



The NewsUpFront

The Newsletter of UpFront Organization Development Consulting

FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH—METHODS AND PRACTICES

UpFront has been conducting effective focus group research projects since 1985. Dianne Tuff, principal consultant at UpFront, facilitates as many as 100 groups each year.

Here is our philosophy and methodology for focus groups.

A research method

Focus group research is a qualitative research method. It seeks to gather information that is beyond the scope of quantitative research (mail and telephone surveys and the like).

The term “focus group” is often used to describe many types of group discussions. Focus group research, however, is a true research method. As such, it uses a fairly standard methodology.

Our methodology draws heavily on the work of Richard Krueger, from the University of Minnesota. It is usually the best suited to the needs of our many non-profit clients, but we have used it successfully in projects ranging from market research to community planning.

The purpose of the methodology is to make

sure that the information that is collected is not biased by the researcher, is a true representation of participants’ feelings and beliefs, and is reproducible (in other words, if another researcher conducted the same focus group, he or she would obtain similar results).

This methodology is described below. Following is a short section describing how to interpret the results of focus group research.

Question design

The question path is open-ended, designed to gather ideas and opinions that are outside the scope of prepared questions, in addition to testing a series of prepared hypotheses.

Recruiting

Recruiting is done from a prepared script developed by the research team and the client. In general, more participants are recruited than the desired group size, since it is difficult to obtain 100% attendance.

Participant selection

Since focus group results are not quantifiable, rigid random selection is not always

Quantitative			Qualitative				
Survey Research	Data Mining	Experiments	Observation	Focus Groups	Depth Interviews	Case Studies	Self Assessment
Telephone	Written	Internet					

Examples of types of research

necessary. The best results are usually obtained when the group has some homogenous aspects, such as a common profession or interest.

Group size

Traditionally, focus groups of eight to ten participants were considered ideal—giving a variety of viewpoints while making sure that everyone has a chance to participate. A number of researchers are now working with 5 to 7-person groups, especially if the topic is complex, or if there is a lot of ground to cover.

Stipend

Participants are sometimes paid a stipend for attending the group. The use of a stipend usually insures better attendance, because it creates a “contract” in the mind of the participant. For non-profit organizations, this stipend may not be necessary but covering participant expenses (for childcare, travel, etc.) is important.

Facility

The group should be held at a neutral site, so participants feel comfortable discussing sensitive issues. A focus group facility with observation area can be used if available, and if budget allows. Otherwise, any conference-style room can be used. An oval table is preferable, because it allows all participants to see and interact with each other. Refreshments of some type are usually served, to create an informal, comfortable atmosphere.

Group length

Most groups last from one and one-half to two hours. Groups with adolescents should be shorter, generally no more than one hour.

Facilitator and observer

The methodology we use includes the use of both a facilitator and an observer. The role of the facilitator is to keep the group on task,

while making sure that divergent viewpoints and ideas are heard. The facilitator is also responsible for making sure that less vocal and less assertive group members have a chance to participate.

The observer’s role is to record the focus group, taking notes to supplement the audio and/or video record. The observer pays special attention to non-verbal cues that indicate agreement or disagreement, interest or disinterest, and the like.

Reporting

Shortly after the sessions, the facilitator and the observer prepare a narrative report. For some groups, where the information is needed quickly, a debriefing session is held immediately following the group, with facilitator, observer and client participating. Transcripts of the groups are sometimes produced as part of the record. Audio taping is standard, used by the researchers in writing the report and often reviewed by clients. Videotaping is also common; audio or video clips can be useful for sharing results when confidentiality is not an issue.

Interpreting focus group results

What focus groups are not. Focus group research is not a statistically valid representation of the views of the population being studied. The sample is not usually large enough, and the question path must be designed to be open-ended. This means that numerical data obtained from focus groups must be looked at with skepticism.

There is a trend in focus group research to do more polling of the group, and to use questionnaires to gather quantitative data. All such information should be looked at only in the context of the qualitative information gathered, and should be verified with further research.

What focus groups are. Focus group research reveals the underlying attitudes and beliefs held

by the population being studied. The focus is on the “how” and “why,” rather than the “what.”

For example, quantitative research, like a customer survey, will show the overall level of customer satisfaction. Qualitative research, like a focus group, will uncover the underlying attitudes and beliefs that customers use to determine their satisfaction.

In focus group research participants usually bring up issues and concerns outside the prepared question path. For that reason, focus group research is useful for issues identification, and to determine areas needing further research.

Contact UpFront

Dianne Tuff

320-255-9657

dianne@upfrontconsultingmn.com

Murdoch Johnson

320-529-4071

murdoch@upfrontconsultingmn.com

Web site:

www.upfrontconsultingmn.com

About UpFront

UpFront is an organization development consulting firm located in Saint Joseph, Minnesota. We provide organization development, program evaluation and research services. Our company is a partnership between owners Dianne Tuff and Murdoch Johnson—and UpFront’s clients.

Our Mission

To help and support teams, organizations and communities as they merge past experience, present strengths and future dreams to create positive change.

Our Vision

UpFront works with progressive, socially-responsible organizations on projects that challenge us and build on our strengths. We strive for balance between the professional and personal—and we integrate our personal values into our professional lives.