

Focus Group Protocols

Why Conduct Focus Groups?

A focus group is a structured method used to obtain information that allows you to ask a number of people the same set of questions at the same time. Questions are carefully prepared in advance and a skilled, objective facilitator leads a planned discussion in a relaxed, comfortable environment. Responses are generally given orally, although they may be given in writing.

The goal is to obtain information about knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and opinions of the participants regarding a given issue. The focus group method is a good way to gather information from different sub-groups in the community. Focus groups are not used for reaching consensus or to provide extensive education on tobacco advertising and promotion, but rather to hear opinions and points of view about these issues.

Advantages

- Relatively easy way to learn about community ideas and opinions
- Gives a better sense of strategies and approaches tailored to your community
- Can develop an understanding of how a group thinks about this subject
- Fast turnaround time and flexibility

Disadvantages

- Not useful for drawing conclusions about the larger population
- Can be difficult to recruit participants
- Results rely heavily on the setting and facilitator
- Data are sometimes difficult to analyze
- Takes more time than written surveys

Formulating Survey Questions

A set of suggested questions is included for those who choose to conduct focus groups. You may use some or all of the questions or create additional questions specific to your community. It is important to formulate questions that will elicit the information you are seeking. Be sure to phrase questions so that they can be clearly understood by the participants. In most cases open-ended questions may provide more useful information than yes/no types of responses. It is important to ask questions that are framed in a neutral way, not in a way that will bias responses. Be sure to pilot test your questions before you choose a final format, as responses to the same questions may vary widely depending on the format.

How Many Groups Should be Conducted?

Determining the appropriate number of focus groups to host depends on a variety of factors including the size and composition of your target group, but four to five groups of merchants would be adequate (more groups will be needed in large, complex communities). If you are interested in learning about retailers from specific cultural groups, you may want to run separate focus groups for each. It is best to use facilitators who are similar in background to the participants.

What is the Length of a Typical Session?

Focus group sessions can last from one to three hours. Retailers tend to be very busy so tailor your groups to fit their constraints.

How Many People Should Be in Each Group?

The focus groups are comprised of 6 to 12 people of a similar background.

Who Should Be in the Groups?

Try to recruit retailers from different types of stores, e.g., liquor, convenience, mom and pop, grocery stores. Be sure that you recruit either owners or managers of stores that sell cigarettes, are knowledgeable about the tobacco products in their stores, and that advertise these products in their stores. If you can find retailers who sell cigarettes but don't advertise them, you may want to include them as well.

How Should Focus Group Participants Be Recruited?

It is important to strategize about how to recruit participants for the focus groups. You can use the yellow pages to call stores or you can visit the stores to try to enlist retailers through personal contact.

Plan to contact possible participants by phone or in-person one to two weeks before the session and explain the purpose of the focus group, who will be involved, etc. Follow up with a letter of invitation and be sure to give the participants a reminder phone call prior to the session. It is a good idea to slightly over recruit the number of participants to allow for no-shows.

Be prepared to offer a substantial financial incentive if you want to be successful with your recruitment efforts. You are asking busy people to take time away from their jobs so an incentive or honorarium will be an important part of your success.

What Are the Logistical Considerations?

Make sure the location you select has a room with enough space to comfortably accommodate tables and chairs needed for the focus group. The facilitator should arrive early to set up the room with an easel and chart-pad for recording members' comments and to make any other changes needed. Group responses are usually recorded by a helper who writes down all the comments so the facilitator remains free to facilitate the group. If the session is being tape-recorded, set up the equipment and bring extra tapes, batteries, and extension cords. A few helpful hints in organizing the session include:

- Seat experts and loud participants next to the facilitator
- Seat shy participants directly across from the facilitator
- Bring enough copies of handouts and/or visual aids
- Have nametags or name tents for participants

How Do I Conduct a Focus Group?

The participants are welcomed and made to feel at ease. The facilitator asks open-ended questions in an objective "information gathering" approach. In most cases the facilitator asks the members of the group to provide their own, personal response to a question, or they can ask the member to speculate on what "others like you" would think or do in a given situation. The goal is to build rapport and trust in the group and probe respondents about tobacco advertising and promotion strategies without reacting to their opinions. The facilitator does not need to be an expert on the subject matter under discussion, but must be able to lead the group, not be led by the group. The facilitator should remain neutral to all comments made by the group and emphasize there are no right or wrong answers to the questions, avoiding comments that signal approval or disapproval. The facilitator should avoid giving personal opinions about tobacco issues and be aware of personal behaviors such as head nodding and hand motions that communicate approval or disapproval to the group members.

STORE ■ Strategic Tobacco Retail Effort

Tips for the facilitator:

1. Create an atmosphere that promotes freedom of expression.
2. Communicate that each participant's contribution is valued and valid.
3. Encourage involvement of all participants.
4. Facilitate interaction among group members.
5. Determine how members feel about each other's ideas or feelings.
6. Remain non-judgmental to participant's responses.
7. Ask questions in an unbiased way.
8. Interject probing questions, comments, and transitional questions.
9. Record responses on a flip chart or board, so everyone in-group sees all responses (this promotes collective knowledge/learning, reinforces member's comments, provides credibility to focus group process).

As soon as possible after the close of the session, the facilitator creates a written summary to capture the key comments and ideas generated. The information obtained from the focus group(s) helps your coalition or organization to create a customized prevention project addressing the issue of tobacco advertising and promotion.

Review of the Steps for Conducting Focus Groups

1. **Determine the types of retailers:**
 - Store type
 - Ethnic neighborhoods
 - Socio-economic areas
2. **Develop questions (suggested questions have been provided) to elicit information unique to your community.**
3. **Pilot test the questions:**
 - Are your questions understood?
 - Are you getting answers that will be useful?
 - Change wording of questions if needed and test again
 - Practice and memorize
4. **Recruit retailers:**
 - Phone or in-person
 - Honorarium
5. **Set up the groups & logistics:**
 - Composition
 - Number of groups, number in each group
 - Recruitment method and incentives
 - Location and physical setting
6. **Conduct the focus groups:**
 - Record during meeting
 - Summarize immediately after
7. **Analyze and synthesize the data collected.**