

Using Focus Groups in a Museum Setting: A Guide

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Foreword

This short guide provides information for museum practitioners interested in carrying out focus group research. It is not designed as a stand-alone tool but as a resource to support training and information already provided in the *Evaluation toolkit for museum practitioners*¹.

Where other resources have been consulted in writing this guide, the appropriate source(s) have been quoted.

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¹Evaluation toolkit for museum practitioners. 2008. East of England Museum Hub. Available for free download at www.renaissance-east.org.uk

Introduction: what are focus groups?

Focus groups were an outcome of research by the US government in the 1930s looking at the impact of propaganda films. They became popular within the field of marketing and have since gained wider appeal in the social sciences. Museums are increasingly using focus groups as a means of involving stakeholders in the decision-making process.

Focus group research can be thought of as a variation of the group interview technique. As its name suggests, the idea is to hold *focussed* discussion with a *group* of people that share a common interest to explore a defined set of issues. A moderator is present to help keep discussion on track. Focus group research can be characterised by group interaction that leads to a deeper understanding of individuals' motivations and the reasons for thinking the way that they do. This is possible because focus groups allow for participants to articulate their thoughts with the group moderator probing and asking follow-up questions as necessary. Interactions between participants enable differing views to be questioned, challenged and explored in more depth.

When might you use focus groups?

Focus groups can be used for a variety of purposes by museums. For example in the following instances they might be used for research into an exhibition or larger scale museum redevelopment:

- *Front-end evaluation* (at the start of the project) – this would be when you need to determine your audience's existing knowledge about a topic as well as to gauge their interest and expectations of how material might be displayed and interpreted.
- *Formative evaluation* (during the project) – this can occur when you wish to test plans or prototypes that may have already been drawn up, such as interactive exhibits and mock-ups, ideas about proposed content or design elements.

- *Summative evaluation* (after the project) – this would be helpful to gain an insight into your visitor’s understanding, satisfaction and learning with respect to the project.

Additionally, focus groups can be used in these instances:

- As a tool in strategic planning and stakeholder analysis/ feedback (particularly useful when you have groups of people or teams of staff where you need to gather feedback simply and quickly).
- For audience research studies – where you research selected audience groups (older visitors, teachers, young people)
- In market research – to test advertising and promotion concepts, consumer motivations, behaviour and product satisfaction.

Source: <http://www.amonline.net.au/amarc/pdf/research/focusgps.pdf>

Pros and cons of focus group research

As with any research method, there are strengths and weaknesses with the focus group approach.

Pros

- Interactions between participants (‘synergistic’ effect) enhances data quality by tempering extreme viewpoints
- Group interaction allows for new areas to be considered that are not necessarily anticipated or encountered via other methods
- It is possible to gain in-depth rich, insightful data and feedback
- It is quicker to gain views from participants than from individual interviews
- It offers the opportunity to ask for clarification of responses and to follow-up and probe key responses from participants
- It is possible to gather ‘visual’ feedback i.e. the observation of body language
- It is a suitable way to gather feedback from children and from people with low literacy

Cons

- It is not possible to generalise to larger populations given the small sample sizes usually involved
- There can be difficulties recruiting an appropriate sample
- A skilled facilitator/moderator is key to manage the focus group so that it is not dominated by a minority of people and to encourage less verbal participants to contribute
- However, managing different personalities can be difficult and lead to bias in the results
- Analysis is time consuming and requires a good level of skill in interpretation
- Not all participants may feel comfortable in a group
- A reduced number of questions and response time is necessary given the number of people participating
- Controversial and highly personal issues are not generally suitable for discussion

The basic rules of focus groups

- 8 - 10 participants is the ideal number
- Group your participants according to the target audience for the subject matter (e.g. exhibition) being researched and pair your groups (e.g. visitors vs. non-visitors)
- A minimum of 4 sessions are usually needed but 6-8 may be better
- Aim for the session to last no more than two hours in total (90 minutes is ideal)
- Try not to be over-ambitious with the number of questions (8-10 questions / themes is more than enough)
- Always use two facilitators (one to moderate and another to assist)
- Aim to reimburse your participants if necessary
- Always hold the session in a safe place
- Offer refreshments to your participants

