

## Focus Groups: Issues and Approaches

O. A. Ogunbameru

### INTRODUCTION

This paper is divided into five parts. The first part is devoted to what focus group is, where it came from, and why it works. The second part discusses the characteristics of focus groups, while part three focuses on the uses of focus groups, as well as its advantages and disadvantages. In part four, the various techniques involved in the conduct and analysis of focus group results are discussed. The final is devoted to the nature of reporting focus group discussions.

For a very long time focus groups became an exclusive mainstay in private sector marketing research. However, the potentials of focus groups are now being discovered by the public sector organizations. They are now increasingly being used up-to-date to discover preferences for new or existing products.

It is germane to make a little clarification of what a focus group is, and what it is not. This is because for a long time some people wrongly used the terms *focus group*, *group interview*, *open space technology*, *delphic processes*, *nominal groups*, and *brainstorming* as synonyms. This should not be.

Group interview involves a procedure in which participants individually provide answers to the questions being asked by a moderator. The open-space technology technique involves a situation whereby an 'intruder' may not necessarily possess the characteristic features of the initial participants, the procedure seizes to be a focus group again, it has become what is known as the open-space technique.

Delphic processes and nominal groups differ from focus groups in that they attempt to identify consensus and agreeable solutions, an important objective but considerably different from the purpose of focus groups. Brainstorming techniques resemble the freedom and spontaneity of focus groups but it is different in that brainstorming is often directed to solving particular problems. It should further be noted that brainstorming, nominal groups, and delphic

process are used primarily with people who are experts or are knowledgeable in finding potential solutions (Krueger, 1988).

What then is a focus group? A focus group can be defined as a "formally constituted, structured group which is brought together to address a specific issue within a fixed time frame, and in accordance with clearly spelled out rules and procedure". Krueger defines a focus group as "a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment (Krueger, 1988: 18). Another way by which a focus group can be defined is to see it as a group discussion that gathers together people from similar backgrounds or experiences to discuss a specific topic of interest to the researcher.

### WHERE DID FOCUS GROUP COME FROM?

Focus group interviews were born out of necessity. In the late 1930s, social scientists began to doubt the accuracy of traditional information gathering methods, especially the interview, the survey and other quantitative research techniques for a number of reasons. One, the individual interview because it used a predetermined questionnaire with closed-ended response choices limited the respondent by the choices offered, hence the findings could be unintentionally influenced by the interviewer either by oversight or omission (Krueger, 1988: 19).

Two, interviews are time consuming, in that they are usually lengthy and may require the interviewer to travel miles (Ogunbameru, 2000: 82). Three, interview method may at times be biased. For instance, the respondent's answers can be affected by his reaction to the interviewer's sex, race, social class, age, dress and physical appearance. These disadvantages prompted social scientists to devise the focus group method.

The evolution of focus groups like other qualitative research method was delayed because of the initial preoccupation with

quantitative procedures.

Social scientists therefore, began to develop the non-directive individual interview. The good thing about non-directive procedure is that it begins with limited assumptions. It also places considerable emphasis on getting in tune with the reality of the interviewee. In addition, it uses open-ended questions and allows individuals to respond without setting boundaries or providing clues for potential response categories. Finally, it allows the subject ample opportunity to comment, to explain, and to share experiences and attitudes as opposed to the structured and directive interview that is dominated by the interviewer.

Rice (1931) was the first of the social scientists to express concern about structured and directive interview:

A defect of the interview for the purpose of fact-finding in scientific research, then, is that the questioner takes the lead. That is, the subject plays a more or less passive role. Information or points of views of the highest value may not be disclosed because the direction given the interview by the questioner leads away from them. In short, data obtained from an interview are as likely to embody the preconceived ideas of the interviewer as the attitude of the subject interviewed.

In the 1930s and 1940s, non-directive interviewing started to have appeal to social scientists. For instance, Roethlisberger and Dickson (1938) cited it in studies of employee motivation, while Rogers (1942) used it in psychotherapy. Focus group interview was greatly used during World War II, mainly as a means of increasing military morale (Krueger, 1988:19). Other social scientists who used focus groups were Merton, Fisks, and Kendal (1956) in the book titled, *The Focused Interview*.

In the early part of its emergence, focus group interviewing was virtually restricted to market research. This was so because it allowed the producers, manufacturers and sellers of new products to understand the thinking of the consumers. However, the focus group interview has today grown to that level where it is being regarded by many as a crucial step in shaping the marketing strategy for products.

