

Focus groups can be a wonderful way of gathering information from a small group.

ADVANTAGES

- Ability to connect with participants
- Rich, descriptive data
- Flexible yet intentional

DISADVANTAGES

- Time needed for transcription
- Unknown group dynamics
- Challenging to discuss sensitive topics

TYPES OF QUESTIONS

- Open-ended questions designed to generate a detailed response
- Experiences and behavior
- Opinions/values
- Feelings/Perceptions
- Knowledge
- Sensory
- Background/Demographics

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

- Tell us about a time when...
- Give us an example of...
- Tell us more about that.
- What was it like for you when...
- Tell us a story about...
- What was the best part of...
- What could be improved about...

QUESTIONS TO AVOID

- Multiple questions at once; (e.g., How did you feel about the day, time, location, and content of the program?)
- Leading questions; (How great was it when the comedian asked for audience participation?)
- Yes or no (closed-ended) questions; (e.g., Did you like the program? Did you have fun?)

THINGS TO CONSIDER

- How will you select your participants?
- How many participants will you invite? (Ideally, you would want 6-8 participants to attend).
- Will you offer incentives for participation?
- Do the participants meet any criteria you are looking for?
- Find a site that will have minimal distractions. This can greatly affect the quality of the data you collect.

(Adapted from University of North Carolina-Greensboro Student Affairs Assessment)

STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH CHALLENGING PARTICIPANTS

Not everyone participates equally in a conversation, but we want to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to participate in the focus group. Here are some tips for dealing with the most common types of focus group participants.

The Conversation Hog

- Try to seat dominant talkers next to the facilitator
- Stop making eye contact after they talk for about 20-30 seconds
- Turn body slightly away from participant and toward others
- Interjecting may be necessary:
 - *Thank you, Bob. Are there others of you who would like to comment on this question?*
 - *Okay, that's one point of view. Does anyone feel differently?*
- Remain tactful and kind, because harsh comments may inhibit sharing by others in the group

The Self-Appointed Expert

- Avoid opening questions that highlight participants' levels of experience or social position
- Emphasize the fact that everyone is an expert and all participants have valuable perspectives that need to be expressed
- Employ the same non-verbal cues that you would with any dominant talker

The Rambler

- Employ the same non-verbal cues that you would with any dominant talker
- Interjecting may be necessary:
 - *Thank you, Sally, but I think we might be getting a bit off track. Can you, in one sentence, tell me how this relates back to our question of...?*
 - *Thank you. In the interest of time, I'd like to hear from some others on this issue.*

The Derailer

- Employ the same non-verbal cues that you would with any dominant talker
- Acknowledge that they appear to have a specific agenda, that it has been recorded in the notes, and that for the remainder of the time you would like them to focus on the questions being asked or give others an opportunity to also be heard

The Quiet One

- Try to seat directly across from facilitator to maximize eye contact
- Use eye contact to encourage them to speak
- Call on the respondent by name:
 - *Tom, I don't want to leave you out of the conversation. What do you think?*
 - *Tom, you look like you have something to say about that.*

The Agreeable Deflector

- Use neutral probes to elicit additional information (1-2 probes is probably max)
 - *Would you describe what you mean?*
 - *Would you give us an example of what you mean?*
- Remind participants of the value of differing points of view
- Ask if anyone has a different experience or other point of view