
TEN TOP TIPS FOR GREAT FOCUS GROUPS

There's no doubt that great focus groups require meticulous planning. My Top Ten Tips below can't guarantee great groups on their own, but they will go a long way to address common pitfalls such as:

- losing focus,
- ceding control of the group,
- running out of time,
- discussions that go off track.

- TIP 1** Develop clear objectives.
- TIP 2** Be specific about who you need to talk with and why.
- TIP 3** Develop a clear screening process at recruitment stage.
- TIP 4** Don't save the most important topics until the end.
- TIP 5** Try it out with a friend or colleague.
- TIP 6** Create a relaxed, positive atmosphere.
- TIP 7** Be in charge of the virtual microphone.
- TIP 8** Never ask leading questions.
- TIP 9** Ask open-ended questions.
- TIP 10** Never assume you understand what participants mean.

Need to go a bit deeper on any of these? Read on...

TIP 1 DEVELOP CLEAR OBJECTIVES

You might be tempted, when planning focus groups, to ask as many questions as possible in the belief that you'll achieve better 'value for money'.

This is a myth.

It never pays off to bombard participants with questions. What was intended as an enlightening discussion turns into a verbal questionnaire, with no mental space or time to fully engage with the issues or questions you wish to explore.

I've found these three simple questions, answered at the outset, helps focus my thinking and weed out unnecessary lines of investigation.

- What do I need to know?
- Why?
- To what end?

TIP 2 BE SPECIFIC ABOUT WHO YOU NEED TO TALK WITH AND WHY

To get the best from your focus groups you need to ensure you talk with the right people in the right sort of groups. Clearly defined groups allow you, at analysis stage, to spot potentially important similarities and differences between them. The 'tighter' the group profile the more robust the insight.

The key questions you need to ask yourself here are:

- **Who do we want to talk with and why?**
the types of people that are relevant
- **In what ways are they meaningfully similar?**
the characteristics they share
- **In what ways are they meaningfully different?**
the characteristics that need to be unique to each group to provide a valuable perspective
- **What/who do you need to exclude from this research?**
traits, characteristics, behaviours that are not relevant and could skew the results

If, for example, you want to explore the reasons behind low family attendance you may want to distinguish between infrequent, lapsed and non-attenders. Profiling in this way would enable you to meaningfully compare and contrast the findings at analysis stage.

TIP 3 DEVELOP A CLEAR SCREENING PROCESS AT RECRUITMENT STAGE

A screening questionnaire (verbal or written depending on the recruitment channel) ensures that those participating are exactly who you want to talk to. This minimises the potential for rogue participants to skew the results.

Create a list of inclusion and exclusion criteria based on your answers to Tip 2. This will focus your thinking.

If, during your screening process, someone does not fit the bill, a gentle way of excluding them from the research is to say that the group they qualify for is already full.

TIP 4 DON'T SAVE THE MOST IMPORTANT TOPICS UNTIL THE END

It's common in group discussions for participants to run with a topic and you may end up running out of time before you've explored everything. To avoid this place your most important questions in the middle of the session. This allows participants to 'warm-up' to the subject and avoids any potential time crunch that could happen at the end.

You could also try assigning time blocks to each section of your discussion guide and try where possible stick to them. The degree to which you stick to the timings is a judgment call which comes with experience. A good rule of thumb is to consider whether the strand of extended conversation is revealing valuable insights that relate directly to your research objectives? If not, move the conversation on.

TIP 5 TRY OUT A TEST RUN WITH A FRIEND OR COLLEAGUE

It's not easy to plan a great focus group on your own. Informal run-throughs with a willing 'ear' are a great way of snagging a discussion guide before you go live.

- **LANGUAGE**

What makes sense to you may sound like gobbledygook to someone else. Our professional language may simply come across as alienating jargon to a layperson.

- **TIMING**

A run-through will also give you a better sense of the timings for the discussion. Do you have too many questions? Are you placing too much emphasis on a particular topic to the detriment of another?

Continued...

