofit and public environment, there is a tendency to give this task to staff or volunteers who have a limited understanding of the study, incomplete knowledge of the organization or little passion for the project. Instead, avoid the temptation to delegate to a lower-level employee or volunteer, and instead, seek a "volunteer" from high up in the organization. Look for a person who is recognized, trusted and respected.

If appropriate, ask the chief executive, the block leader or the head nurse to make initial contacts. You don't want potential participants to feel coerced—like they can't say "No" to this person. But often people think this study must be really important if this important person is taking time to invite me to do this. We have had people tell us it was an honor to be invited by a certain person. Also, participants are more likely to show up if they have said "Yes" to this person they trust and respect.

If the topic or incentive is lackluster, or if our past experience with this type of participant dictates it, we sometimes slightly overrecruit, inviting one or two people more than we actually want. Overrecruiting is usually not necessary if the participants see the group as nonthreatening and incentives to participate are good, or if the groups are with employees who will be released from work responsibilities to attend the focus groups.

4. Send a Personalized Follow-Up Letter

Just after the participant agrees to be in the focus group, follow up with a personalized follow-up letter—not a form letter. For many groups this is sent one week before the session. The letter is sent on official letterhead with a personal salutation, an inside address, and a signature of someone related to the study (for example, the moderator, the head of the unit sponsoring the study, the head of the agency sponsoring the study). It provides additional details about the session, location, and topic of discussion. An example of the letter is included as Appendix 4.2 at the end of this chapter.

5. Make a Reminder Phone Contact

Phone participants the day before the focus group to remind them of the session and confirm their intention to attend. This "dentist" style phone call serves two purposes. It reinforces the importance of the group ("This must be an important session because you've invited me three times!"), and it reminds participants who might have forgotten about the session. This phone call can be as simple as saying, "We are looking forward to seeing you tomorrow at 2:00 p.m. at the library to talk about neighborhood recycling. Are you still able to make it?"

Incentives to Participate

Incentives are needed because it takes effort to participate in a focus group. The participant must promise to reserve a time on their schedule. For individuals whose lives are unpredictable or who are subject to the wishes of others, this can be a big promise. Furthermore, the participant incurs financial and emotional expenses to participate: child care, travel, having to leave their kids when they feel like they don't spend enough time with them anyway, having to be inside on a beautiful day, having to leave home after they have just settled into their favorite chair, the apprehension of talking about something dear to them. Finally, the participant spends a designated amount of time in the focus group. This level of individual contribution exceeds that needed for other forms of data gathering. The mail-out survey and the telephone interview are conducted in the participant's home or office and no travel is necessary. With the mail-out survey, and to a lesser extent the telephone interview, the participant has some choice about when they will respond. Furthermore, surveys and telephone interviews rarely take two hours. Individual interviews come closest to the focus group in terms of the investment the participant must make. However, with individual interviews the participant is a partner in setting the time and location of the interview, usually within the home or office of the interviewee at a time convenient for them.

Focus groups are unique from other data gathering processes in terms of the investment that must be made by the individual. It is therefore no surprise that a tradition has been established to provide an incentive for participation. From a practical aspect, it would be next to impossible to conduct focus groups without incentives in some situations.

The incentive is not a reward and not really an honorarium or salary. It is an incentive! It serves as a stimulus to attend the session. The primary function of the incentive is to get the participants to show up for the focus group—and to show up on time. The motivational influence of the incentive hasn't worked if the participants are surprised when they receive it. Imagine yourself coming home from a hard day's work. You're tired. You're hungry. Your day didn't go well. You're looking forward to a relaxing evening at home. But, you promised someone a couple of weeks ago that you would go to a small group discussion tonight. Now this is one of the places where the incentive kicks in. You recall what was promised if you attend, and you decide that it will be worth the effort to go. Another way the incentive works is to encourage participants to hold open the time of the scheduled focus group. Some people will receive a number of last-minute requests for the same time period. The incentive serves to protect the promised time slot from being preempted. The third function of the incentive is to communicate to the participants that the focus group is important.