## WHY DO FOCUS GROUPS WORK?

The focus group works because it taps into human tendencies. The attitudes and perceptions relating to products, services, or programmes are developed in part by interaction with other people. For instance, researchers for a long time, neglected the influence of environment and other people around us. In the past, it was assumed by researchers who used the mail and telephone surveys, and face-to-face interviews, that individuals actually do know how they feel. It was also assumed that individuals form opinion in isolation. But these assumptions have today been found to be untrue (Krueger, 1988). There are times when people would need to listen and be influenced by other peoples' opinions. Focus group interviews have proved that people do influence each other with their comments, and, at times individuals shift their personal viewpoints in the course of a discussion. The factors influencing such a shift can readily be discovered by a focus group analyst.

The focus groups work also because the permissive group environment gives individuals license to divulge emotions that often do not emerge in other forms of questioning.

One intent of the focus group is to promote self-disclosure among participants, and it has been found that people have a greater tendency for self-disclosure when the environment is permissive and nonjudgmental. The focus groups provide this permissive selection of participants, the nature of the questioning, and the establishment of focus group rules.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF FOCUS GROUPS

The five known characteristics of focus groups are briefly discussed below:

### 1. *Focus Groups Involve People*

Focus groups involve 7 - 10 people, but at times, this can range from 4 - 12. The number varies somehow among investigators from the target population, on issues important to a particular study. As a rule, the size is conditioned by two factors: it must be small enough for everyone to have opportunity to share insights and yet large enough to provide diversity of perception.

## ***2. Participants are Homogenous and Unfamiliar with Each Other***

Focus groups are best conducted with participants who are similar to each other. Although the specification of group characteristics flows from the research objectives and the topics to be discussed, each group must be homogenous on the relevant variables (e.g. age, ethnic or cultural identity, gender and educational level, among others).

Although focus groups are composed of homogenous participants, ideally, it is best if participants do not know each other. Despite the fact that this may not be visible in some communities, researchers should avoid close friends or those who work together as participants. Theoretically, the participants in each group should be strangers to each other, and have had no previous experience with focus groups.

It should however be noted that the issue of homogeneity should not be overstretched. This is because heterogenous group can also be useful. For instance, if the problem under investigation refers to a past event, different religions or different age groups, then the composition of the group has to be heterogenous in order to accommodate opinions and interests of the various people involved.

## ***3. Focus Groups Are a Data Collection Procedure***

Focus groups have a narrow purpose for which they work particularly well - that is, to determine the perceptions, feelings, and manner of thinking of consumers about products, services, or opportunities. Focus groups are not intended to develop consensus, to arrive at an agreeable plan, or to make decisions about which course of action to take.

## ***4. Focus Groups Make Use of Qualitative Data***

Focus groups produce qualitative data that provide insights into the attitudes, perceptions, and opinions of participants. What researchers do in focus groups is to moderate, listen, observe, and analyze using an interactive process.

## ***5. Focus Groups Have a Focused Discussion***

In a focus group, the topics of discussion are predetermined and sequenced, based on an analysis of the situation. The analysis includes an in-depth study of the event, experience, or topic in order to describe the context of the experience and the ingredients or components of the experience.

### **The Uses of Focus Groups**

Like other qualitative techniques, focus groups may be used to complement survey-based research in several ways. Focus groups provide a preliminary step in the development of a quantitative study. Focus groups generate ideas for narrowing the scope of the research, yield hypotheses for field testing, select appropriate wording of questions for questionnaires and identify target groups for study. Focus groups may also be used to explore and illuminate results of a quantitative study or to gain greater understanding about the reason for certain trends (Kahn and Manderson, 1992). Focus groups are a means of gaining insights about perceptions, attitudes, problems and fears - and the language used to talk about all these (Basch, 1987).

Focus groups are also used as a primary data collection method for some topics which cannot be easily studied through quantitative techniques or through individual interviews - for example sexual behaviour.

In another way, focus groups can be used to provide information to decision maker about how programmes touch the lives of a number of people at three different points in time: before, during, and after the programme or service is provided.

### **Focus Groups Before a Programme Begins**

Focus groups can be used before an experience such as in planning needs assessment, assets analysis, programme design, or market research. Focus groups provide decision makers with information on the acceptability and consequences of new endeavours.

### Focus Groups During a Programme

During a programme or experience such as in customer surveys, formative evaluations, or recruiting new clientele for existing programmes, focus groups can be conducted.

