

Focus Groups

A focus group is a conversation with a particular group of people, a way to generate dialogue. Like surveys, focus groups are a way of obtaining information from the public.

Why use focus groups

Focus groups are used to generate dialogue about a specific issue with a small number of people. When less people are involved, you may tend to get more open answers. Even though some people don't like to speak in front of others, if they know the other people present, it may embolden them, allowing them to speak more freely. The small number of people can be less intimidating.

Who should you include in a focus group?

You may want the opinions of a certain group of people, for example, a particular neighborhood or the downtown business owners. If this is the case, then you can organize a time to have a focus group with them. You may also want to use focus groups to get to different cross sections of your community. The group may be a community or neighborhood organization or maybe a local civic club. Often you will know more about the people in the group, because of the type of group it is. This lends itself to more specific questions, as compared to a general survey. If for example, you are talking to a garden club, you might make the assumption that they will understand more about composting and fertilizing than the downtown business owners. Focus groups can also be used to gather the names of other people and groups that should be included in future focus groups

How to run a focus group

Have very clear goals laid out ahead of time, and be sure to communicate them to your focus group. Be sure to have an agenda and a set timetable, and stick to it. Remember, you may be working, but the focus group members are your guests and are volunteering their time. A focus group may take anywhere from 30 minutes to two hours, depending on your goals.

Focus groups can be scheduled times when people get together for the specific purpose of the focus group, or they can be scheduled during pre-existing meetings, such as a civic organization's monthly meeting. These focus groups will likely be shorter, but no less successful. You may be able to get a half hour of time from an interested group of people that you might not be able to reach otherwise. How valuable could that information be? Another venue for a focus group is a community fair. You could have ongoing focus groups throughout the weekend, scheduled for 30 minutes at a time every hour or so. When people are given the chance to speak up about local issues, they often do.

Organizing data

It is important to take good notes. You may even want to record the focus group, but you should ask permission before doing so. It is best to have a note taker present so the facilitator does not have to be concerned with writing and can just converse with the group.

References:

International Association of Public Participation [IAP2.org]