Use careful protocol when using cash incentives

TIP

When money is promised for attending a focus group, the accepted practice is to provide cash to the participants at the conclusion of the discussion. Each participant is asked to sign that they have received the incentive and sometimes they are requested to add an address or a telephone number. Do not ask for Social Security numbers (SSNs).

Many public organizations are hesitant to pay cash and even more hesitant about providing money without having a Social Security number. The dilemma for the researcher is that you just don't want the responsibility of carrying around this type of personal information in the field. In a perfect world with adequate security, collecting the SSN might be reasonable, but when you are on the road and traveling by car, taxi or plane the security of information becomes a major concern.

In addition, when money is promised in a focus group, it is assumed that it will be in cash offered at the end of the group. Don't be surprised if this is difficult for public and nonprofit organizations. They will prefer offering a check and having it mailed out in several weeks. Be thoughtful as you seek authorization to provide cash incentives.

Money as an Incentive

By far the most common type of incentive is money. Money has several advantages. Its value is immediately recognized and understood by the participants, it is portable, it will fit into small spaces, and most important, it works. When considering money, several principles apply. We give each participant an envelope with cash in it at the conclusion of the group. We have each person sign a form with the date and name of the sponsoring organization that says something like "I received $50 for participating in a discussion about nature areas." Immediate payment in cash is preferred. The promise of a check in the mail within a few weeks will be a disappointment. The amount of the payment can and should vary—but not within the same focus group. Each person within a particular group, and sometimes within the total study, should receive equivalent payment. You don't want to create the impression that some people's opinions are worth more than others. When considering the amount of payment, the researcher should be mindful of the workable range. At the lower end of the range, the researcher risks insulting the participants with a payment that is too small. While each person will vary, often promises of payments in the range of $10 to $20 may be too low and be a detriment to the project. When time and travel are considered, it may be below minimum wage and just not enough to be taken seriously. Better to be creative and come up with another type of incentive. At the upper end of the range, the researcher will find that the study can quickly get too expensive and the participants may feel awkward receiving what they perceive to be an excessive payment—especially from a public or nonprofit organization.

Generally, as the payment approaches the ceiling, the time needed to recruit is reduced. In some studies, it may be more efficient to pay more for incentives and thereby reduce the recruiting time and increase the likelihood that people will show up. At the time of this writing, amounts of $50 to $75 usually work for public and nonprofit studies. As the amount approaches $100, an interesting phenomenon begins to occur. If the participant has a last-minute conflict, they are more likely to call the moderator and offer to send a replacement in their absence. When working with elite categories of focus group participants, the amounts may need to be adjusted upward. Focus groups with engineers, physicians, attorneys, upper-level managers, and similar categories may require amounts in the $100 to $500+ range.

When asked why they participate in focus groups, 66 percent of those surveyed indicated compensation as the main motivator, based on a study by Rodgers Marketing Research in Canton, Ohio ("Money not the only motivation," 1991, p. 17). Money is not the only incentive that works, and in some cases it can be inappropriate or illegal. Employees released from work to attend a focus group are already being compensated, and financial incentives are usually deemed inappropriate, if not illegal.

Nonmonetary Incentives

The incentive is symbolic, and other symbols may be worthy substitutes. Food, which can range from light snacks to a full meal, can be effective. Gifts can work well, but they must be adequately described in advance to avoid disappointment when they are presented. Sometimes gifts can be of limited financial value but have significant emotional or psychological value.

