

Focus Groups: More than Market Research

While focus group research finds its origins in academic social sciences, it is most often associated with consumer research and, increasingly of course, with political campaign strategies. While focus groups are rarely created by the “subjects” which are the targets of research, they are participatory in the sense that the research attempts to understand cultural worlds and lived experience from within.

It is not uncommon for well meaning social service organizations to create what they feel are innovative new programs, only to find that no one “comes to the party.” Because focus groups, as opposed to surveys, entail a more in depth exploration of issues, they can serve well to help craft programs that better fit the “real world” of potential consumers. Yet, because focus group findings are generally based on very small samples, they will not have the statistical power of surveys. In other words, surveys are a form of quantitative research. Focus groups are a form of *qualitative* research. Hence, different goals are addressed by different methods and both forms of research have their strengths and their weaknesses.

Morgan and Krueger suggest that focus groups can be especially helpful when:

- you want to explore the gap between the worlds of providers and consumers

- you want to explore complex behavior and motivations
- you want to understand diversity
- you want a form of research that is friendly and respectful.

(source: David L. Morgan and Richard A. Krueger. 1998. The Focus Group Kit. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.)

In another section of this website, the reader will find a description of the use of collages as trigger material for focus group discussions. Such a technique was employed in the very early stages of the AdvantAge Initiative in order to explore citizens in depth notions of the concept "elder-friendly community."

Below, we describe a focus group project held in Bloomington, Indiana, designed to solicit impressions from elders and other adults about the qualities of a healthy neighborhood. This is a project that a community planning group can do at low cost (without professional moderators) and with good community participation, both important factors to most planning groups.

“What makes a neighborhood healthy?”

Goal of the project:

Engage a large and relevant group of elders and other adults in an in-depth discussion of the qualities of healthy, nurturing environments. The information will be used to educate public policy makers and other stakeholders and inform local neighborhood planning efforts related to land use, housing, transportation and commerce.

Major Resources Needed:

A small planning team to design and script focus groups according to identified information needs. A corps of trained volunteer discussion leaders and reporters. Liaisons with sponsoring organizations to assist with recruiting and facilities.

Preparation:

As part of a larger community-based planning project, the need arose for solid information regarding the thoughts, ideas, impressions, dreams, and experiences of older adults relative to their neighborhoods and downtown commercial districts. A small planning team spent one meeting discussing the topical areas that could be addressed in community focus groups. A team member then drafted a script to be reviewed and approved in a second meeting. Also, in the

second meeting, a list of potential venues for focus groups was created, with emphasis on current senior gathering places and adult discussion groups in local downtown churches. Eleven sites were identified.

In the next phase, a group of volunteer discussion leaders and reporters was constituted successfully. Most individuals were drawn from the larger planning group involved in the community wide initiative. Some volunteers preferred to serve as moderators, some as reporters. In a training meeting, volunteers were provided instructions and a common script to serve their needs as group leaders. Volunteers selected sites they would like to contact and the roles of moderators and reporters were clarified. A time line was established to assure that discussions would be held in the near future and reports due soon after. Volunteers generally selected sites where they had pre-existing connections.

Following the training, volunteers contacted site liaisons to select appropriate dates and discuss logistics of recruiting participants and providing refreshments. Uniformly, site liaisons were delighted to be involved and offered to provide refreshments. Recruiting ranged from simply engaging with existing audiences in regular activities (such as senior nutrition sites and Sunday morning adult discussion groups), to setting up separate meetings advertised through

neighborhood association flyers or newsletters. In one setting, a neighborhood church recruited teen volunteers to distribute "door knob hangers" in the vicinity of the church.

Discussion Groups:

Over the period of approximately 4-6 weeks, a total of eleven focus groups occurred, involving 155 citizen participants, largely older and middle-aged adults. Settings included a public housing nutrition site, two senior centers, 5 churches, an older mens' support group, a neighborhood association, and a senior leadership group. The diverse settings allowed for outreach to very low income as well as minority elders in the community, blue collar retirees, and higher income elders with advanced education. Discussions ranged in duration from 45 to 90 minutes, determined both by level of participation, size of the group and the constraints of the venue. Each group began with an icebreaker involving participants in a discussion of their favorite places and the "best things about their home, their neighborhood, and their community."

Three main topics and two themes were addressed in each group discussion. They included:

- Shopping downtown

- Getting around downtown
- Housing and the blend of services
- The image of the neighborhood
- Integration of all ages in housing and programs

One group was audiotaped. One group was videotaped. All other groups contained one or more recorders who were responsible for authoring a report of the discussion at its close. Individual profile forms completed by participants provided a demographic record of the character of the groups. A Fact Sheet on the overall planning project was provided as a "take home" for each participant. A handful of participants authored letters to the project following the discussion, further discussing their thoughts and dreams about the ideal neighborhood.

The transcriptions, tapes, and reports were then gathered and analyzed by a single individual, who authored a final report to be reviewed for accuracy and tone by the volunteer team before formal publication. Evaluation forms completed by each two-person team at the close their group discussion provided the planning team continuous feedback about the process and suggestions for improvement. The final publication summarized findings by topic, not by group. A brief summary of each topic was followed by lists of actual quotes that reflected the findings. It was important to include contradictory opinions to accurately reflect the diversity of views around certain issues.

Use of data:

While having a complete report from the project was worthwhile, for those who desired the reading, most audiences are more interested in the “executive summary.” In the Bloomington initiative, the focus group project was but one of several participatory research efforts designed to “distill design principles for healthy urban environments for elders.” As such, the focus group findings were incorporated as “evidence” for broader assertions made to relevant audiences we intended to reach. Hence, public presentations, conferences, a lecture series, and other outreach efforts made reference to the focus group results, along with other research results. The broadest audience was reached through summarizing all of the research findings in an 8 page newspaper insert that found 25,000 households.

In an important and somewhat unintended consequence of the focus group project, we discovered that the discussions themselves, and not merely the “results” were very positively received and those who were involved felt included in a way they had not experienced previously. They became advocates for the broader agenda because their voices were heard and, interestingly, those who held opinions contrary to others, discovered that their views were not as widely held as they might have suspected.

In addition, the involvement of 10 volunteer discussion leaders/reporters further broadened community involvement and gave planning group participants a concrete, valuable, defined, and very enjoyable role to play. Teaming two people for each group provided "buddy" with which to plan and evaluate the process before and after the events themselves.