

"Focus Groups on a Shoestring"

Methodological Issues in Program Evaluation

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**"A limited number of homogeneous people are invited to participate in a focused discussion in order to provide data of a qualitative nature. The purpose is not to teach, to provide therapy, to resolve differences, or to achieve a consensus, but to obtain information in a systematic and verifiable manner. With that purpose in mind, the researcher should be encouraged to 'twist it a bit' and discover just how robust and hardy focus group interviews really are."
[Krueger, p. 224, 1994]**

Dimensions of the Focus Group Interview (FGI) [Archer, 1991]:			
Dimension		Necessary	Nice
1.	Project Suitable for FGI Methodology	√	
2.	Trained Moderator	√	
3.	Trained Assistant Moderator		√
4.	Pre-Determined Questioning Route (QR)	√	
5.	Quality Delivered Standard Introduction	√	
6.	Introduction & QR Memorized		√
7.	Personal/ Verbal Invitation	√	
8.	Neutral Site of Interview		√
9.	Discussants - Homogeneous Backgrounds	√	
10.	Discussants - Known Divergent Positions		√
11.	5-9 People in Group	√	
12.	Proper Location of "Dominant" or "Shy" People		√
13.	People in Group - Not Know Each Other		√
14.	Emphasis and Adherence to Confidentiality	√	
15.	Discussants Treated as Equals During Interview	√	
16.	Audio Tape Recorded	√	
17.	1 ½ - 2 hours in Length		√
18.	Minimum of Three (3) Group Interviews	√	
19.	Incentive/ Compensation for Participants		√
20.	Transcribed Tape of Discussion		√
21.	Listen to Tape During Analysis	√	
22.	Systematic, Rigid Analysis	√	

Shoestring Possibilities:

The second dictionary definition of *shoestring* is, "2. A small sum of money; barely adequate capital." [American Heritage Dictionary, 1982]. In social science settings, especially Extension settings, professionals often have "barely adequate capital" to complete quality program development through evaluation. They constantly look for ways to reduce expenses and utilize limited resources, hopefully, without jeopardizing the integrity of the processes and validity of corresponding results.

The expanded use of focus groups as a means of qualitative data collection makes these same professionals look for ways to more cost effectively utilize FGI methodology. What are some ways in which expenses in conducting focus groups can be reduced?

The obvious first step in reducing expenses eliminates the "Nice" but not "Necessary" Dimensions. In doing this, one eliminates all or part of major expenses which include: [1] Assistant Moderator; [2] Meeting Room Rental Costs; [3] Incentives/ Compensation for Participants; and [4] Transcription.

Shoestring Tip Sheet - Focus Group Interviews - Exactly How Can Expenses be Further Reduced?

Through over twelve years of completing Focus Group Interview projects, mostly in Extension, Education, and Social Science environments, several "twists" have been utilized to meet limited budget demands. The specific tips listed below have either worked, or showed promise of working, given the appropriate situation. The four categories include: Recruitment; The Group Itself; Recording; and Analyzing/ Reporting.

Recruitment:

- [1] Use Gift Certificates (e.g. at least \$20 from a well recognized retailer); Avoid over generous incentives - desire participants interested in the discussion, not reward
- [2] Arrange sponsors for expenses
- [3] Recruit for participants to "Bring a Friend"; Then divide into two groups at site
- [4] Recruit at exit interview of a service site
- [5] Follow-up letters and phone call reminders a must - cheap and good insurance
- [6] NEVER use cold calls to recruit - this just takes too much time
- [7] "Piggyback" an FGI on existing meeting (with caution)
- [8] Make sure the recruiter is knowledgeable of process and project: positive, upbeat, and offering an opportunity for potential participants to share opinions
- [9] Think about including past FGI participants
- [10] Use the phrase "focus group" in the recruitment process

The Group Itself:

- [1] "Free" and easy to find meeting room location - church, school, government agency, bank basement
- [2] Have 5 or 6 participants in group - not 8 or 9

- [3] Utilize "volunteer" moderators (well-trained)
- [4] Conduct two groups at same site in different rooms with different moderators at the same time
- [5] Reduce number of questions, but be prepared to ask more specific sub-questions in smaller groups
- [6] Consider a limit to the distance to travel to an FGI site
- [7] Tables and chairs, water fountain and restrooms are only real "creature comforts" necessary
- [8] Keep the introduction simple, e.g., "My name is _____ and I am interested in finding out more about {statement of the objective of the study}."
- [9] Keep in mind what you do not want to know - make a list before you begin

Recording:

- [1] If do not have an Assistant Moderator, have two audio recorders
- [2] Two "cheap" audio tape recorders are better than one "expensive" one
- [3] Have the stake holders at the FGI, as quasi-Assistant Moderators - taking notes, but mute; 2-4 extra people do not appear to hinder discussion if not introduced by title and if they listen only
- [4] Purchase voice quality tapes at discount stores in quantity; Always "fast forward" and "re-wind" new tapes; Re-use tapes after project is completed and reported

Analysis/ Reporting:

- [1] Use bullets - no quotes
- [2] Avoid reporting the unique responses - report only major themes
- [3] Make verbal reports only

Bibliography:

1. American Heritage Dictionary, Second College Edition, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, Massachusetts, 1982.
2. Archer, Thomas M. "When is a Focus Group Interview Not a Focus Group Interview?", Paper presented at the 1991 American Evaluation Association Annual Meeting, October 31, 1991, Chicago, Illinois.
3. Krueger, Richard A. "Focus Groups - A Practical Guide for Applied Research, Second Edition," Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, California, 1994.

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