

# FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW

## What Is It?

The basic idea of a Focus Group Interview (FGI) is simple. A group discusses certain topics, commonly for one to two hours. The interviewer/leader/moderator raises various issues, focusing the discussion on matters of interest to the researcher according to an outline or general guide (Focus Group Interviews — A Reader). Analysis of gathered information attempts to discern patterns and trends that develop among participants, also across focus groups.

## When Should One Use a Focus Group?

Examples of questions that could be answered with Focus Group Interviews are: (Krueger, *Focus Groups—A Practical Guide for Applied Research*.)

- "What do existing clients or potential clients think about the new proposal or program?"
- "What are the strengths/weaknesses of the proposed program?"
- "Will the new plan or program work?"
- "How should we promote the new program?"
- "How well is the current program working?"

Focus Group interviewing uncovers information on human perceptions, feelings, opinions, and thoughts. It is **not effective** for discovering technical solutions, but so often it is forgotten that what seems a technical problem is really both a technical and a human problem.

## Advantages<sup>1</sup>

1. Fast and relatively cheap.
2. Great for generating hypotheses when little is known.
3. Drastically reduces distance between the respondent who produces information and the stake-holder who uses it.
4. Flexibility.
5. Great ability to handle contingencies.
6. Group interview respondents stimulate dialogue among the group.
7. Findings emerge in a form that most users fully understand.

## Disadvantages<sup>1</sup>

1. FGIs are very easily misused. They are easy to set up, but require skill to moderate, and use systematic and tedious procedures to interpret data.
2. Projections of results to a wider group requires much caution. FGIs are not intended to obtain numbers that represent a population.
3. Groups can vary considerably. Therefore, many FGIs might be needed to balance the idiosyncrasies of individual sessions.

## Steps in Conducting Focus Group Interviews<sup>2</sup>

1. Consider your purpose: Begin by writing. Determine whom to study.
2. Consider the information users: Know who they are, what they want, and why they want the information.
3. Develop a tentative plan and estimate resources needed: Make both a chronological and fiscal plan.

4. Identify the questions to be asked in the interview:  
Identify potential questions; Highlight the key questions; Establish the context of the questions; Arrange the questions in a logical sequence; Begin with unstructured questions; Carefully use structured and semi-structured questions.
5. The art of moderating the group interview:
  - a. Moderators must be mentally alert and free from distractions.
  - b. Small talk just before the FGI helps create a warm and friendly environment, puts the participants at ease, and purposefully avoids the key issues to be discussed later.
  - c. Individuals who talk a great deal and might dominate the discussion should be seated to the moderator's side; Shy and quiet participants are best placed immediately across from the moderator.
  - d. The location should be easy to find, relatively free from outside distractions, neutral, and have tables and chairs arranged with participants facing each other.
  - e. The moderator should direct and keep the discussion flowing, and take few notes. The notes of the moderator are not so much to capture the total interview, but to identify future questions that need to be asked.  
  
Two essential techniques for the moderator are: (1) The Five Second Pause, and (2) The Probe. The short *pause* often prompts additional points of view or agreement with a previously mentioned position, especially when coupled with eye contact from the moderator. The *probe* is a request for additional information. Examples of probes are: "Would you explain further?"; "Would you give me an example of what you mean?"; "Would you say more?"; "Is there anything else?"; "Please describe what you mean."; or "I don't understand."
  - f. FGIs should be recorded in two ways: by an audio tape recorder and with written notes taken by an assistant moderator.
  - g. The moderator must create a thoughtful, permissive atmosphere, provide the ground rules, develop a climate for sharing among the participants, and set the tone for the interview.
  - h. The first question is designed to engage all participants one at a time in the group discussion.
6. Identify the audience, those who will be interviewed:  
Consider the purpose identified in Step 1. Existing groups may have ways of relating to each other that can influence the results; New audiences can be identified from existing lists,

contacting existing groups, and random telephone screening; Use systematic notification procedures to ensure people will attend FGI session; Incentives may help ensure good attendance and also promote good will between sponsor and participants.

