How to Conduct a Focus Group

By Judith Sharken Simon

While focus groups are often seen as a technique reserved for corporations involved in expensive, competitive advertising, they can also be extremely useful for nonprofit organizations wishing to connect with their communities. Just as important for the budget-wise nonprofit, focus groups are relatively inexpensive and easy to conduct. Most people love to be asked their opinion and they're generally not shy about voicing it.

Nonprofit organizations generally use focus groups in planning, marketing, or evaluation, either to improve some specific product or service or, more globally, during the development of strategic plans or mission statements. Within these broader goals, focus groups have multiple applications. These include:

• Collecting opinions, beliefs, and attitudes about issues of interest to your organization
• Checking out your assumptions
• Encouraging discussion about a particular topic
• Building excitement about a topic from the spontaneous combination of participants' comments
• Providing an opportunity for facilitator and participants to learn more about a topic or issue.

While all these are valuable, the first two — collecting opinions, beliefs and attitudes on issues of interest to your organization and checking out your assumptions — are the most important. The last three objectives are better thought of as welcome by-products.

Not only can focus groups yield valuable information. They also help you build good rapport with the community you serve.

Step 1- Define the Purpose

You need a clear, specific purpose statement in order to develop the right questions and elicit the best information. Purpose statements that are broad and general (e.g., "To find out what people think") make it hard to identify participants, develop questions, and get useful results.

After writing an initial purpose statement, ask yourself, "Why do we want to know that?" Usually the answer will lead to a clearer and more refined purpose statement. The clearer the purpose statement, the easier it will be to design the rest of the process.

Step 2- Establish a Timeline

A focus group cannot be developed overnight. You should start planning no less than four weeks ahead of the actual session. Six to eight weeks is probably more realistic. In all likelihood, it will take at least that much time to identify the participants, develop and test the questions, locate a site, invite and follow up with participants, and gather the materials for the sessions. Below is a list of standard components and a typical timeline:

1. Write the purpose statement — 6-8 weeks prior to the session date
2. Identify the participants — 6-8 weeks prior
3. Gather address and phone information on the participants — 6-8 weeks prior
4. Select a facilitator — 4-5 weeks prior
5. Develop the questions — 4-5 weeks prior
6. Develop a script — 4-5 weeks prior
7. Arrange and reserve the session site — 4 weeks prior
8. Write and send the invitations — 3-4 weeks prior
9. Follow up the invitations with phone calls — 2 weeks prior
10. Make room arrangements (seating, equipment, refreshments, etc.) — 1 week prior
11. Place a reminder call to the participants — 2 days prior
12. Gather session materials — 2 days prior
13. Conduct the focus group — Session date
14. Send a thank-you letter to the participants — 2 days post
15. Transcribe notes from the session — 2 days post
16. Summarize the session and mail summary to the participants — 1 week post
17. Analyze sessions and write report — When all information is gathered

Step 3- Identify and Invite participants

Deciding who to invite is a five-stage process:

1. Determine how many participants you need and how many to invite.
2. Review your purpose statement and develop a list of key attributes to seek in participants.
3. Using the list of attributes you have developed, brainstorm possible participants and categories of participants.
4. Refine the list by looking for "two characteristics in common" and "homogeneity and heterogeneity" characteristics in the potential participants.
5. Secure names and contact information, finalize the list, and send invitations.

Step 4- Generate the Questions

Because the focus group will last for little more than one or two hours, you will only have time for four or five questions. That's not many, especially when you consider that there are really two kinds of questions: introductory or warm-up questions and more serious questions that get at the heart of your research. Since the first two questions are usually a warm-up, of some sort, that leaves you three questions to probe the issue you're researching.

The sequence and tone of the questions are as significant as the questions themselves. To be effective, focus group questions should be open-ended and move from the general to the specific.

Once you have a list of questions, look at your purpose statement again. Which questions do not apply? Which questions seem really important? Now look at your list of possible participants. Which questions would they be able to answer? Eliminate as many questions as you can. If you are using a group to design the questions, have everyone vote for their top five questions from the whole list. Once you have selected the top five questions, find someone with good editing skills to rewrite them. Finally, arrange the questions in a sequence that will be comfortable for the participants, moving from the general to the specific, easy to challenging, and positive to negative.

Before using the questions in an actual focus group session, test them out. Do the responses you get give you the information you need? Sometimes questions seem great on paper, but when implemented they don't elicit the responses we need. Go through the questions yourself and try answering them as if you were in the focus group. Pull some staff members together for a practice focus group and try the questions out. If they work, use them. If not, revise them.

