



Quality Research and its Application

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Abstract:

Focus groups are a qualitative data collection method effective in helping researchers learn the social norms of a community or subgroup, as well as the range of perspectives that exist within that community or subgroup. Focus groups are often used to determine what service or product a particular population wants or would like to have, such as in marketing studies. Because focus groups seek to illuminate group opinion, the method is especially well suited for socio behavioral research that will be used to develop and measure services that meet the needs of a given population. This paper presents the fundamentals of using focus groups in applied qualitative research.

Keywords: *Applied qualitative research, Focus groups, Research*

1. Introduction

A focus group is a form of qualitative research in which a group of people are asked about their perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes towards a product, service, concept, advertisement, idea, or packaging. Questions are asked in an interactive group setting where participants are free to talk with other group members. The first focus group was held in Ernest Dichter's house in a room he built above his garage. The first focus groups were created at the Bureau of Applied Social Research in the USA by associate director sociologist Robert K. Merton. The term itself was coined by psychologist and marketing expert Ernest Dichter. Focus groups have a long history and were used during the Second World War to examine the effectiveness of propaganda.

2. Marketing

In the world of marketing, focus groups are seen as an important tool for acquiring feedback regarding new products, as well as various other topics. In marketing, focus groups are usually used in the early stages of product or concept development, when organizations are trying to create an overall direction for marketing initiative. In particular, focus groups allow companies wishing to develop, package, name, or test market a new product, to discuss, view, and/or test the new product before it is made available to the public. This can provide valuable information about the potential market acceptance of the product. A focus group is an interview, conducted by a trained moderator among a small group of respondents. The interview is conducted in an informal and natural way where respondents are free to give views from any aspect. Participants are recruited on the basis of similar demographics, psychographics, buying attitudes, or behaviors. Today, using audience response keypads to collect questionnaire answers is the new industry trend.

3. Social sciences

In the social sciences and urban planning, focus groups allow interviewers to study people in a more natural conversation pattern than typically occurs in a one-to-one interview. In combination with participant observation, they can be used for learning about groups and their patterns of interaction. An advantage is their fairly low cost compared to surveys, as one can get results relatively quickly and increase the sample size of a report by talking with several people at once.

4. Usability engineering

In usability engineering, a focus group is a survey method to collect the views of users on software or a website. This marketing method can be applied to computer products to better understand the motivations of users and their perception of the product. Unlike other methods of ergonomics, focus group implies several participants: users or future users of the application. The focus group can only collect subjective data, not objective data on the use of the application as the usability test for example. Alan Cooper, in his book "The inmates are running the asylum", suggests that although focus groups might be effective in many industries, they should not be relied upon in the software industry.

5. Types

Variants of focus groups include:

- **Two-way focus group** - one focus group watches another focus group and discusses the observed interactions and conclusion
- **Dual moderator focus group** - one moderator ensures the session progresses smoothly, while another ensures that all the topics are covered
- **Dueling moderator focus group** (fencing- moderator):-two moderators deliberately take opposite sides on the issue under discussion
- **Respondent moderator focus group** - one and only one of the respondents are asked to act as the moderator temporarily
- **Client participant focus groups** - one or more client representatives participate in the discussion, either covertly or overtly
- **Mini focus groups** - groups are composed of four or five members rather than 6 to 12
- **Teleconference focus groups** - telephone network is used
- **Online focus groups** - computers connected via the internet are used Traditional focus groups can provide accurate information, and are less expensive than other forms of traditional marketing research. There can be significant costs however: if a product is to be marketed on a nationwide basis, it would be critical to gather respondents from various locales throughout the country since attitudes about a new product may vary due to geographical considerations. This would require a considerable expenditure in travel and lodging expenses. Additionally, the site of a traditional focus group may or may not be in a locale convenient to a specific client, so client representatives may have to incur travel and lodging expenses as well.

6. Discussions

- Group discussion produces data and insights that would be less accessible without interaction found in a group setting—listening to others' verbalized experiences stimulates memories, ideas, and experiences in participants. This is also known as the group effect where group members engage in “a kind of ‘chaining’ or ‘cascading’ effect; talk links to, or tumbles out of, the topics and expressions preceding it” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 182) Group members discover a common language to describe similar experiences. This enables the capture of a form of “native language” or “vernacular speech” to understand the situation
- Focus groups also provide an opportunity for disclosure among similar others in a setting where participants are validated. For example, in the context of workplace bullying, targeted employees often find themselves in situations where they experience lack of voice and feelings of isolation. Use of focus groups to study workplace bullying therefore serve as both an efficacious and ethical venue for collecting data (see, e.g., Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006).

7. Problems and criticism

A fundamental difficulty with focus groups (and other forms of qualitative research) is the issue of observer dependency: the results obtained are influenced by the researcher or his own reading of the group's discussion, raising questions of validity (see Experimenter's bias). Focus groups are "One shot case studies" especially if they are measuring a property-disposition relationship within the social

sciences, unless they are repeated. Focus groups can create severe issues of external validity, especially the reactive effects of the testing arrangement. Other common (and related) criticism involve groupthink and social desirability bias.

