

FOCUS ON: FOCUS GROUPS

Another type of evaluation method, a focus group, gives you a chance to get up close and personal with consumers. Basically, it's a panel discussion, led by a moderator, with usually eight to twelve participants. It's used to gather information or reactions concerning a specific topic. Participants in the group are encouraged to relate to each other and express their candid opinions about the topics presented to them by the moderator or generated by the group. Listening to the participants share their thoughts provides insight not only into the way they think, but why they think that way.

Researchers often conduct more than one focus group on a specific topic. This allows them to hear the opinions of a larger number of people. The use of multiple groups can also help overcome problems that may be unique to one group. For example, if you're only using one group and that group has one person who tends to dominate the discussion, you may get a very limited range of opinions.

As with the pretest/post-test survey method, you may want to consider conducting some focus groups before exposure to your campaign and some groups after. Participants in the "after" groups might give different types of answers to certain questions than the "before" groups. Such an outcome might be considered as evidence of the effectiveness of your campaign.

Creating a topic guide: Before conducting the groups, the research team will prepare a topic guide that lists the questions they would like the participants to answer. Since it's often hard to tell how much time a group might need to address the questions on the guide, it's often helpful to prioritize them so the moderator knows which ones the team definitely wants to cover and which ones would be nice to get to if time permits.

When writing a topic guide, you generally should try to avoid closed-end questions (those that can be answered with brief, one or two word answers, like "yes" or "no.") Remember, the goal is to get the participants to share their ideas, so asking open-ended questions, such as, "What are some characteristics and behaviors of a good driver?" tends to stimulate more discussion than simply asking, "Do you think you're a good driver?"

When selecting the questions for the topic guide, try to picture the shape of a funnel. It often works best to start with questions that are general, working down the funnel toward ones that are more specific. A series of questions might go something like this:

- Describe an experience when you were riding with another driver and you felt like they might have taken an unnecessary risk or their behavior was a concern for you.
- How might they be persuaded not to do that again?
- Have you ever tried to persuade someone to avoid such behavior? If so, what happened?

Moderating the group: At the beginning of each group, the moderator should welcome the participants and introduce him- or herself. The moderator should also talk briefly about the following issues:

- The purpose of the group
- Voluntary participation and participant confidentiality
- Recording of participants comments (via audio tape, note taking, etc.)
- The need for everyone to participate in the discussion (equal airtime)

Once the group starts, it's the moderator's job to try to keep the discussion focused so the group doesn't get too far off the topic and has a chance to address most of the questions on the topic guide. If the participants veer off topic, the moderator often has to use their judgment as to whether the conversation, though somewhat off topic, is still providing valuable information for the research team. If not, the moderator should steer the discussion back toward the topic of interest.

Recording comments: The research team will need to decide how comments from the group will be recorded. You may want to use video tape, audio tape, manual note taking, or a combination of these methods. If you choose to take notes, someone other than the moderator should be assigned to this task, since the moderator will need to be concentrating on what's being said, thinking about keeping the discussion on track, watching the time, etc.

Dealing with the data: Unlike surveys, focus groups are not intended as a tool to measure opinions with the goal of generalizing them to a larger population. Comments from the group will provide you a sense of what people are thinking about your topic and hopefully, in this case, provide some insight into what they may be thinking or doing differently as a result of exposure to your media campaign. In reporting the results of your groups you may want to consider the following questions:

- What "story" did the group's comments tell?
- Did the participants' comments suggest that they generally liked or disliked the campaign (or various aspects of it)?
- Did you come away with ideas for improving the effectiveness of the campaign?
- Did any of the participants give specific examples of something they did differently or thought about differently after seeing your campaign?
- Were there any specific comments from group members that were especially insightful or that described something particularly well