Step 5- Generate a Script

Generating the questions is a prelude to developing a more detailed script for your focus group. If you are experienced at running meetings, you may be tempted to do without a script. But a good script has several benefits:

• The process of writing a script helps you be sure you've put the questions in context for the participants.
• A script ensures that each focus group is conducted in a similar fashion, making the results more reliable.
• A script helps the facilitator stay on track and on time.
• A script is helpful when the facilitator is external to the process (e.g., a volunteer or hired facilitator).

Plan on a one to two-hour time frame. A minimum of one hour is recommended because the process requires some time for opening and closing remarks as well as at least one or two questions. Be cautious not to exceed two hours. After two hours participants and facilitator start to fade; the questions and subsequent discussion lose their relevance. The average adult attention span is about 20 minutes, so a good focus group script writer carefully crafts the time so that participants stay engaged, making sure sections are no more than 20 minutes long.

There are three parts to a focus group script:

1. The opening is the time for the facilitator to welcome the group, introduce the purpose and context of the focus group, explain what a focus group is and how it will flow, and make the introductions.
2. The question section is where you ask the questions that you designed and tested in Step 4
3. The closing section wraps up the focus group. This includes thanking the participants, giving them an opportunity and avenue for further input, telling them how the data will be used, and explaining when the larger process will be completed.

Step 6- Select a Facilitator

One thing that distinguishes focus groups from interviews or written surveys is that they require a facilitator with some skill to run them. Don't be scared off by this requirement. It doesn't mean you need a highly paid consultant, but it does mean you need someone with a working knowledge of group dynamics and a reputation as a good meeting leader. In particular, a focus group facilitator should be able to deal tactfully with outspoken group members, keep the discussion on track, and make sure every participant is heard.

The facilitator can be a staff member, volunteer, or member of a committee or task force. Budget permitting, you can hire a professional facilitator. You can also use a two-person team, where one person moderates the discussion and another records it.

Be wary of anything about the facilitator (or facilitators) that might make participants uncomfortable. For example, you may not want the organization's executive director to facilitate a staff focus group about a new performance appraisal system.

Also consider qualities that might make participants more comfortable. For example, a facilitator from outside the organization may be viewed as more objective and may elicit more honest responses from participants.

Step 7- Choose the Location

You don't need the kind of room that professional focus group operations use — with a one-way mirror or sophisticated recording devices — but you do need a setting in which the participants feel comfortable expressing their opinions.

When choosing a location, ask these questions:

- What message does the setting send? (Is it corporate, upscale, cozy, informal, sterile, inviting?)
- Does the setting encourage conversation?
- How will the setting affect the information gathered? Will the setting bias the information offered?
- Can it comfortably accommodate nine to fifteen people (six to twelve

participants plus facilitators), where all can view each other?
• Is it easily accessible? (Consider access for people with disabilities, safety, transportation, parking, etc.)

Choose a setting that is appropriate and makes the participants feel comfortable. For example, if you are conducting a focus group with members of a mutual support group, you may want to hold the session at the support group's regular meeting place. If you are conducting a focus group of funders, it may be beneficial to hold the session at one of your board member's corporate boardrooms.

Step 8- Conduct the Focus Group

Now that you've identified why you're doing a focus group, selected and invited the participants, chosen the facilitator and location, and developed the script, it's time to actually conduct the session.

The materials you will need for the session are:

Notepads and pencils
Flip chart or easel paper
Focus group script
List of participants
Markers
Masking tape
Name tags
Refreshments
Watch or clock

Conducting the focus group is primarily a matter of following the script, but of course there's more to it than that. The facilitator should arrive before the participants, set out the refreshments, and arrange the room so all participants can view one another; U-shaped seating or all at one table is best. As participants arrive, the facilitator should set the tone for a comfortable, enjoyable discussion by welcoming them just as would any gracious host.

Once the group gets underway, all the skills of a good facilitator come into play. Think of it as a combination of running a meeting and managing group dynamics. Attention to the following items will help ensure success:

1. Set the tone; participants should have fun and feel good about the session.
2. Make sure every participant is heard.
3. Get full answers (not just "we need more money" but "we need more money to hire a receptionist to answer phones").
4. Monitor time closely.
5. Keep the discussion on track.
6. Head off exchanges of opinion about individual items.

Step 9- Interpret and Report Results

There are three steps to creating a report on your focus group:

1. Summarize each meeting. If you've taped the meeting, be sure to spot-check the tape. If there was some failure, it's easier to reconstruct the discussion immediately after the session. The facilitator should review the session with another person to capture fresh impressions.

Finally, transcribe notes that were taken soon after the session is over and write a summary of the focus group.

