

## Steps for Conducting Focus Groups or Individual In-depth Interviews

### 1. Plan the study

Plan your study with the input of your strategy team, stakeholders, and research experts so that collaboratively you determine:

- What you want to learn
- When you need to have that information
- How you'll apply what you learn
- Your budget
- Your criteria for participants. Select people who are:
  - Typical of your audience (the same behavioral, demographic and psychographic characteristics). You may want to conduct separate groups with “doers” (those who already engage in the desired behavior) and “non-doers” (those who don't) to help identify what actions the doers take and why. Those approaches then can be explored with the non-doers.
  - Not experts. Exclude market researchers and advertising professionals (because of their familiarity with the methodology) and those who have, or might be perceived by other group members as having, expertise in the subject matter. For example, exclude health professionals from focus groups when the topic is a health issue. In addition, anyone involved in the production, distribution or marketing of tobacco products should be excluded from focus groups regarding the issue of tobacco control.
  - Of the same gender, race, age, level of formal education or other characteristic(s) within each group so that participants are more likely to express themselves freely. If your target audience includes people of different demographics, consider whether you need to conduct separate sessions for each audience segment in order to determine whether there are differences between the groups.
  - Relative newcomers to interviews, so that their reactions will be spontaneous. This will help you avoid questioning “professional” respondents (i.e., those who have participated in focus groups or individual interviews before) who may lead or monopolize the discussion. Typically, the recruitment screeners exclude people who have participated in qualitative research in the past six months. (Recruitment screeners are discussed more thoroughly in Step 3.)
- The number of groups or interviews you'll conduct
  - If you're using focus groups, conduct at least two groups with each audience segment. For example, if you're conducting separate groups with men and women, you would need at least four groups – two with men, two with women.
  - If you're using individual interviews, conduct about 10 interviews per audience segment. If audience perceptions vary or the audience feedback is unclear, you may want to conduct additional groups or interviews, especially if you revise the moderator/interviewer guide to more fully explore unresolved issues.
- Who will conduct the research.

### 2. Choose the location and format for focus groups or interviews

You can conduct focus groups or interviews several ways:

- Commercial focus group facilities can recruit participants. These facilities offer audio- and/or video-recording equipment as well as one-way mirrors with observation rooms. Commercial facilities may not be available in small towns or in rural locations.
- Teleconference services can set up telephone focus groups. Most allow observers to listen without being heard, and some have remote viewing capabilities that allow the moderator to see a list of participants (with a symbol next to the one currently speaking) or notes sent by a technician from observers listening to the call. Some teleconference services can recruit participants as well.
- You can also conduct focus groups or interviews in meeting rooms at churches, schools, office buildings, community centers, or other locations. If an observation room with a one-way mirror isn't available, allow staff to listen by hooking up speakers or closed-circuit TV in a nearby room or by audio- and/or video-recording the session. In some cases, you may use one or two quiet observers taking notes in the room.

The table below shows the pros and cons of different formats for focus groups and individual interviews:

<b>Format</b>	<b>Pros</b>	<b>Cons</b>
<b>Face-to-face</b> Moderator/interviewer and participants are in one room, usually around a table; observers (members of the research team) are behind a one-way mirror	Can assess body language Observers can be present without distracting participants If videotaped, can share with others who couldn't attend Have participants' undivided attention	Responders lose anonymity Higher travel expenses because of multiple locales May be a logistical challenge in rural areas or small towns
<b>Telephone</b> Moderator/interviewer and participants are on a conference call; observers listen in	More convenient for participants and observers Can easily include people in rural areas or small towns, and the homebound For professional groups, less likely to have people who know one another Relative anonymity may result in more frank discussion of sensitive issues	Can't assess non-verbal reactions More difficult to get reactions to visuals (they can be sent ahead of time, but you still have less control over exposure) Participants can be distracted by their surroundings May have noise interference from callers' environments
<b>Internet</b> Moderator and participants "chat," observers watch	Complete record of session instantly available Relative anonymity may result in more frank discussion of sensitive issues	Useful only for participants comfortable with this mode of communication Relatively slow pace limits topics that can be covered No way to assess whether

Format	Pros	Cons
		participants meet recruitment criteria Can't assess body language or tone of voice More difficult to get reactions to visuals (they can be sent ahead of time, but you still have less control over exposure) Participants can be distracted by their surroundings

### 3. Draft a recruitment screener

A recruitment screener is a short questionnaire that is administered to potential participants, typically by telephone, to ensure that they meet the criteria you developed in step 2. Your research expert or research vendor, if you have one, can do this. The screener should help you exclude people who know one another or have expertise in the subject of the sessions. Potential participants can be told what the subject is in general (e.g., “a health topic”), but shouldn’t be told what the specific subject is. If participants know the subject in advance, they may formulate ideas or study to become more knowledgeable about the subject than the typical audience member. For similar reasons, they also shouldn’t be told who the sponsor is. The screener should also guarantee the approximate mix of respondents within a group that isn’t separated by certain characteristics, such as a balance of men and women in a mixed-gender group.

