Ag Decision Maker

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Conducting Focus Groups*

A focus group is a structured group setting used to obtain detailed information on a particular topic. Focus groups are often a preferred method of research for capturing attitudes and feelings and creating awareness of issues that may be unknown to the researcher.

Focus groups are used for a variety of reasons. You may need to determine if there is a market for your product, awareness and acceptance of your product after a launch period or general attitudes and ideas on the marketplace, business or industry.

Focus groups can be done before your business is launched, soon after launching, whenever a new product is announced, annually or every five years. In short, focus groups can be done whenever there is a need to capture the attitudes, feelings and ideas of the potential market.

A focus group is generally composed of six to nine participants brought together to discuss a specific topic. Typically, focus groups are composed of homogeneous people, all representing a particular segment of the population that have a specific interest in the topic. For example, to answer questions on the acceptance of a new piece of farm equipment, a group of farmers would be used rather than teachers, businessmen, etc.

A good guideline for a focus group session is one and a half hours with two hours being the absolute maximum time. An unbiased group facilitator keeps the discussion on track by asking a series of open-ended questions meant to stimulate discussion.

Advantages

- Focus groups are relatively easy to use.
- Results can be obtained in a short period of time.
- The interaction within the group produces honest and often more complex responses than if a survey is used.
- The facilitator can probe for clarification and solicit detail.

Disadvantages

- Focus groups require a highly skilled moderator to solicit opinions and feelings without casting an opinion or skewing the conversation.
- Groups are often difficult to assemble and participants generally expect monetary compensation.
- Individual responses are not independent of one another. What one participant states aloud may cause another one to vocalize an opinion or new thought and may sway opinions to one side versus another.
- Because the group selection is not random, the results may not be representative of the general population.

Seven Steps in the Focus Group Process

1) Clearly Define Purpose

The first step is to identify the issues you need to understand better, then formulate some objectives relating to the issues. Your objectives should be as specific as possible. For example, we want to determine if there is enough local community interest in buying local food products to start a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) subscription.

2) Prepare Interview Questions

Develop a set of questions to provide direction for the discussion. Questions should be open-ended, simple, unbiased, and focused on the specific issue. The purpose of the questions is to stimulate discussion. The questions are merely a guide for the discussion. Undoubtedly the discussion will ellicit more questions.

3) Identify and Recruit Participants

Identify the types of people able to provide you with the answers you need. Think about the key population groups that may have an interest in the issues

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being researched. You want to form several different, separate groups that represent different viewpoints. The groups can be formed based on several different characteristics: age, income, gender, race, place of work, place of residency, unemployed, single mothers, students, retired, education, etc.

Although the groups should have a common background, you should avoid getting people who know each other in the same group. You also want people who will participate in the discussion and freely share their opinions.

Participants are generally sent a letter inviting them to participate in the focus group. The letter should state the purpose of the focus group session, who is sponsoring and conducting the session, compensation provided for participation and what the results will be used for. It should be made clear that individual comments made during the focus group are strictly confidential. A return postcard should be included in the letter.

4) Pre-Meeting Preparation

The meeting room should be quiet, comfortable and free from outside distractions. Participants should sit around a table so they can see each other. It is often helpful to audio record the focus group. This will enable the researcher to refer back to comments missed during focus group notes and maintain participant confidentiality.

5) Conducting the Focus Group Interview

A good facilitator is the key to the focus group discussion. The facilitator must direct the discussion without adding opinions or leading questions. She/he must have excellent communication skills. The facilitator must be able to create a relaxed, informal atmosphere where people feel free to express their opinions. The facilitator should ask a series of open-ended questions from general to specific. The questions should not get in the way of the participants expressing their opinions, experiences, and suggestions. The facilitator allows the discussion to go in new directions as long as the topics pertain to the specific issue addressed.

All members of the group should be encouraged to participate. One person should not be allowed to dominate the discussion.

As stated above, the session should be tape recorded and transcribed after the meeting. Some focus group interviews are conducted with someone taking notes during the meeting. This can inhibit the discussion and lead to missed notes.

6) Analyzing the Data

The focus group will generate a lot of information. The researcher's job is to summarize the data for analysis and discovery.

The tape recording should be transcribed, omitting the names of the speakers. Type the discussion and then read the transcript for key words and concepts that reoccur.

Group the key words and phrases into several categories. Each category generally has three to ten key words or phrases. All comments should fit into at least one category. Key words and phrases should then be coded for (1) central theme and (2) general sentiment (positive, negative, neutral, suggestion).

After the category groupings, the findings can be interpreted. Central themes and issues emerge.

7) Reporting Findings

Background information should be included in a written report of the findings and include the date of the focus groups, number of participants and any statistical findings. The researcher can also use the central themes and issues that emerged to determine key directions, opinions or ideas that the business needs to act on.

Both quantitative and qualitative results are reported. Quantitative results are statistical or numerical in nature - the number of people who mentioned X and the percent of people who think Y. Qualitative results are representative comments from focus group participants.

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