Six to nine participants are needed for most Focus Group Interviews. More participants inhibit opportunity for discussion, and fewer may not provide the desired interaction. Successful Focus Group Interviews have been conducted with as few as two participants.

7. Conducting the Focus Group Interview:
  - a. The helpful rule of thumb is to continue conducting interviews until little new information is provided.
  - b. When the session is ended, check the tape to be sure it adequately captured the group comments. The moderator and assistant moderator should then find a secluded spot to de-brief the session.
8. Analyzing the results consists of four distinct levels:
  - a. Findings — What was said by the participants?
  - b. Interpretations — What do the findings mean to the analyst?
  - c. Judgements – Are the findings of value to the stakeholders?
  - d. Recommendations — What should the stakeholder do?

This distinction between the four levels provides an outline for the analysis. Also, this distinction allows the information users to disagree with the recommendations or judgments without disagreeing with the findings.

Notes should be made by the assistant moderator of the non-verbal responses during the actual interview session. These cues should be considered when analyzing the results.

9. Reporting the results:
  - a. Consider your audience.
  - b. Focus on the most important results.
  - c. Attempt to present both written and oral reports.

### **Tips For Your FGI**

#### *Equipment! Tapes:*

1. Pressure Zone Microphone (PZM) — Anything that the human ear can hear can be accurately picked up by the PZM; no need for concern over the angle between sound source and PZM. The distance between the PZM and the sound source has no effect on quality of sound reproduction.

2. Use 90-minute tapes. Sixty-minute tapes are too short and 120-minute tapes are prone to break and jam. Before the session, use fast forward and rewind on new tapes to ensure that they do not stick or jam.

***Systematic Notification Procedure:***

After meeting times for the FGIs are set, the following steps are in order:

1. Approximately 10 to 14 days before the meeting, begin making telephone invitations to the session. It is best to over-recruit and later cancel some invitations if it appears too many will attend.
2. One week before the meeting, send a personalized follow-up letter of invitation to those who have consented to participate.
3. The day before the meeting, make another phone call to each person as a reminder of the session and to ask about intentions to attend.

***Optimum Moderator Characteristics:***

1. Well-rested and alert for the FGI session.
2. Prepared to give standard introduction without referring to notes.
3. Can remember questions/questioning route without referring to notes.
4. Responsible for advance arrangement of meeting room; extra tapes, batteries, an extension cord.
5. Avoids head nodding or other responsive body language.
6. Avoids comments that signal approval.
7. Avoids stating own opinions.

***Duties of Assistant Moderator:***

1. Maintains tape recorder.
2. Takes detailed notes.
3. Handles unexpected interruptions.
4. Asks questions where important and relevant.
5. Leads the analysis process.

***More About Questions:***

1. All questions have a "Stimulus" and a "Response." The stimulus is the topic of discussion, and the response provides clues to how people are expected to answer.
2. An unstructured question is free of both stimulus and response. Semi-structured questions narrow the inquiry by limiting either the stimulus or the response.

3. The "Focus" of an FGI is achieved by careful use of unstructured to semi-structured questions.

***What About Analysis:***

1. Immediately following the FGI, the moderator and assistant moderator should check the tape to see that it worked, and briefly identify the common experiences and perceptions that surfaced during the interview.
2. Within 24 hours following the FGI, and definitely before another FGI is conducted, the moderator and assistant moderator should review the tape, capturing comments using the questioning route as an outline.
3. In final summary, state question. Describe responses in one or two paragraphs. Add three to eight relevant quotations to illustrate. Following quotations, include a paragraph to interpret findings.

***Standard Introduction for Focus Group Interview***

Good evening and welcome to our session. Thank you for taking the time to join our discussion of \_\_\_\_\_.

My name is \_\_\_\_\_. Assisting me tonight is \_\_\_\_\_. We are gathering information about \_\_\_\_\_. We have invited people with similar experiences to share their perceptions and ideas on this topic. You were selected because you have certain things in common that interest us. You are all \_\_\_\_\_. We are particularly interested in your views because you are representative of others in \_\_\_\_\_ (the county, committee, etc.).