The quick turnaround time on the transcription helps avoid memory lapses. It's easiest for the facilitator or recorder to remember what was meant by a particular acronym or shorthand immediately following the session than it is a month later.

2. Analyze the summaries. Start by reading all the focus group summaries in one sitting. Look for trends (comments that seem to appear repeatedly in the data) and surprises (unexpected comments that are worth noting). Keep in mind that context and tone are just as important as the reiteration of particular words. If a comment (or a number of comments) seemed to be phrased negatively, elicited emotional responses, or triggered many other comments, that would be worth noting in the analysis.

3. Write the report. The final report can take many different shapes, but it should include all information about the background and purpose of the focus group, details of the sessions, results, and conclusions.

Step 10- Translate Results Into Action

The greatest failures in the use of focus groups occur in two areas: failure to report to the focus group participants and failure to apply the results to the purpose for which they were originally commissioned.

Remember, one major benefit of focus groups for nonprofits is that the process engages people in the topic. Once they are invested, don't let them down. Follow up with participants. Mail them the summary from their session, send them a thank-you letter, and include them in correspondence about how the information was used. While good public relations is not the primary goal of a focus group, don't let the energy you invested go to waste.

Here are some suggestions for translating the results into action:

- Schedule a meeting to review the summaries and discuss their implications.
- Put the focus group information in context. Refer to your purpose statement and analyze the answers or insights the focus groups gave you. Compare, contrast, and combine the focus group information with information gathered from other sources such as surveys, interviews, or secondary research sources.
- Highlight the main themes, issues, problems, or questions that arose in the focus groups. Discuss and record how you will address these.
- If there is a lot of information, prioritize it. Then decide what actions need to be taken with regard to the priority items. For example, share the information with local policy makers, build some items into staff work plans, and incorporate specific suggestions into the budget.

Focus Group FAQs

Q: Should we have people such as board members or staff observing the focus group?
A: A few observers are fine and do not interfere with the focus group. But be careful to consider whether the observers' presence will inhibit the participants from speaking freely. Also, be sure the number of observers isn't out of balance with the number of participants.

Q: Do we have to pay people for attending focus groups. How does this work for financially strapped nonprofits?

A: It's nice to offer people a gift or token for participating in a focus group, but it isn't necessary. People like to be asked their opinion and are happy to participate without an incentive. If you are able, offer an inexpensive gift related to your agency, such as a T-shirt or coffee mug imprinted with your logo.

Q: Some audiences, like parents, are especially hard to reach. How can we get them to attend a focus group?
A: Consider ways to minimize the barriers to attendance. For example, you can offer on-site child care, reimbursement for travel, or free bus passes. You can hold the focus group in someone's home, invite participants to bring a friend, or take the focus group to a location where the audience usually convenes. In some cases, you may need to pay people to attend, offer a meal as part of the reward for participation, or provide some other incentive that fits the needs of your audience.

Q: Is it important to send out background information beforehand to the focus group participants?
A: This depends on the purpose of the focus group. Sometimes the topic is so complex that background reading can help orient the participants. Be aware, though, that no matter what you send, some people simply won't read the information. Never assume that participants have read the background information you've sent them. Some nonprofits also use the focus group invitation as an opportunity for low-cost public relations by including a brochure along with the invitation.

Q: Should we record or videotape the sessions?
A: Recording is not necessary. First, consider whether you will review or transcribe the hours of tape. Most nonprofits that record focus groups never listen to or look at the tapes. Second, recording is one more thing to tend to. You will have to make sure the equipment is functioning and you may need someone there to operate it.

The Right Size

Focus groups should consist of six to twelve participants. Fewer than six participants tends to limit the conversation, because there is not enough diversity to spark energy and creativity. A group larger than twelve gets to be unwieldy and voices get lost.

Determine how many people you expect to be in each focus group. If you have fewer than six, consider expanding your selection criteria, combining two groups, or both. If your group looks like it will be larger than twelve, consider narrowing your selection criteria or holding two focus groups.

Having determined the number of participants you want in each group, you next need to estimate how many people will actually respond to your invitations. If participants come from some preexisting group, such as a regularly scheduled staff meeting, then attendance and how many to invite is not an issue — response rate will be close to 100 percent.

If you use a group that's harder to reach, such as single parents or homeless people, you may need to adjust your expected response rate to a lower percentage. You may also need to make special accommodations, such as providing child care, transportation, or meals.

Judith Sharken Simon is a former senior consultant with Community Services Group of the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation. This article is adapted from The Fieldstone Alliance Nonprofit Field Guide Series Conducting Successful Focus Groups*, Copyright © 1999 Fieldstone Alliance, all rights reserved. Used with permission. www.fieldstonealliance.org.*