### Focus Groups After a Programme

Focus groups are also helpful after a programme or event has been conducted. For instance, focus groups are used in the assessment of programmes, summative evaluations, or programme postmortems to discover what went wrong (Krueger, 1988).

### Advantages of Focus Group Interviews

1. Focus have several advantages over both survey methods and other qualitative approaches (Folch - Lyonet et. al. 1981; Freedman, 1987; Knodel and Pramulratana, 1988; Morgan and Spanish, 1984). Focus groups help to reduce the chance of questions being misunderstood by respondents, and to rescue socially desirable answers. Focus groups place people in natural, real-life situations as opposed to the controlled experimental situation typical of quantitative studies.
2. Focus group discussions have high face validity. The technique is easily understood and the results seem believable to those using the information.
3. Focus group discussions are relatively low in cost.
4. Focus groups enable the researcher to increase the sample size of qualitative studies. Typically, qualitative studies have limited sample sizes due to the time and cost constraints of individual interviewing. But focus groups enable the researcher to increase the sample size without dramatic increases in the time required of the interviewer.
5. Focus groups are excellent for obtaining information from illiterate communities.

### Disadvantages of Focus Group Interviews

1. In the main, the small sample and the purposive selection of participants does not

enable quantification nor allow generalization of the findings (Basch, 1987; Sittitrai, and Brown, 1990).

2. The researcher has less control in the group interview as compared to the individual interviews. The sharing of group control can result in some inefficiencies such as detours in the discussion, and the raising of irrelevant issues, thus requiring the interviewer to keep the discussion focused.
3. Data are more difficult to analyze. Group interaction provides a social environment and comments must be interpreted within that context. Care is needed to avoid lifting comments out of context and out of sequence or to come to premature conclusions.
4. Groups are difficult to assemble. The focus group requires that people take time to come to a designated place at a prescribed time to share their perception with others.
5. Focus groups can present a picture of what is socially acceptable in a community rather than what is really occurring or believed.

### Techniques Involved in Focus Groups

#### 1. The Art of Asking Questions

In focus group studies, asking quality questions is not easy, it involves foresight, concentration, and some background knowledge. Below are some characteristics of good questions for focus groups.

#### 1. *Focus Groups Interviews Use Open-Ended Questions*

The importance of open-ended question is that it allows the respondent to determine the direction of the response. For instance, since the answer is not implied and the type of response is not suggested, individual response is based on his/her specific situation. One advantage of the open-ended question is that it reveals what is on the interviewee's mind as opposed to what the interviewer suspects is on the interviewee's mind.

Typically, the questions which can either be structured or free serve as the "stimulus" for the respondent.

Certain closed-ended questions appear like open-ended ones. Such questions usually imply answers that fall within a specified range should be asked toward the latter parts of the focused interview. Examples are questions that incorporate words and phrases like *satisfied*, *to what extent*, or *how much*?

## **2. Focus Group Interview Avoid Dichotomous Questions**

Questions that can readily be answered with a simple “yes” or “no” response seem appealing because they are so simple, easy to ask, and familiar in social situations. Researchers should however use them with caution. Specifically, in focus group interviews the simple yes - no question does not evoke the desired group discussion. Besides, they tend to elicit ambiguous responses, which can in turn restrict the clarity of the discussion (Krueger, 1988: 62).

### **“Why” is Rarely Asked in a Focus Group**

Theoretically, why questions imply a rational answer, one developed by thought and reflection. It is a known fact that many decisions are made by impulse, by habit or generally in a nonrational manner. Respondents tend to provide quick answers that seem rational or appropriate when asked why.

If a why question cannot be avoided, it should be specific. This is what Lazarfeld (1986) referred to as the principle of specification.

### **Focus Group Questions Are Carefully Prepared**

The best questions hardly come like a flash of lightning out of the sky. Thus good effort and systematic development.

The researcher should identify first potential questions. This is done by first thinking about the area of concern, then list all questions that are of interest to the users. For instance, brainstorming sessions with information users can be helpful in obtaining a range of possible questions and variations in phrasing. After listing, the critical questions can then be highlighted. Usually, these are the questions that capture the intent of the study.

## **2. Key Steps in Conducting Focus Group Discussion**

- i. Define the subject matter. This involves defining clearly the research objectives and all aspects of the problem must be identified and understood.
- ii. Determine the adequacy of focus groups in meeting the research objectives. Are there other methods that can better meet the research objectives? If the answer is yes, are you using focus groups as a mere supplement to these other methods?
- iii. Identify the target groups. This can be achieved by specifying all respondent variables that are thought to be critical to the research problem. Once there is a clear cut understanding of all aspects of the problem, it will be relatively easy to think of all categories of respondents who could have some knowledge of influence on the problem.
- iv. Establish homogenous groups based on the critical respondent variables. Procedures for selecting participants, determination of group composition of the size and number of groups are covered here.

