What is a focus group?

A focus group is a form of primary research, which uses a small group discussion format to obtain information from people who represent the company’s target market. The group discussion is centered on a specific, predetermined set of questions. A typical focus group session includes six to ten participants and lasts about two hours.
Primary Market Research  Conducting Focus Groups

Why are focus groups used?

A focus group can be used any time you wish to obtain qualitative information from your potential customers. Focus groups are frequently used to:

- Identify new ideas for products.
- Develop questionnaires for statistical research.
- Identify new uses for existing products.
- Identify new advertising or packaging themes.
- Test alternative marketing approaches.
- Diagnose competitor’s strengths and weaknesses.
- Improve product positioning.
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What are the advantages of conducting a focus group?

A focus group is a good way to obtain valuable, quick, low cost marketing information directly from potential customers.
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What are some of the disadvantages of a focus group?

The results from a focus group are not “statistically significant.” Because of the small size of the sample group, the information cannot be projected to the entire target market. In addition, the information obtained may be misleading and results of focus groups are often difficult to compile. Sometimes people tell you what they think you want to hear, or say they would buy, but wouldn’t in actuality. Planning and conducting focus groups can also take a great deal of time.
How should I plan for a focus group?

Conducting a successful focus group involves a great deal of planning. Consider the following steps:

1. Before you plan any focus groups, be sure to document your goals. What type of information do you need? What is your desired outcome? How will the information be used? Goals will help keep the focus group on track, which saves company time and money.
How should I plan for a focus group? continued

Conducting a successful focus group involves a great deal of planning. Consider the following steps:

2. After you understand your goals, develop a facilitator’s guide. This guide should include lists of questions to be covered during the session arranged by topic for easy reference. When facilitators use specific, predetermined questions, it helps to reduce any bias on the part of the facilitator and helps in compiling and comparing the results from different focus groups.

The guide should outline a proposed agenda for the group discussion. Each session should start with an explanation of the purpose of the meeting and an assurance that participants’ answers will be kept confidential. This introduction is followed by a few fact-finding questions designed to include all members in the discussion.
How should I plan for a focus group? continued

Conducting a successful focus group involves a great deal of planning. Consider the following steps:

3. Select a location that provides a convenient, comfortable atmosphere for participants. You may need to consider providing transportation to ensure participation.

Prepare the location to facilitate an open discussion. Tape recorders or video recorders to capture the responses of the participants should be as inconspicuous as possible. Be sure to provide name cards and refreshments.
How should I plan for a focus group? continued

Conducting a successful focus group involves a great deal of planning. Consider the following steps:

4. Choose participants who are actual or potential buyers or who match the relevant characteristics of the target market. Before identifying participants, screen them with a few questions that confirm their qualifications to participate in the focus group. Screening allows you to form groups that match your target market and that will work well together. Plan to offer a small “reward” for participating, such as a meal or nominal fee.
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How should I facilitate a focus group?

Facilitating a focus group can be very difficult, especially when you are facilitating a group discussion for your own company. As it is frequently difficult to be unbiased and accepting of others’ suggestions, you may consider using the services of an outside, neutral third party to facilitate the group discussion.
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How should I facilitate a focus group? continued

Remember the following tips when facilitating a focus group discussion:

- Allow the participants to freely speak their opinions. Encourage them to contribute their responses as they go rather than holding their thoughts until the “right” time. Don’t provide feedback on participants’ responses and recommendations. For example, explaining to the participant why his or her suggestion would not work will discourage further contributions.
- Be aware of possible cultural issues that could affect the comfortable exchange of information.
- Try to reach the goals of the focus group, yet remain flexible.
How should I facilitate a focus group? continued

Remember the following tips when facilitating a focus group discussion:

- Be sure to keep the discussion as close to the topic as possible. There may be times when the discussion will take an unexpected turn. Redirect the topic, if necessary.

- Record the session and study the tapes several times after the completion of the focus groups. Have additional people study the tapes and provide their feedback.