Tonight we will be discussing \_\_\_\_\_. This includes \_\_\_\_\_. There are no right or wrong answers, but rather differing points of view. Please feel free to share your point of view, even if it differs from what others have said.

Before we begin, let me remind you of some ground rules. (This is a research project and there are no sales involved. You will not be requested to volunteer or attend any future events or programs.) Please speak up with only one person speaking at a time. We are tape recording the session because we do not want to miss any of your comments. If several are talking at the same time, the tape will become garbled and we will miss your comments. We will be on a first name basis tonight, and in our later reports, there will not be any names associated with comments. You may be assured of complete confidentiality.

Keep in mind that we are just as interested in negative comments as positive ones, and at times, the negative comments are the most important.

Our session will last about  (hour(s)/minutes) . We will not be taking a formal break. The rest rooms are \_\_\_\_\_ and refreshments are \_\_\_\_\_. Feel free to leave the table for either of these, or if you wish to stretch, but please do so quietly. We have placed name cards on the table in front of you to help us remember each other's names.

I am going to ask the first question differently from the remainder of the questions. I will ask the first question, then pause to allow you to form your thoughts. Then I will ask each of you to respond to the first question. After this, anyone may respond to any question or discussion at any time.

Let's begin. Think back....(first question)

## **Other Considerations for Focus Group Interviews in Extension Settings**

1. The Focus Group Interview is a unique approach to gathering qualitative data for use in answering questions. However, not all questions can be answered with this technique. Focus Groups are useful in finding out why people feel the way they do, but not appropriate for determining how many individuals hold a particular point of view.

2. Keep in mind that Focus Groups are unlike other Extension groups with which field faculty may work. Focus Groups are not planning committees, regular meeting program advisory committees, or groups that vote on issues.

Likewise, the Focus Group Interview technique should not be confused with other group techniques with which field faculty may work, e.g.. Nominal Group Technique or Delphi Technique. Nominal Group and Delphi procedures are often used to achieve

consensus, whereas Focus Group procedures help investigators to understand the depth and nature of individual points of view.

3. Focus Groups can be influenced by the role, title, or position of the moderator. That is, a county agent would not make the ideal moderator in his/her own county, and neither would that agent's supervisor. Even a community leader may produce questionable results if he/she is the moderator.

A better moderator in Extension settings would be a county agent as moderator in another county, or a carefully selected and trained volunteer within the county who has little or no connection with existing Extension programming.

4. Be cautious of existing groups. Employee work groups, boards of directors, or professional colleagues may have established formal or informal ways of relating to each other that can influence the results. This technique works well when all participants are on an equal basis. Results might be affected if there are pre-determined spokespersons for the group.

## **References**

<sup>1</sup>Higgenbotham, James B. and Cox, Keith K. (1979) *Focus Group Interviews — A Reader*, American Marketing Association, 222 South Riverside Plaza, Chicago, Illinois 60606, 312-648-0536.

<sup>2</sup>Krueger, Richard A. (1988) *Focus Groups—A Practical Guide for Applied Research*, Sage Publications, 2111 West Hillcrest Drive, Newbury Park, California 91320.

## **EDGE – Evaluation Guide Sheet, OCES**

Ohio Cooperative Extension Service, The Ohio State University

### **Prepared by:**

*Tom Archer*, County Extension Agent, 4-H, and Chair, Shelby County

*Jeff Layman*, County Extension Agent, Agriculture and CNRD, Miami County

### **Coordinator:**

*Marilyn R. Spiegel*, Leader, Evaluation

7/91—500

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Bobby D. Moser, Director of the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service, The Ohio State University. All educational programs and activities conducted by the Ohio Cooperative Extension Service are available to all potential clientele on a non-discriminatory basis without regard to race, color, creed, religion, sexual orientation, national origin, sex, age, handicap or Vietnam-era veteran status.

