



Focus Group

Brief Description

A Focus Group is a facilitated group discussion for 6-12 participants on a pre-determined topic. The discussion lasts for 1-2 hours. In health promotion and prevention, Focus Groups are used to gather feedback from members of the target group on all stages of project planning and implementation.

The strength of a Focus Group is that the project can learn about the target group's views on a health problem or a (planned) intervention within a relatively short time and at the same time gains insight into the target group's lived experience. The Focus Group is a market research tool that is also used extensively in health and social services internationally.

Prerequisites

- A venue where the group can talk without disruption
- Experience in facilitating group discussion
- A clearly defined topic

Applications

- Target group needs assessment
- Pre-testing the concept for a project
- Developing new ideas for project work
- Checking service acceptance
- Checking the impact of a service

Process Overview

1. Determining the discussion topic
2. Developing a discussion guide
3. Organising a venue
4. Determining the composition of the group
5. Recruiting participants from the target group
6. Conducting the discussion (facilitation and documenting results)
7. Analysing the results



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Resources Required

Time:

Conducting the discussion will take 1-2 hours. The time required for planning (working steps 1-3) depends on internal project procedures. The time required for analysis depends on the questions and the service organisation's expectations.

Personnel:

At least one worker is needed to conduct the Focus Group. Ideally, two workers contribute to its implementation: one as facilitator and one to record the results and take care of organisational tasks (e.g. audio recording).

Materials:

A writing pad to take notes during the conversation. An audio recording device is also useful for documenting the discussion.

Other Costs:

Incentives such as vouchers or sitting fees can be offered to promote participation. Should this not be possible within the budget, it is important to express appreciation for group members' participation in other ways.

Refreshments may also be served during discussion.

Transcribing the audio recording should be planned for in advance.

Detailed Working Steps

1. Determining the Discussion Topic

A clearly defined topic is an important prerequisite for a successful Focus Group. The topic could be a service or a research question.

2. Developing a Discussion Guide

The guide is a compilation of the most important questions to be answered over the course of the discussion. It should not be comprehensive (5 questions at most). It is intended for the facilitator, not for Focus Group participants. It serves preparation and also assists in focussing the conversation. While it is there to provide orientation during the discussion, its questions do not necessarily have to be discussed in order.

3. Organising a Venue

A venue that is conducive to conversation should be organised for the discussion. It should be a place where participants can feel at ease. Public places such as parks and restaurants are not excluded here as long as they allow for group conversation to take place undisturbed. To convince hard-to-reach target groups to take part in the discussion it may be necessary to recruit participants at their favourite locations and also to conduct the Focus Group there. The regulars' table at the local pub may just be the ideal Focus Group!



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4. Determining the Composition of the Group

Participants should represent relevant characteristics of the target group to be reached with project activities. Where a service is trying to reach a range of target groups, conducting several Focus Groups is recommended. Focus Groups work best when their composition allows participants to talk to each other easily. Participants should therefore not be too diverse.

5. Recruiting Participants from the Target Group

To successfully recruit participants for a Focus Group it is important to convey what its aim is and how such a group discussion works. The topic, location and expected duration of the conversation as well as the confidential treatment of discussion content (that statements will be de-identified) should be explained.

6. Conducting the Discussion (Facilitation and Documenting Results)

Ideally, two workers, one as facilitator and one responsible for administrative tasks and for recording results will conduct the Focus Group. The facilitator ensures that a conversation on the questions listed in the discussion guide develops among participants. The overall topic is reiterated at the outset and participants are encouraged to ask questions if anything is unclear. Group agreements are made on how to interact with each other and with the topic: confidentiality, respecting different opinions, one person speaks at a time etc. It is important to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to contribute. The facilitator assists people to express their views and to explain their reasons for holding them. The course of the discussion and its results are noted down in writing (with as many de-identified quotes as possible), and, wherever feasible, using an audio recording device.

7. Analysing the Results

Analysing the results means to understand the opinions expressed in the course of the discussion and to reflect on their significance for the further development of project activities. The simplest form of analysis is to identify the main topics of the conversation and to describe and explain the different opinions expressed about them. These topics may correspond to the questions in the discussion guide or they may be new topics raised by members of the group. The written notes are used for summarising and analysing the Focus Group. It also makes sense for the two workers to utilise the audio recording to complement written notes.