### **How to Identify Participants**

There are quite a number of ways of identifying the participants. The five common ones are discussed below:

1. The use of an existing list. One convenient way of finding participants is to use existing lists of people. This includes: existing lists of clients, or those who use services of the organization.
2. Making contact with other groups for names. Once the audience has been targeted and the necessary characteristics for individual selection have been determined, the researcher can find out whether existing groups in the community have members with these characteristics. Such groups can be contacted.
3. Participants in focus groups can be asked for names. Names of people who meet the necessary characteristics can be suggested by participants in focus groups.

- Another variation of this procedure is the “snowball sampling” procedure (Krueger, 1988:95). With this snowball approach, the invited participant is requested to bring a friend to the discussion.
4. Random telephone screening. this procedure begins by random selection of names from a telephone directory. This method is a favourite of many market research firms because they are able to control the quantity of calls and consequently the number who will be attending the group interview.
  5. Recruitment “on location” by inviting people using the services to participate in a discussion.

#### How To Record Focus Group Discussion

Typically, focus group discussions can be recorded in two ways: by a tape recorder and with written notes taken by the moderator and assistant moderator. In the second type - written notes, the moderator will take brief notes and the assistance will capture complete statements of the participants, especially quotable statements.

There are times when the tape recorder may stop, in this situation, note taking should be done in such a manner that notes are complete and usable.

Usually, the tape recorder is set up before the meeting begins and in plain sight of participants. Recorders and microphones should not be hidden from participants because if hidden, they may create an unnecessary secretive atmosphere and inhibit participant conversation if discovered. Right from the beginning of the session, the importance of the recorder should be mentioned.

One problem with tape-recording group conversations is that recorders can pick up background noise, tapping of pencils, and the hum of the ventilation system instead of the softly spoken comments of participants (Krueger, 1988:79). It is advisable that the moderator uses built-in microphones on cassette recorders.

Two techniques are essential to moderators of group discussions: the five-second pause and the probe. The five-second pause is often used after a participant comment, short pause elicits additional points of view, especially when coupled with eye contact from the moderator.

The probe is simply a request for additional

information. When participants make vague or ambiguous comments, the probe can serve as an effective technique to elicit additional information.

#### How To Analyze Focus Group Results

The analysis of focus group results like all other analysis in qualitative methods is complex. This complexity occurs at several levels. One, there are times when two people answer using different words when a question is asked. It is essential that the analyst considers how to compare the different answers. Two, internal consistency of the comments. The analyst should find out whether respondents change their position later in the discussion. Three, specificity of the responses in follow-up probes. The analyst should find out whether respondents were able to elaborate on the issue when probed.

In the analysis process, the researcher’s task involves the preparation of a statement about what was found, a statement that emerges from and is supported by available evidence. In preparing the statement, the researcher seeks mainly to identify evidence that repeats and is common to several participants.

The analysis process must be systematic and verifiable. It is systematic when it follows a prescribed, sequential process. It is verifiable if the process permits another researcher to arrive at similar conclusions using available documents and raw data.

At the departure of participants, the moderator and assistant moderator should do a debriefing. The purpose of the debriefing is for the moderator and assistant moderator to compare notes. The analysis process is followed by gathering together brief summary reports, tape recordings, questioning route, demographic information, and at times, transcripts of the discussion.

The researcher goes a bit further by:

- (1) Reading all the summaries at one sitting and making notes of potential trends and patterns;
- (2) The researcher reads each transcript if transcripts are available; and
- (3) The researcher listens to the tapes or reads the transcripts concentrating on one issue or question at a time.

There are a few factors, a researcher must consider when conducting this analysis:

- (a) Consider the words. This involves thinking

- about both the actual words used by the participants and the meanings of those words.
- (b) Consider the context. This involves examining the context by finding the triggering stimulus and then interpret the comment in light of that environment.
  - (c) Consider the internal consistency. At times, there can be a shift in opinion. When this occurs, the researcher traces the flow of the conversation to determine clues that might explain the change.
  - (d) Consider the specificity of responses. This involves giving more weights to responses that are specific and based on one experience than on responses that are vague and impersonal.
  - (e) Find the big ideas. This involves taking a few steps back from the discussions by allowing an extra day for the big ideas to percolate.
  - (f) Consider the purpose of the report. Reflection should be made on the objectives of the study and the information needed by decision makers.

