

Focus groups



Description

Focus groups of up to ten people discuss an issue. The group is facilitated and run according to an interview guide and the discussion recorded. Responses and themes are then summarised and fed back to organisational decision makers and into the decision making processes.

How it works

The aim of the focus group is to provide a situation in which meaningful and sustainable flow of ideas can take place.

First you need to decide how many focus groups you need: this depends in part on what other consumer participation strategies you are using. The number of focus groups may also depend on the number of different consumer groups that have needs in relation to the issue. For example, separate focus groups might be organised to gather input from consumers of different ages, genders, racial or ethnic origins.

Consumers are best recruited through existing contacts such as through current client lists of programs.

Select people who are fairly open, who can express their feelings in front of a small group of people and are prepared to respond to what others say. A focus group would normally have a maximum of 10 participants, more usually 6 to 8.

Participants must be informed about the purpose of the research and guaranteed confidentiality. Participants should be asked to sign a consent form which details all relevant information and provides contact details of project manager. Anyone who is involved in providing the services which may be under discussion definitely should not act as a facilitator. Consumers need to be confident that anything they say will not have an impact on the service they receive from the organisation.

An interview guide is prepared and used to explore attitudes and behaviours; facilitators ask questions and allow consumers to discuss things among themselves, with the facilitator monitoring and guiding the discussion.

A focus group should be no longer than two hours. However, introductions and house-keeping can take place 'over refreshments' in an additional half hour at the start, especially while waiting for late comers.

Consumers are reimbursed for any costs incurred and often their contribution is also acknowledged with some form of payment or gift.

Sessions should be recorded (audio and/or video) and someone should be present to assist the facilitator and to take notes. Notes assist in identifying who the speakers are. It is not necessary to transcribe the tape recording; however it is important that it is carefully analysed and the key messages and themes are extracted and written up in a comprehensive report.

The report records the composition of the group and some descriptive demographic data relevant to the topic. The report should include: the research questions / purpose of the focus group (what you want to know); the interview questions; a summary of the answers to the interview questions; analysis and discussion of these answers with quotes to illustrate main points, and answers to the research questions.

A summary of the focus group should be made available to participants with details of what will happen next to their input.

Degree of participation

Information seeking.

Timeframe

Short term.

Resource level required

Medium to high.

Resource requirement include: an ethics process to ensure that informed consent is obtained and to guarantee consumer confidentiality; assistance to recruit consumers and ensure they are able to get to venue; a budget to cover costs of venue, reimbursements and acknowledgements and refreshments; and a skilled facilitator and a note-taker. Interpreters may also be required where the focus group includes consumers from CALD backgrounds.

Time is required to analyse and report findings and summarise for consumers.

Strengths

Consumers enjoy focus groups: they like to meet with others and share ideas and experiences, and often feel they have made a worthwhile contribution for relatively little effort.

Well run focus groups can be one of the most efficient ways of getting in-depth information from consumers. Focus groups are an efficient way to collect qualitative data.

Interaction between consumers means that issues get explored in greater depth than is possible with individual interviews. False or extreme views tend to be discouraged by the group process.

Consumer's perspectives and experiences are clearly illustrated 'in their own words' from quotes recorded during the group.

Weaknesses

The main limitation of focus groups is that the information obtained is only what participants say they do or believe. Opinions and feelings may be exaggerated or silenced in the group.

At times discussion may be dominated by one or two people, in which case the quieter members may not get to have a say. The group may also stray from the issue and fail to answer the questions. Focus groups require a facilitator with good group-work skills to avoid these pitfalls.

The number of questions that can be asked in one session is limited. It is unlikely that you will be able to have more than five questions for eight people in one hour.

Focus groups require a significant amount of time in both the preparation phase and in recording and analysing the information.

Example



Focus groups were used to get the views and opinions of consumers and of service providers to inform the content of this Resource Kit. The interview guide and the information presented were prepared in consultation with Peer Educators from the Housing Advocacy Service, who also facilitated the consumer focus groups. Since many questions were about definitions and meanings, information for discussion was presented on Powerpoint slides.

Consumers were recruited through housing workers who were given printed information to share with their clients. Lunch was provided to participants and they were also reimbursed \$50 for costs incurred. The purpose of the project and the group were explained and a summary of the focus group was posted to them. Their ideas and selected quotes have been incorporated into the Kit.

Tips

☞ Focus groups can be a useful adjunct to other consumer participation processes where in-depth consumer perspectives are sought on a specific issue or on a one-off basis.

☞ Involving consumer advocates to facilitate the

group can encourage openness and honesty of input.

For more information...

- <http://www.participateinhealth.org.au/clearinghouse/#I>. "IMPROVING HEALTH SERVICES THROUGH CONSUMER PARTICIPATION: A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR ORGANISATIONS". p.40. Viewed November 2007.