Planning Successful Focus Groups

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Conducting and hosting a focus group can be one of the most important tools to ascertain the needs and concerns of a community. With careful strategic planning, organizational skills and understanding one’s target audience will yield beneficial results.

Hosting a Focus Group

Hosting a focus group should be as much fun for the participants as it is for the facilitators. There are some clear guidelines that should be integrated into the overall plan. Before getting started it’s necessary to understand the reasons for conducting a group. Grab a piece of paper and start jotting down the goals of why the group is being planned. Setting clear goals in the beginning will answer your questions and provide you with a roadmap to a successful focus group.

Who is your target audience? Once your goals have been set, the rest of the puzzle will come together. Some of the items to ask about the audience should include:

- Age group
- Gender
- Ethnic population
- Languages spoken

When planning a focus group there may be different variables for each of them. For example, when conducting focus groups for the Clorox Company, they were interested in understanding why African American and Latina/Hispanic women, considered to be “Extreme Cleaners” between the ages of 25 to 55, used their brand PineSol. The purpose of the focus group was to eliminate any assumptions until proven true and to better understand its audience. The overall goal was to learn what was important to their target audience and develop an effective cause marketing campaign.

Remember to make sure that your focus group is culturally sensitive to the audience that you are trying to reach. Too often, the smallest details do get overlooked. If your audience speaks a different language, try to make sure that you engage a facilitator who speaks that language and is sensitive to the needs of your audience.
Writing the focus group questions and discussion guide are key components to pulling the best information from participants. All questions should be open ended to increase discussion among participants and facilitator. Try to avoid closed ended or yes/no questions at any cost. As the facilitator you want to get the group talking and sharing information about the topic. It’s always best to start with a couple of soft questions designed to get participants to relax. A few tricks of the trade would be to ask participants to comment or do something that will make everyone laugh. For example, ask participants to use two words to describe themselves, but the words must begin with the letter of their first name.

The discussion guide should be created to drive the focus group from A to Z. The guide includes the role of the facilitator and insertions of funny stories or other items to share with the group.

Show and Tell is significant to stimulate discussion. Many focus groups are usually interested in unveiling ideas for a new campaign, project or product. Samples usually come in all forms, such as advertising boards, videos or other products. Participants will usually tell you about colors that stand out more for them, text that work best and displays the message correctly, placement of your product or best avenues to disseminate the message.

**Location**

Location, location, location is everything. When planning your focus group it’s important to select a site that is accessible for the target audience. Not everyone has access to an automobile or is able to drive. The best location should be centrally located, near a subway or bus line. If you were targeting the Latino/Hispanic community, the best site would be close to where the audience lives or work so that it’s more convenient.

**Incentives**

There are many incentives for encouraging participation in your meeting or focus group. Food is a necessary factor. Again, being culturally sensitive to the type of food served moves to the top of the list. Avoid unhealthy food and remember that many participants may be vegetarian or vegan. When planning your menu include a variety of foods, salads and vegetables. Remember many folks are allergic to shellfish, wheat and dairy products. Always be ready to offer substitutes. To stay on the healthy track, offer water, juices, or diet drinks. Don’t assume that women are the only people concerned with eating healthy or watching their weight. Avoid fried foods. Dessert is also a wonderful treat.
How many people should be invited?

In order to get enough feedback about your product or campaign, it would be best to host a group of 12 to 15 people. More than 15 participants could prove to be unmanageable when trying to collect adequate information. Remember it’s key that everyone gets an opportunity to share their thoughts and ideas without feeling rushed or cut off.