Another issue is with the setting itself. If the focus groups are held in a laboratory setting with a moderator who is a professor and the recording instrument is obtrusive, the participants may either hold back on their responses and/or try to answer the moderator's questions with answers the participants feel that the moderator wants to hear. Another issue with the focus group setting is the lack of anonymity. With all of the other participants, there can not be any guarantee of confidentiality.

Douglas Rushkoff argues that focus groups are often useless, and frequently cause more trouble than they are intended to solve, with focus groups often aiming to please rather than offering their own opinions or evaluations, and with data often cherry picked to support a foregone conclusion. Rushkoff cites the disastrous introduction of New Coke in the 1980s as a vivid example of focus group analysis gone bad.

Jonathan Ive, Apple's senior vice president of industrial design, also said that Apple had found a good reason not to do focus groups: "They just ensure that you don't offend anyone, and produce bland inoffensive products."

8. Focus group data analysis

The analysis of focus group data presents both challenges and opportunities when compared to other types of qualitative data. Some authors have suggested that data should be analysed in the same manner as interview data, while others have suggested that the unique features of focus group data - particularly the opportunity that it provides to observe interactions between group members - means that distinctive forms of analysis should be used. Data analysis can take place at the level of the individual or the group.

Focus group data provides the opportunity to analyse the strength with which an individual holds an opinion. If they are presented with opposing opinions or directly challenged, the individual may either modify their position or defend it. Bringing together all the comments that an individual makes in order can enable the researcher to determine whether their view changes in the course of discussion and, if so, further examination of the transcript may reveal which contributions by other focus group members brought about the change.

At the collective level, focus group data can sometimes reveal shared understandings or common views. However, there is a danger that a consensus can be assumed when not every person has spoken: the researcher will need to consider carefully whether the people who have not expressed a view can be assumed to agree with the majority, or whether they may simply be unwilling to voice their disagreement.

Steps in Moderating a Focus Group

Preparing for the Focus Group

1. Study the focus group guide.
2. Study the informed consent document.
3. Practice both moderating and taking notes.
4. Decide with the note-taker how you will handle not using participants' real names.
5. Review debriefing notes from previous focus groups.
6. Prepare a checklist of everything you need to bring to the focus group. (See the Focus Group
7. Confirm the reservation of the focus group location and arrange for refreshments (if applicable).

Day of the Focus Group

- 8 Before leaving for the focus group, use a checklist to verify that you have all equipment.
- 9 Arrive early at the focus group site to set up the room and materials.
- 10 Label all data documentation materials.
- 11 Greet and check in participants.
- 12 Obtain informed consent from each participant before they join the group (unless the note-taker has this responsibility).
- 13 Assign identifying pseudonyms or numbers to participants and provide materials for making name cards (unless the note-taker has this responsibility).
- 14 Make a seating chart to identify speakers in your notes.
- 15 Introduce yourself and explain your role.
- 16 Lay the ground rules.
- 17 Lead the discussion according to the focus group guide.
- 18 Take brief notes in the focus group guide during the discussion.
- 19 End the question-asking phase of the discussion.
- 20 Give the note-taker the opportunity to ask questions.
- Give the participants the opportunity to ask questions.
- Obtain oral confirmation of the group's informed consent while the tape recorder is still on (if specified in the protocol).

After the focus group, clarify any factual misconceptions expressed by participants. Reimburse the participants in accordance with study procedures. Wrap up all conversations and clear the room.

9. Immediately after the Focus Group

Take a break

Participate in the debriefing session led by the note-taker.

Using a checklist, gather all forms and notes.

Expand your notes, within 24 hours if possible. **P S H E C K L I S T**

Focus Group Checklist

Make arrangements for

- Private setting for focus group site
- Transportation of staff to focus group site
- Transportation of participants to focus group site
- Refreshments for participants (if applicable)

What to take to the focus group

Equipment

- 1 tape recorder (plus 1 extra, if available)
- 2 blank 90-minute cassette tapes per focus group
- Spare batteries
- Field notebook and pens
- Name card materials

Focus group packet

- 1 large, heavy-duty envelope
- Archival information sheet with archival number
- 2 copies of focus group guide (1 for moderator, 1 for note-taker)
- Informed consent forms (enough for all participants)
- Note-taking form
- Debriefing form
- Participant reimbursement (if applicable)
- Reimbursement form (if applicable)

What to place in the envelope after the focus group

- Completed archival information sheet
- Signed informed consent form (signed by moderator and/or note-taker)
- Labeled focus group guide with notes (moderator's copy)
- Labeled focus group guide (note-taker's copy)
- Note-taker's field notes
- Labeled cassette tapes, re-record tabs punched out
- Signed reimbursement form (if applicable)

References

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