

PARTICIPANT APPROACH

# FOCUS GROUPS

A classic qualitative interview research method in which a researcher invites a group of people and asks them questions on specific products, services, goods, concepts, problems, prototypes, advertisements, etc.

<b>Duration</b>	<p><b>Preparation:</b> 1–4 hours (depending on accessibility of participants and legal regulations)</p> <p><b>Activity:</b> 1–2 hours (depending on questions and process)</p> <p><b>Follow-up:</b> 1–8 hours (depending on research focus and amount of data)</p>
<b>Physical requirements</b>	Notebook, voice recorder, video camera, photo camera, legal agreements (consent and/or confidentiality agreement)
<b>Energy level</b>	Middle
<b>Researchers/Facilitators</b>	1–2
<b>Participants</b>	4–12 (6–8 is often regarded as an ideal size)
<b>Expected output</b>	Text (transcripts, notes), audio recordings, photos, videos

With a focus group, researchers strive to understand the perceptions, opinions, ideas, or attitudes toward a given topic. Focus groups are mostly carried out in a rather informal setting, like a meeting room or a special room where researchers observe the situation in a non-participant manner through a one-way mirror, or via live video coverage in another room. The aim is that participants feel free to discuss the given topics from their own perspective.<sup>01</sup>

Researchers often ask only an initial question and then observe the group discussion and dynamics. Sometimes a researcher acts as a moderator, guiding the group through a set of questions. In a dual-moderator focus group one researcher facilitates the process while the other observes interactions between the participants. In contrast to co-creative workshops, researchers do not act as facilitators and the participants do not work with boundary objects in order to create an outcome together.

Although focus groups are often used in business, they have only limited applicability in service design.

<sup>01</sup> You might realize a certain bias regarding focus groups in this text. Here's why: "Focus groups are actually *contraindicated* by important insights from several disciplines," says Gerald Zaltman, Emeritus Professor, Harvard Business School. "The correlation between stated intent and actual behavior is usually low and negative." Source: Zaltman, G. (2003). *How Customers Think: Essential Insights into the Mind of the Market*. Harvard Business Press, p. 122.



They are not useful when we need to understand existing experiences in context as they are done in a lab setting without a situational context. Unlike co-creative workshops, focus groups usually do not use boundary objects the group can work on together, such as personas, journey maps, or system maps. This often leads to limited informative value as results depend on the moderated discussion. Therefore, moderators need to take care to avoid results that are biased by issues like observer effect, group think, or social desirability bias, to name but a few.

### Step-by-step guide

#### 1 Define specific research question

Specify your research question or a set of questions for the focus group. Questions mostly refer to perceptions, opinions, ideas, or attitudes regarding a specific product, service, software, concept, problem, prototype, or advertisement.

#### 2 Recruiting interviewees

Based on your research question and aim, define criteria for selecting suitable participants. Use sampling techniques to select your focus group

participants and consider including internal experts or external agencies for participant recruitment. Often focus groups aim for homogeneity among participants to maximize disclosure. Following the approach of triangulation, at least have a second focus group as a control group<sup>01</sup> for the first one.

#### 3 Plan and prepare

Plan how to approach your participants and what incentives you will offer them for their participation. Find a comfortable venue and decide how you'll record the focus group. Prefer unobtrusive recording methods to ensure a comfortable environment, and in case of sensitive or stigmatized topics use only audio recording. If you conduct the focus group in teams, agree on the roles within your interviewer team; establish beforehand who will ask questions, and who will observe and take notes. Write up a guideline of open and non-leading questions; avoid technical terms and jargon. Consider the participant experience when

<sup>01</sup> A control group is often used in experiments: one group receives a specific treatment, while the other group, the control group, receives no treatment or the standard treatment.

you create your guideline: start with rather general engagement questions (e.g., introduction of participants and general opinions about a given topic), move into exploration questions (e.g., digging deeper into understanding details, pros and cons of a topic, emotions, etc.), and finish with exit questions (such as “Did we miss something on that topic?” or “Something else to add to this?”).

#### 4 Conduct interviews

Start by explaining the purpose of the focus group and introducing everyone in the room, including the moderators and their roles. During the focus group, follow your question guidelines, make sure not to ask closed or leading questions, and keep your questions short and clear. The moderator should stay neutral and empathic, and prevent individual participants from dominating the conversation. Try to engage the quiet ones and make it clear that a focus group is not about finding a consensus within the group, but more about understanding different perspectives. If appropriate, the assistant might also visibly record key answers of participants as a list, mind



map, or graphic recording. At the end of the focus group, offer participants follow-up options to give feedback and review the content. The length of a focus group is typically 1.5–2 hours.

## 5 Follow-up

Write up your individual key learnings right after the focus group and compare them within your team (you might have external observers besides the moderators). Review and index your collected data and highlight important passages. For each focus group, write a short summary that includes your conflated key findings as well as raw data to exemplify these, such as quotes, photos, or videos. Compare the key findings of your different focus group. Do they match, and can you identify patterns? If you see differences try to find out why, and conduct more focus groups until you identify the reason for a specific bias or until your sample is large enough that you find patterns (or until you don't find patterns, which would be a result as well). Don't forget to link the summary to the collected data of your focus groups (e.g., by indexing your data).

## Method notes

→ Often a focus group is influenced by the researcher's opinion (e.g., through an unconsciously biased briefing) – this is referred to as the observer effect. Another issue is group think – participants might be influenced by the most outgoing or powerful group member. One way to overcome this issue can be to first create an “isolated” step before the focus group in which participants write down their opinions alone, and then discuss their ideas in pairs or with the researcher. Only afterwards will they meet the entire focus group. Optionally, you can start by reading out all the individual ideas, or start by looking for common patterns as a group to stimulate discussion in a nonthreatening way, allowing for some voices to be “heard” without being directly attributed to individuals. This can make people feel more self-confident and ready to express their own opinions, and less likely to be influenced by the most outgoing or powerful members of the group.

→ Another problem focus group moderators often need to deal with is social desirability bias – participants say what might be considered as the “right” choice instead of what they really think or do. **People in observed situations often say what they think they should say, instead of truthfully describing what they actually do.**

To combat this, use a mixed-method approach and start by showing some of your raw data that shows what people “really” do. Address openly that you are aware of the reality and consider techniques to establish a safe space<sup>02</sup> to comfort participants and to ease them into speaking openly. ◀

<sup>02</sup> See #TISDD chapter 10, *Facilitating workshops*, for a detailed description of how to establish a safe space in a workshop.