Recruiting Participants

- Focus groups rely on you recruiting participants by *purposive sampling* (i.e. choosing your participants with regard to your project aims). So, first of all you need to decide which groups of people you wish to consult. This will help you to create a number of screening questions to recruit an appropriate sample. You will probably need to consult your local community so it is important to know what your community profile is (i.e. demographic information, such as age, ethnicity, gender, employment status, or shared interests, about a group of people who live within a set geographical area).
- Remember to recruit more people than you will actually need as some individuals will cancel last minute.
- Never underestimate the resources needed for recruitment – it is a time consuming business.
- You can choose to use a recruitment company or undertake the recruitment yourselves. If you choose the latter then the following ideas may help:
 - Compile a database of willing participants from collecting names and demographic information in the museum as well as Friends of your museum
 - Use ‘snowball’ sampling – asking participants to name other suitable participants
 - Involve people from previous consultations,
 - Your Local Authority Citizens Panel may be able to provide you with demographic information about local citizens who could be approached to take part in your focus groups
 - Approach community groups that you already have a relationship with; aim also to create new contacts with community groups that you have not previously

Thinking about your questions

- Consider whether you will use a ‘topic guide’ or a set of structured questions. A topic guide is a list of issues that you aim to cover during the focus group. Structured questions on the other hand set out word-for-word each question, in sequence, that you wish to ask. Topic guides take less time to prepare and are more conversational in nature but are not always advisable where you are holding focus groups run by moderators with less experience or where different moderators are involved in a set of focus groups. In these situations, structured questions are usually a better option.
- Remember, even if you use structured questions, you can still ask them in a more conversational manner
- Small talk (and an ice-breaker) is an important part of focus groups at the beginning of the session as this will help to ‘warm up’ your participants and hopefully enable them to feel more responsive and relaxed.
- Try to move from the more general to the specific (e.g. from describing a recent museum visit to specific questions exploring feedback on a range of exhibition topics or themes)
- When phrasing questions it is best to:
 - Use broad, open-ended questions to elicit an open-ended response
 - Ask about specific experiences rather than intentions or possibilities (“think back”)
 - Avoid asking participants to explain themselves using questions starting with “why” as this suggests that they need to justify their thinking with a rational answer. “What” or “how” are better-used terms to start your questions.
 - Keep questions simple
- Avoid using jargon and giving examples
- Test, test and test again your questions beforehand

Source: Krueger, R.A. (1998). *Developing Questions for Focus Groups*. London, Sage Publications.

Ethical Issues

It is very important to brief participants before any focus group discussion starts. This should cover the following:

- What the research is about (its purpose, aims)
- What is expected of them (honesty, openness, be respectful of others)
- What they can expect of the researchers (adhere to best research practice)

Remember also to provide participants with a participant information sheet and ensure that two participant consent forms are signed, one copy for you and one copy for your participant. More information about these is provided in the 'Evaluation toolkit for museum practitioners'.

Lastly, it's important to ensure that if you have personal information about your participants, you store and process this in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 (see the *Evaluation toolkit for museum practitioners* for further guidance).

How to Structure a Focus Group Session

There is an advisable basic structure to follow when it comes to delivering a focus group. The stages are outlined below:

- On arrival, ask participants to sign consent forms (following an explanation of their need) and deal with any reimbursement
- Provide introductions from facilitators and cover any housekeeping issues (refreshments, toilets, fire exits)
- Give details about how the session will be structured and how long it will last; purpose of research, ground rules
- Hold an 'ice breaker' (incorporates participants introducing themselves)
- Hold the main discussion covering your key questions
- Summarise the participants' main points of view and ask them if this is an accurate record of their feedback
- Invite further comments and questions from participants
- Offer thanks to participants
- Hold a debrief between the facilitators (moderator & assistant)

How to deal with difficult situations

In some instances, focus groups can go a little awry. You might encounter the situations detailed below. Some advice is provided to help overcome these problems.