### 4. Recruit participants

Choose the right participants for the focus groups or interviews, or your research may be unreliable. Even if a vendor does the recruiting, make sure the screener is followed carefully so that only those who qualify will be included in the research.

Participants should be recruited by telephone one to three weeks before the sessions. How you identify potential participants depends on the type of people they are and the resources you have. Focus group facilities typically identify members of the audience through their own databases. If you do the recruiting yourself, you might need to run an ad in a local publication, work with community organizations, purchase lists of phone numbers of individuals with certain characteristics, or identify professionals through a relevant association or mailing list service. Here are some ways to recruit, depending on your budget and internal resources:

- Hire a focus group facility or independent recruiter. To find such facilities, consult a directories from the American Marketing Association or the Marketing Research Association. If you have many facilities and recruiters to choose from, consider getting recommendations from other local organizations that conduct qualitative research from time to time.

- Get help from a university marketing research or advertising class, if they are knowledgeable and experienced in focus group research.
- Work through gatekeepers such as teachers (for students), health care systems (for patients, physicians or nurses), religious institutions or community organizations (whose members meet your audience criteria; a small donation may encourage the organization to recruit for you), or instructors of English as a Second Language courses (for recent immigrants).

### ***Getting participants to show up***

To ensure that enough people show up, offer an incentive (usually money) and over-recruit more people than you actually need. If everyone shows up, select those who best fit your screening criteria, thank the extra participants, give them the agreed-upon incentive, and ask them to leave. You also can make sure you have enough people by:

- Scheduling sessions at times that are convenient for your potential participants (e.g., at lunch or after work)
- Choosing a safe and convenient site
- Providing transportation (or reimbursing them for agreed-upon transportation costs)
- Arranging for child care, if necessary
- Letting participants know you'll provide snacks or refreshments.

### ***Recruiting for telephone interviews***

If you're recruiting for telephone interviews, create a spreadsheet with spaces for the following information about each potential participant: the time zone in which the person is located; the date, time and number at which they should be called; and the result of each call (e.g., scheduled an interview, no answer, busy, refused, etc.). This type of spreadsheet can also be helpful in planning in-person interviews and in using other research methodologies.

## **5. Develop a moderator's guide**

The quality of the moderating guide is critical to your success. The moderator's guide tells the moderator/interviewer what information you want from the participants and helps him or her keep the discussion on track and on time. Usually, your research expert or vendor will draft the guide for you. Before this is done, you'll need to determine:

- What you want to learn from the focus group or interview
- How you'll apply what you learn
- What tools (e.g., descriptive information, message concepts or other draft creative work) you'll need to provide for the sessions.

Then, write questions for the guide that relate to the purposes you have identified. Most questions should be open-ended so participants can provide more in-depth responses than just "yes" or "no." Also, make sure the questions aren't worded in a way that will prompt a particular response. For example, instead of asking "What problems are you having with quitting smoking?" you could start by asking "Are you having any problems with quitting smoking?" This will help ensure that participants offer honest responses, not the answers they think you want. The time and depth of exploration given to each issue should reflect the issue's importance to your purposes.

In the focus groups, don't include questions for group discussion if you need individual responses. Instead, you can have the moderator give each participant self-administered questionnaires to be completed *before* the session. Participants also can be asked to individually rank items such as potential actions, benefits, or message concepts on paper during a session to combine individual and group reactions.

## **6. Conduct the focus groups or interviews**

Focus groups and interviews typically begin with the moderator welcoming participants and briefing them on the process (e.g., that there are no right or wrong answers, that it's important to speak one at a time and maintain confidentiality, that observers will be present, that the session will be recorded). In focus groups, participants then introduce themselves to the group, including some information relevant to the discussion (e.g., number of quit attempts, number of cigarettes smoked each day). Next, the moderator asks a few simple "icebreaker" questions to help participants get used to the process and to help reduce any anxiety. This also helps the moderator develop rapport with the participants. Again, to reduce the risk of introducing bias, the study's sponsor should not be revealed.

Next, the session shifts to an in-depth investigation of participants' perspectives and issues. Following the moderator's guide, the moderator manages the session and ensures that all topics are covered without overtly directing the discussion. Participants are encouraged to express their views and even disagree with one another about the topics. The moderator doesn't simply accept what participants say but probes to learn about participants' thinking and attitudes. The moderator also seeks opinions from *all* participants so that all are heard, rather than a vocal few dominating the discussion.

Near the end of a focus group, the moderator will often give participants an activity or simply excuse himself or herself for a moment to check with the observers and obtain any additional questions. Notes can also be sent in to the moderator throughout the session if the observers want other questions asked or other changes made.

One advantage of the focus group/interview methodology is that the moderator's guide and any materials presented can be revised between sessions.