Recruitment

Any consultant or facilitator worth his or her salt should have a gallery of concrete ideas for reaching and securing group participants. There are a couple of things that one can do to promote the focus group:

- Partner with local community based organizations in the targeted community or provide them with a small stipend or honorarium to secure participants for the discussion group
- Post fliers in community centers
- Create fliers to be disseminated through an E-mail blast
- Partner with local churches to conduct outreach
- Mention clear incentives to entice participants to your discussion group

In order to obtain a solid base of discussion group participants, it’s recommended to offer a substantial amount worth the audience time. It’s best to offer $50 to $100 for participation in a focus group including food and/or snacks. Offering a lower amount will make it difficult to recruit good participants, especially during today’s economy. Another option is to offer a variety of gift cards. At the end of the focus group, one could also conduct a drawing for a gift (iPod Shuffle, gift card, Tupperware set, etc.)

Timing

Whether you call it a focus group, a Meet & Greet, a Munch & Mingle, a Talk & Taste, or a Chat & Chew, the discussion should last no longer than 90 minutes. Participants should be encouraged to eat when they arrive or during the focus group as to not interfere with the group discussion, hence the name, Chat & Chew. Always try to start and end the focus group on time. If you need to go over the amount of time, make sure that you get buy in from the entire group so that they will know that you respect their time.
Logistics

Preparing ahead of time is key to hosting a successful focus group or meeting. The following is a checklist to help you cover all details:

- Visit the site prior to the day of the event
- Provide clear guidelines on how you would like to set up the room
- If Internet is needed, make sure the room has connection
- If using your computer for a power point presentation, make sure there is a blank wall or a screen available
- If sound is needed for a video, you may need to bring your own speakers
- Pack an easel and paper if needed for the focus group
- Organize all materials to be used at your focus group (sample advertising boards, art work or products) Art boards can be printed and mounted on 11x17 foam core so that they can be easily passed around
- Develop a demographic form if needed to track information about members attending your focus group (i.e., ranges of age, gender, income level, marital status, zip code and level of education)
- Provide pens and paper
- Provide nametags or name cards so that facilitator can see the name of each participant
- If participants need to rate ads or commercials, provide rating sheets
- Include a person to record notes of the focus group. Provide the note keeper with discussion questions and a copy of the guide so they will be able to follow the progression of the meeting.
- If using a computer, bring the computer power cord and extension cords
The Group

Greet each group participant as they arrive. The facilitator should always introduce him or herself to the entire group. The facilitator should be friendly, open and honest. Remember to do your homework and learn as much as possible about the group that you are targeting prior to the date of the discussion group.

Remember to share information about the focus group.

Participants should leave knowing:

- Goal and overview of the focus group
- Why they were selected to participate in the group
- How the information will be used

It’s imperative to set ground rules at the beginning of the focus group and to include participants in setting those rules so that they are invested in the process. Ground rules could include some of the following:

- Be respectful of each other
- Agree to disagree
- No talking at the same time (Most of us can all sing together, but it’s difficult to all talk at the same time)
- Raise your hand before sharing a comment
The role of the facilitator is to listen very carefully to the comments of participants. In order to avoid any miscommunication it’s a great idea for the facilitator to summarize any comments for the sake of accuracy and clarification. It’s extremely necessary for the facilitator to:

- Maintain control of the group
- Not argue or disagree with participants
- Avoid leading participants towards preconceived ideas
- Maintain a neutral position at all times
- Encourage active communication and interactive discussion
- Make sure that everyone gets an opportunity to share
- Discourage side conversations
- Be genuine, participants can identify fakeness
- Use humor, it helps to relax the group
- Have fun

Once the focus group has ended, remember to thank participants for attending. Make sure to collect the demographic forms and rate sheets. Develop a check off list with the names of the participants to acknowledge when each person has received their incentive for attending the meeting. Each name should be checked off as the incentive is provided.

**Post Focus Group**

Once the focus group ends and the participants depart, restore the space back to its original look. Make sure that all garbage is placed in the appropriate areas. Send thank you notes or emails to all participants. Once the discussion group notes have been transcribed, they should be reviewed and analyzed. A summary report should be prepared for the client with a section of recommendations and suggestions to assist in designing the campaign, program, or product.