- Are the participants answering the question or just talking? There is a certain skill needed by the moderator to overcome this issue. Moderators need to listen carefully to the conversation whilst keeping track in their head of whether this is relevant to the issues that need to be discussed. In some instances, the discussion may be lively and interesting but irrelevant to your question. In these cases, you need to steer the discussion back on track.
- Shy participants – In this instance it is useful to have your participants wearing name badges so that you can draw these individuals into the conversation by asking their opinion directly, where they have not contributed.
- Dominant participants or participants with a bugbear – these are often the most difficult participants to handle. You can thank them directly for their comments and clearly ask the others whether they agree or not. In some cases, if the participant is completely disrupting the discussion, then you may wish (during a break, on a one-to-one basis) to thank them for their time and let them know that you have enough feedback from them and that they may leave early.

Recording the focus group

Keeping a record of what was said in your focus group is vital. It is advisable to use a number of methods:

- A voice recorder – remember to test, test and test again before you use it to determine the best settings for your setting and do let participants know that you will be recording them beforehand.
- Observer notes taken by the moderator's assistant (recording the body language of participants, often as insightful as the actual comments themselves; as well as the seating plan of participants, any notes of animated

discussion, points of consensus/divergence of opinions and interesting quotes)

- Transcripts of sessions, typed up from your recorded focus groups.
- Notes from the debrief between the two facilitators following the session.

Making sense of your results

As soon after the session as possible, it is important to hold a debrief between the two facilitators while the discussion is still fresh in your mind to consider the following questions:

- What are the most important themes or ideas discussed?
- How did this differ from what you expected?
- How did these differ from what occurred in earlier focus groups?
- What points need to be included in the written report?
- What quotes should be remembered and possibly included in the report?
- Were there any unexpected or anticipated findings?

You can also consider the group dynamics and whether anything seemed to influence the discussion. Then go through each question and discuss the main themes to emerge from each, using the observer's notes. Dictate these on your recorder once you have agreed the main points for each question.

Source: Krueger, R.A. (1998). *Analyzing and Reporting Focus Group Results*. London, Sage Publications.

Reporting and using your results

There are a number of points to keep in mind when it comes to reporting your results.

- Who is your audience? This will shape the format, length and content of your report. Make it relevant and accessible to your audience.
- Avoid giving a summary of the data as numbers and percentages. Remember you are dealing with qualitative data and need to report on it in a qualitative way. It can be a good idea to give the reader a sense of how

common or unusual the qualitative data is (e.g. 'The prevailing feeling was ...', 'A less common opinion was ...', 'Around half the participants suggested that ...').

- Interpret your participants' comments based on the advice given above under 'Making sense of your results' – What do they mean? How do they answer your original research questions?
- Provide quotations where necessary to illustrate your point. It is acceptable to edit quotations (if you do not lose or change their meaning) so that they read more lucidly as people often do not speak in complete or sensible sentences! To insert text, place this inside square brackets [] and when omitting text replace it with '... ..'. Try to explain the context of quotations if it aids with understanding.
- Lastly, decide on your recommendations. What changes will you make as a result of this information? How will the feedback affect your decision-making?

Further reading

The Focus Group Kit (Volumes 1–6) by Sage Publications
ISBN 0-7619-0760-2

Vol. 1 The Focus Group Guidebook (D.L. Morgan)

Vol. 2 Planning Focus Groups (D.L. Morgan)

Vol. 3 Developing Questions for Focus Groups (R. A. Krueger)

Vol. 4 Moderating Focus Groups (R. A. Krueger)

Vol. 5 Involving Community Members in Focus Groups (R. A. Krueger & J. A King)

Vol. 6 Analysing and Reporting Focus Group Results (R. A. Krueger)

For a short summary on focus groups also see

<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/survey-unit/focusgroupsFAQs.htm>