EXAMPLE

An Effective Nonfinancial Incentive

This isn't a focus group example, but it is a good example of providing a gift that doesn't cost much but that people treasure. Several years ago a researcher was sending out a burdensome survey to private forest landowners; the research team was concerned that the landowners would not reply. Considerable discussion was given to an incentive to participate. A number of items were suggested and then rejected. Finally one of the team members had a clever idea:

> At the Forestry School we have a garbage can full of tree seeds. But not just any seeds. We interbred red, white and blue spruce and the result was called the "All American Spruce." The new tree didn't possess the features we wanted and as a result we couldn't commercially market the tree. We have lots of the seed and we could put this seed in small envelopes along with a note describing the development. Maybe the forest owners would consider it interesting.

The comment was a huge understatement. Inadvertently we discovered that we had given the forest owners an object of major value. It reinforced their values and couldn't be obtained anywhere else at any cost. The respondents wrote back and asked for more seeds. They put the packets on their coffee tables and told their friends about it. Some even framed the seeds. The seeds were about to be dumped out because they were considered garbage by the researchers, but to those receiving the seeds, they were a gift of great value.

A positive, upbeat invitation, the opportunity to share opinions, meals or refreshments, and tangible gifts are all incentives we've used. So is a convenient, comfortable, and easy to find meeting location. For some target audiences, it is important to know they will be participating in a research project where their opinions will be of particular value. They feel honored when they are asked to provide opinions for a research project. Finally, people are more likely to attend a focus group if the invitation builds on some existing community, social or personal relationship. Thus, an invitation might mention the connection between the study and a local organization, social cause or respected individual.

Also consider the barriers to participation: those factors that would prevent people from attending. Start by making attendance easy and comfortable. Remove barriers that might inhibit participation—child care, transportation, starting time, distance and so on.

Examples of effective focus group incentives

TIP

- $50 telephone calling cards for Alaskan fishermen
- Gift cards for $20 for teens in a drug prevention study
- 50-pound bag of rice for Southeast Asian Americans in a cancer study
- A manicure during the focus group for New Orleans female prostitutes
- A bucket of fried chicken to take home to your family for low-income parents
- Helping other veterans get screened for prostate and colorectal cancer
- Contributing to a study that will improve our local schools
- A box lunch at noon for university faculty members
- A stipend for $15 for child care
- An opportunity to help a profession, an organization or a cause

Unique Recruiting Advantages of Public and Nonprofit Organizations

There is a tendency for nonprofit and public organizations to assume that cash incentives are the most effective incentives in getting people to show up for focus groups. While this is often true in the market research environments, it is less true in the nonprofit, public, educational and academic environments. The financial incentive is effective, but there may be other factors that are even more powerful incentives than money.

In the noncommercial environment, there are several factors that prompt people to attend focus group interviews. Spend time listening to those close to the type of people you want to invite and brainstorm possible incentives. For some, food might be effective. Breakfast, lunch or dinner meetings where people can chat and share thoughts can be stimulating and refreshing as well as a way to connect with colleagues. In some communities, ethnic food prepared by a talented chef might be a meaningful incentive. Gifts need not be expensive or elaborate, but they do need to be seen as meaningful and as a symbol that attendance at the group was appreciated.

In our experience, one of the most powerful incentives is that an individual is invited by someone who respects their wisdom and they are nominated to attend the discussion. The invitation is an honor. Someone thought you were insightful, wise and could offer advice on an important issue.

The challenge for the recruiter is to make the case for how participation creates a social benefit. Describe clearly and honestly what might improve, what might change and how others might benefit if they attended the focus group.

In some studies, one of the incentives is to get a copy of the results. On some community issues or with specialized audiences, one of the benefits is getting access to information.

Consider all that is available to you. You are not limited to financial incentives but are able to use an impressive array of other factors to entice people to attend.

Summary

Who should be invited to participate in a focus group? How do you find them? How do you get them to show up? These are the questions answered by this chapter. You need the right number of the right people to show up in order for a focus group to be successful. Homogeneity is the guiding principle for focus groups, and the researcher must determine the nature of that homogeneity based on the purpose of the study. Potential participants can be located in a variety of ways, including lists or directories, through cooperating organizations or individuals or "on location" at an event or activity.