- **FLOW**

Flow is also an important consideration. Achieving conversational flow encourages people to hold a train of thought and build on their thinking. Done well, this can add depth and dimension to their answers. A run-through will reveal if you've asked questions in the wrong order. Does it 'feel' right? Trust your instincts on this one.

- **NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION**

Body language, eye-contact and posture are important in managing group dynamics so be mindful of how you are behaving as well as what you're saying.

- **ATTENTIVE LISTENING**

Your participants are the most fascinating people in the world at that moment in time. Listen well, be attentive and look interested in order to increase people's confidence in speaking their truths.

TIP 6 CREATE A RELAXED, POSITIVE ATMOSPHERE

Your primary responsibility when moderating a focus group is the well-being of the participants. Your own demeanour and behaviour at the start of the group therefore is extremely important in putting people at ease. Here are some pointers:

- Be welcoming when people first arrive.
- Personally greet as many as you can.
- Thank them for coming.
- Give everyone a name badge so you can refer to each other by name.
- Ensure everyone is comfortable and relaxed before you begin.
- Provide high quality refreshments.
- Be positive, open-minded and interested in what participants say throughout.
- Never appear to judge – in word or in body language.

TIP 7 BE IN CHARGE OF THE VIRTUAL MICROPHONE

As the moderator, you are responsible for managing the discussion. Here are some things to think about:

• VERBAL CUES

When moving from one topic to another, give a clear verbal cue that the previous discussion has finished so participant's can make the mental shift to the next element of the discussion.

"Great. What I'd like us to move onto now discussion about ..."

• KEEPING ON TRACK

There is always someone who 'goes off on one' and starts telling a story that is not relevant to the research. I always address this by raising my hand and then bringing up the metaphor of going 'off-road'

"I think we've gone a little off-road here. Time is limited so can I bring us back on track to our discussion about ..."

• SHARE OF VOICE

Every participant has an important contribution to make. It is vital therefore to obtain balanced representation – or 'share of voice' - across the group. This means proactively dealing with dominant and reticent participants.

For the dominant participant try: *"You've made some very good points. Thank you... I'm interested in what other members of the group might want to add. Who else has something to say?"*

For the reticent participant try: *"Let's open the conversation out a little. Sarah, what has occurred to you during the conversation?"*

TIP 8 NEVER ASK LEADING QUESTIONS

It can be very tempting to test out people's opinions in relation to your own assumptions.

The way to address this is to ask open questions (who, what, when, where, how) or simply invite the group to talk and elaborate from their own perspectives

• LEADING QUESTIONS

"Do you think our online booking service is overly complicated?"

"List 3 things you didn't enjoy about your last visit to ..."

• OPEN QUESTIONS

"Tell me about your online booking experience."

"If you were to describe ... to a friend, what would you say?"

TIP 9 NEVER ASSUME YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT PARTICIPANTS MEAN

Your own subjectivity might lead you to misinterpret what someone means. In order to avoid this, keep checking and asking what people mean when they say something, especially if it involves a judgment or an adjective:

“When you say ‘I was disappointed with the customer service’ what do you mean by that?”

Another approach is to clarify your understanding by paraphrasing what the participant says. If your assumptions are wrong the participant will soon put you right.

“What I’m understanding here is that you ... how does that seem to you?”

A good way to finish a focus group is to reflect back the key points you have learnt as a result of the discussion and invite feedback. This may lead to additional insights or clarify key points further.

“The key points I’m taking away from this session are ... Does anyone have anything else to add?”

“Am I right in thinking that the main points from our discussion are ...?”

“My understanding is that these are what matter to you most ... how does that seem to you?”

TIP 10 LEAVE THEM ON A HIGH

Focus groups are an important experiential brand touch point for all participants that can generate interest and deepen loyalty if conducted well.

It’s important therefore to ‘leave them on a high’. Here are some pointers:

- Thank them for their time.
- Praise the session and tell them how valuable it has been.
- Tell them what will happen next.
- Seek to engage them further by inviting them to join the mailing list or opt-in to take part in further research. Give them opportunity to do this immediately.
- Offer to share the results of the research with them.
- Wish them a safe journey home.
- Smile.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

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