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How to Conduct Your Own Focus Group

By Debra J. Stratton

If you haven't already tried focus group research, consider doing so. Hearing first hand from your members and testing new ideas before trying something new in print or online can provide fresh insight into readers.

Here are some pointers to keep in mind as you get started:

- **Clarify your purpose and keep it narrow.** Like the articles you write, your focus group should have a clearly defined goal, such as gathering reaction to your magazine or newsletters. Don't try to accomplish too much in one two-hour session. Remember that the broader your goal, the less depth you'll be able to plow.
- **Invite a range of participants.** Seek a good mix of about eight to 10 readers. A larger group gets difficult to handle and doesn't allow as much participation by all. Invite a variety of readers/members and avoid including your association leaders and most-involved members, whose views will differ from the average reader's. To boost attendance, be sure to reconfirm participation with a follow-up e-mail or call.
- **Use an incentive to help ensure participants remember to show up.** Consider something of professional value (such as a book or resource report). Many groups also offer an honorarium as a token of appreciation for time spent, which can range from \$50 to \$150 per person.
- **Avoid conducting the focus group at a convention, if possible.** Ideally, you'll find a quieter time when participants are not tired or in a hurry and are better able to focus. Still, conference focus groups can work if you make an extra effort to remind participants of the meeting's time and place and find a room away from other activities.

Just keep in mind that a certain amount of bias is unavoidable if you talk to those most-involved members who generally attend an annual meeting. Seek to include some first-time attendees as well as regulars to ensure a balanced and representative discussion.

- **Consider time, location, and set-up:** Generally an hour and a half to two hours is the maximum. Tape record the proceedings so that you can concentrate on the discussion. Offer some refreshments during the session, or provide a meal if the focus group is in the evening after work, as is commonly done.

- **Find a good independent facilitator.** Enlist the services of someone who is familiar with the topic and comfortable and experienced in moderating, which takes a special talent. For instance, if you are conducting a focus group to gather feedback on your newsletter or magazine, use someone other than the editor or other staff members to lead the discussion. Hire a facilitator or use another volunteer who is trained in engaging and encouraging discussion but not “leading” response. Facilitators are skilled at remaining neutral, encouraging open discussion, and eliciting critical data, both positive and negative.
- **Maintain some ground rules.** For maximum results, start by explaining the purpose of the session and outline the protocol for discussion to ensure that everyone gets a chance to comment and no one individual monopolizes the discussion.
- **Develop an outline to guide the discussion.** Without one, it’s too easy to get off track. Don’t hesitate to stop someone who digresses from the topic at hand; politely remind the person of the focus of the session.
- **Always ask questions that require more than yes or no answers.** Inquire about the whys and hows of the issue, such as “How can we make the magazine more useful to you as a reader?” Or, “Specifically what topics would you like to see covered in upcoming issues?”

Then follow up. Ask “Like what?” “How much?” “How can we make that better?” And “What do you think of...?”

- **Act on the results.** Be sure to send participants a thank-you. Develop a plan of action to ensure you put the findings of the focus group to good use. And finally, be sure to share the highlights of those strategies with participants. They’ll want to know that you listened and learned from the insights they shared.

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