

NEW COMMUNITIES PROJECT

Focus Groups: A Beginner's Guide

What is a focus group?

- GROUP OF INTERACTING INDIVIDUALS HAVING COMMON INTEREST OR CHARACTERISTICS ORGANISED BY A MODERATOR TO GAIN INFORMATION
- USED TO UNDERSTAND HOW, WHY OR WHAT BELIEFS PEOPLE HOLD ABOUT TOPICS, PRODUCTS OR POLICIES

What is a focus group?

- TYPICALLY 7-10 PEOPLE UNFAMILIAR WITH EACH OTHER IN AN ENVIRONMENT WHICH ENCOURAGES DIFFERENT PERCEPTIONS.
- SEVERAL GROUPS USED TO IDENTIFY TRENDS AND PATTERNS IN BELIEFS AND PERCEPTIONS
- SYSTEMATIC ANALYSIS OF DISCUSSIONS TO GAIN INSIGHT INTO HOW PEOPLE FEEL ABOUT A PRODUCT ISSUE OR POLICY/PROGRAMME

Focus groups are best used to explain "why" the public feels the way it does. A properly constructed and administered focus group will draw out the "motivational factors" behind the "top of mind" opinions -- which is critical to understanding what is driving public opinion.

WHO USES FOCUS GROUPS?

- POLITICAL ANALYSTS/POLLSTERS
- ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCHERS
- STATUTORY AGENCIES
- SURVEY DESIGNERS

Origins of focus groups

- DEVELOPED IN US IN 1930s DUE TO CONCERNS OVER DATA DERIVED FROM INTERVIEWER LED RESEARCH
- RK MERTON: EVALUATION RADIO BROADCASTS AND US PROPAGANDA FILMS IN 1940s AND 1950s

What focus groups can tell you

- HOW PEOPLE THINK OR FEEL
- GREATER INSIGHT INTO WHY CERTAIN OPINIONS ARE HELD
- ASSIST PLANNING AND DESIGN OF PROGRAMMES
- EVALUATE EXISTING POLICY
- DEVELOP STRATEGY

WHAT FOCUS GROUPS CANNOT TELL YOU

- VALID INFORMATION ABOUT INDIVIDUALS
- VALID BEFORE AND AFTER INFORMATION
- WIDELY GENERALISABLE INFORMATION

Advantages of Focus Groups

- HIGH FACE VALIDITY (NATURAL INTERACTION AND SOCIAL INFLUENCE)
- USEFUL IN OBTAINING INFORMATION FROM GROUPS SUCH AS CHILDREN OR NON-LITERATE
- LOWER COSTS AND SPEED OF DATA GATHERING
- EASY TO CONDUCT

Advantages of Focus Groups

- CAN USE BOTH VERBAL AND NON-VERBAL DATA
- CAN OBTAIN DEEPER LEVELS OF MEANING
- HIGHLY FLEXIBLE/ADAPTABLE
- ACCESSABLE RESULTS

Disadvantages of Focus Groups

- SAMPLE NOT RANDOM NOR NECESSARILY REPRESENTATIVE
- QUALITY OF DATA HIGHLY INFLUENCED BY ABILITY OF MODERATOR TO EVOKE RESPONSES
- RESULTS SUBJECT TO MULTIPLE INTERPRETATIONS
- TRANSITORY EFFECTS

The Making of a Good Focus Group

....the single greatest component of a successful focus group is the moderator

Frank I. Luntz
Voices of Victory