#### **Issues to Consider When Analyzing**

It should be noted that the analysis of focus group is complex, and the complexity occurs at several levels. For instance, when a question is asked, two people will answer using different words. The analyst needs to consider how to compare the different answers. Analysis begins with a comparison of the words used in the answer. Are the words identical, similar, related or unrelated? Another consideration relates to the internal consistency of the comments. Did respondents change their position later in the discussion?

The analysis process is like detective work. The analyst looks for clues, and the clues are trends and patterns or themes that reappear among various focus groups. The researcher's task is to prepare a statement about what was found. The statement must be related to the themes that were found and supported by evidence. In preparing the statement, the researcher seeks primarily to identify evidence that repeats and is common to several participants.

An analyst of focus group discussions need to think about several issues. Such as transcribing the tapes, the use of quotations, and nonverbal communication in the groups when analyzing.

#### **1. *Transcribing Versus Relistening to the Tapes***

Though difficult, it is preferable to have the tapes transcribed before beginning the analysis. This will assist in speeding up the process of sorting and categorizing and in enabling others to verify the analysis more quickly.

#### **2. *Editing Messy Quotations***

More often participants use incomplete sentences and at times rotatable along with disconnected thoughts thereby rendering transcripts of focus group interviews to contain messy quotations. It is the duty of the researcher to determine the extent to which statements can be abridged or modified. There is the need for the researcher to do some minor editing and to correct grammar in order to present the views of the participants fairly and accurately.

#### **3. *Nonverbal Communication in the Focus Group***

There is the need to factor into the statements of finding enthusiastic comments and excitement. The degree of spontaneity and the extent of participants' involvement should also be noted. Body language during the session should also be of interest to the researcher.

#### **4. *The Use of Numbers in Focus Group Results***

Numbers convey the impression that results can be projected to a population, and this is not within the capabilities of qualitative research procedures. This numbers and percentages are not appropriate for focus group research. The use of adjectival phrases such as "a preponderance of the participants argued that "..., or" majority of the participants agreed that...", are preferable.

#### **The Nature of Reporting Focus Group Discussions**

The three ways by which focus group reports can be presented are: Oral only, written only, or a combination of oral and written. Oral reports allow for questions, clarifications, and the use of taped highlights. Written reports allow for distribution within an organization and are

preferred when people are difficult to gather together.

### The Written Report

In survey analysis the outline for presenting the report is as follows:

1. Introduction: (what problem were you investigating and why?).
2. Method: (what procedures did you employ?).
3. Results: (What did you find?).
4. Discussion: (What do your findings mean, where do you go from here?).
5. Summary or Abstract: (A brief summary of points 1 - 4).
6. References: (An alphabetical list of books and articles cited in the reports).
7. Appendix (Optional): (Copies of questionnaires, scales or tables used) (Ogunbameru, 2000).

With the focus group report a recommended outline includes the following:

1. Cover page: Containing the title, names of people receiving the report, the names of the researchers, and the date the report is submitted.
2. Summary: (Usually limited to two pages. It describes why focus groups were conducted. It also lists major conclusions and recommendations).
3. Table of Contents: (Optional; it provides the reader with information on how the report is organized and where various parts are located).
4. Statement of the problem, key questions, and study methods: (A description of the purpose of the study and a brief description of the focus group interviews).
5. Results: (Organized around key questions or big ideas in the focus group interview).
6. Limitations and alternative explanations: (those aspects of the study that limit the transfer of findings, and the use of procedures that prevent conclusive statements about the programme refers to the limitations).
7. Conclusions and recommendations: (the findings are put together into clear-summary statement by the conclusions. Recommendations are optional).
8. Appendix: (made up of additional materials)

**Author's Address:** O.A. Ogunbameru, Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria

that might be helpful to the reader (Krueger, 1988:137).

**KEY WORDS** Technology. Private Sector. Qualitative Methods. Interview. Focus Groups.

**ABSTRACT** There is up to date, a scarcity of texts on focus groups, especially in the developing world. This paper attempts to fill the void. The paper corrects the wrong usage of focus group as a synonym for group interview, open space technology, delphic processes, nominal groups, and brainstorming as being used by some scholars. The paper provides a brief history of focus group, as well as the techniques of data collection and analysis. The advantages and disadvantages of focus group, and the methods of reporting focus group discussions are also discussed in the chapter.

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