Be thoughtful about setting the screens for recruitment. These are what help you ensure that you are getting the right people. Think carefully about how you want to describe the study and its benefits to potential participants. Does it sound inviting? Worthwhile? Nonthreatening? Use a systematic recruitment strategy that is repetitive and personalized. Use a combination of incentives to get people to say "Yes" to the invitation and to get them out of their recliners and to the focus group. Incentives can vary and need not be limited to money, although cash does work well. If you don't have cash, be creative.

APPENDIX 4.1

Telephone Screening Questionnaire
Department of Health
Focus Groups Recruitment Script

(THIS IS MEANT ONLY AS A GUIDE. DON'T READ THIS AS YOU INVITE PEOPLE. YOUR CALL SHOULD BE CONVERSATIONAL)

Name of person ______________________________

Phone number ______________________________

Time called ______________________________

Better time to call ____________________________

Hi, this is [your name] and I'm with [name of agency]. We're working with the Minnesota Department of Health to design a program for new parents. I got your name from [name a person or agency] and they said you might be interested in what we are doing. We want to talk with new moms.

You're a new mom, right? [Could chat about how old the baby is, and so on]

We're getting together a small group of moms to give us input on how to design a new home-visiting program. We are trying to get ideas about what new moms would like. We plan to get about eight moms together. It will be:

Date, day

Time (2 hours)

Place

We will have a few refreshments and we will have $50 for you as a thank-you for giving us your time and ideas. We will also have child care available, if you want to bring your children.

Would you be able to join us?

No ________ Okay, Thanks for your time.

Yes ________ Great. I'd like to send you a letter just to confirm everything.

I have [check spelling of the name from above and get address]

Address ____

____

Will you need child care? No ________________

Yes _______ Okay, Just to help us plan for the child care, what are the names and ages of the children that you will be bringing along?

Great. I'll send out the letter and we look forward to seeing you at the discussion.

APPENDIX 4.2

Follow-Up Recruitment Letter

[Date]

[Name and address of participant]

Thank you for accepting our invitation to talk about designing a home visiting program for new parents. The Department of Health is funding this program, and we want advice from people like you about what will work and what won't. It doesn't matter if you have had home visits or not. We're interested in the ideas of all moms with new babies. The group will be held:

Tuesday, May 14

2 to 4 p.m.

Burns County Department of Health Building

1494 Idaho Ave West in Spooner, just around the corner from Nick's Café

Room 102—just inside the front door and to the right

It will be a small group, about eight people. We've got great child care arranged for Megan and Max. Several teachers from the Early Childhood Family Education program have agreed to watch the little ones. We'll be bringing a few snacks for you and the kids, and we'll have $50 for you at the end of the session.

If for some reason you won't be able to join us, please call as soon as possible so we can invite someone else. If you have any questions, please give me a call at 624–2221.

We are looking forward to meeting you, Megan, and Max next Tuesday. See you then.

Sincerely,

Your name
Title

What Lies Ahead

In this chapter we describe:

What's Needed When Planning

- *Selecting the Right Moderator*
- *Using a Moderating Team*

What's Needed Just Before the Group

- *Mental Preparation*
- *Pre-Session Strategy*
- *Snacks and Meals*
- *People Who Haven't Been Invited*

What's Needed During the Group

- *Capturing the Group Discussion*
- *Beginning the Focus Group Discussion*
- *Anticipating the Flow of the Discussion*
- *Giving License to Expressing Differing Points of View*
- *Two Essential Techniques: The Pause and the Probe*
- *Experts, Dominant Talkers, Shy Participants, and Ramblers*
- *Responding to Participant Comments*
- *Concluding the Focus Group*
- *Incorrect or Harmful Advice*

Responding to Participants' Questions

Be Ready for the Unexpected

Concluding the Focus Group