A verbatim transcript of the audio recording and a scientific analysis of the conversation, e.g. using methods such as qualitative thematic analysis and discourse analysis, require more effort. Transcription and scientific analysis can lead to more accurate findings, but the time it takes to complete them should be considered in relation to their benefit.



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Please Note:

- A Focus Group is not a free exchange of ideas, but a guided discussion with a clear objective (namely to obtain feedback on a particular topic).
- A Focus Group is not an invitation for general feedback on the project's activities (the facilitator should therefore take care that the conversation does not drift too much).
- The Focus Group is a method of guiding discussion, not a quiz. A marker of a successful Focus Group is a lively conversation that is mostly carried by the participants (i.e. the facilitator should not follow the guide too rigidly but use it flexibly to stimulate discussion).
- Written notes are a limited basis for analysis because often many important details are lost. Even if transcription is not possible, an audio recording should be made of the conversation. The notes should include as many "sound bites" (de-identified quotes) from the conversation as possible to make the results more authentic and the arguments easier to follow.
- The Focus Group is a method for discovering the views of a group. The group's influence on individual opinions is part of its dynamic. For this reason the Focus Group is less suitable for discussion topics too intimate, stigmatised or taboo for the particular target group.

Further Advice

- The topic must be worded precisely, clearly and comprehensibly.
- It is important to take care when forming the group so that its members are able to interact easily. Known personal or ideological conflicts should be taken into account in determining its composition.
- When in doubt, e.g. if the results of a Focus Group are ambiguous or there are indications that that important opinions were not expressed, further Focus Groups may be conducted with different participants from the same target group, but using the same discussion guide. If this does not produce any new information it indicates that all relevant data have been collected.
- A Focus Group promotes a common group experience. Important components for this are a pleasant atmosphere, giving participants time and space and providing professional support where appropriate.

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Further Reading and Links

On Focus Group Methodology:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Focus_group

<http://www.cse.lehigh.edu/~glennb/mm/FocusGroups.htm>

<http://managementhelp.org/research/focusgrp.htm>



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Scientific Literature:

Dürrenberger, G. & Behringer, J. (1999). Die Fokusgruppe in Theorie und Anwendung. Akademie für Technikfolgenabschätzung: Stuttgart.

(Dürrenberger, G. & Behringer, J. (1999). The Focus Group in Theory and Practice. Academy for the Assessment of the Consequences of Technology: Stuttgart (In German))

Krueger, R. (1994). Focus Groups. London: Sage Publications.

Bohnsack, R. (2004). Gruppendiskussion. In U.Flick, E,v.Kardorff, I.Steinke (Hg) Qualitative Forschung. Ein Handbuch. Reinbek:Rowohlt, S. 369-384.

(Bohnsack, R. (2004). Group Discussion. In U.Flick, E,v.Kardorff, I.Steinke (Ed.) Qualitative Research: A Manual. Reinbek:Rowohlt, pp 369-384. (In German))

Text über eine Auswertungsmethode: Pelz, C., Schmitt, A. & Meis, M. (2004). Knowledge Mapping als Methode zur Auswertung und Ergebnispräsentation von Fokusgruppen in der Markt- und Evaluationsforschung. Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung, 5(2), Art. 35. Verfügbar über: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/2-04/2-04pelzetal-d.htm>

(Text on a method for analysis: Pelz, C., Schmitt, A. & Meis, M. (2004). Knowledge Mapping as a Method for the Analysis and Presentation of Focus Group Results in Market and Evaluation Research. Forum for Qualitative Social Research, 5(2), Section 35. Available at: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/2-04/2-04pelzetal-d.htm> (In German))

Literatursammlung zu Gruppendiskussionen: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/organizations/or-gr-l-d.htm>

(Bibliography on "Group Discussions": <http://www.qualitative-research.net/organizations/or-gr-l-d.htm> (In German))

Links to Case Studies:

- [Rent Boy Projects](#)
- [Neighbourhood Detectives Berlin](#)