



# Focus Groups

This section describes another way to gather information about your market and opportunities to strengthen the economic health of your business district. It can be used with various stakeholders such as consumers, business owners and community leaders.

A focus group is a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions of a defined area of interest (i.e. downtown revitalization) in a permissive, non-threatening environment. Approximately seven to ten people who have some common characteristics that relate to the topic being discussed participate in the group. The discussion is conducted by a trained interviewer (moderator, facilitator). Typically, a focus group study consists of a minimum of three focus groups.

This section provides an outline summary of workshop materials developed by Mohammad Douglah, Evaluation Specialist, University of Wisconsin-Extension, Department of Life Sciences Communication. Applications to downtown and business district market analysis were added.

## **Learn more:**

[Overview](#)

[Moderator Skills](#)

[Expectations of the Assistant Moderator](#)

[Beginning the Focus Group Discussion](#)

[Asking Questions that Yield Powerful Information](#)

[Systematic Analysis Process](#)

[Focus Group Analysis Tips](#)

[Reporting Focus Group Results](#)

# Overview

## Why do Focus Groups?

The focus group approach provides a qualitative alternative to survey research. It is based on the premise that attitudes and perceptions are developed in part by interaction with other people. It recognizes the danger of taking people's perceptions for granted and provides a structure that promotes reflective thinking and self-disclosure.

*Examples of Downtown Focus Groups:* Five stakeholder groups were used in the study of Downtown Milwaukee as a place to live, work and recreate. These groups included: hospitality industry professionals, downtown workers, downtown residents, young professionals, and college students. Each group was asked a set of questions intended to look at various strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for improving the overall Downtown environment.

## When to Conduct Focus Groups

Focus groups are effective when:

- People have something to share (motivations)
- The goal is to understand human behavior

Focus groups are not effective when:

- People are divided or angry
- The goal is to gather factual information
- The organization is trying to improve its image

## Selecting Participants

Participants in each focus group should be similar in terms of who they are as a group (shoppers, business operators, property owners, etc.). Ideally, participants do not know each other or the moderator. General selection rules:

- Set exact specifications
- Maintain control of the selection process
- Use the resources of the sponsoring organization in recruiting
- Beware of bias:
  - Participants picked by memory
  - Participants picked because they've expressed concern
  - Participants who are clones of the person doing the selection
  - Participants are nonproductive
- Develop a pool of eligible participants and then randomly select those to participate in the focus group

## Selection Strategies

- List piggyback
- On location
- Nominations
- Random phone screening

- Ads in newspapers and bulletin boards

## **Incentives for Participants**

- Money (or gift certificates to downtown businesses)
- Food (or catered lunch)
- Gifts
- Positive, upbeat invitation

## **Systematic Notification Procedures**

- Set the meeting times for interviews
- Contact potential participants by phone or in person (two weeks before meeting time)
- Send a personalized invitation
- Phone (or contact) each person the day before the focus group.

[Return to top](#)

# Moderator Skills

## Selects the right moderator:

- Exercise mild unobtrusive control
- Adequate knowledge of topic
- Appears like the participants

## Uses an assistant moderator

- Handles logistics
- Takes careful notes
- Monitors recording equipment

## Is mentally prepared

- Alert and free from distractions
- Has the discipline of listening
- Memorizes questioning route

## Uses purposeful small talk

- Create warm and friendly environment
- Observe the participants for seating arrangements

## Records the discussion

- Tape recorders
- Written notes

## Has a smooth & snappy introduction

1. Welcome
2. Overview and topic
3. Ground rules
4. First question

## Uses pauses and probes

- 5second pause
- "Would you explain further?" "Would you give an example?" "I don't understand."

## Controls reactions to participants

- Verbal and nonverbal
- Head nodding
- Short verbal responses (avoid "that's good," "excellent")

## Uses subtle group control

- Experts

- Dominant talkers
- Shy participants
- Ramblers

## Selects appropriate location

- Neutral
- Free from distractions
- Participants facing each other

## Uses appropriate three step conclusion

1. Summarize with confirmation
2. Review purpose and ask anything has been missed
3. Thanks and dismissal

[Return to top](#)

# **Expectations of the Assistant Moderator**

## **Take responsibility for equipment**

Ensure that needed equipment is available and working. This includes recorders, microphone, tapes, handouts, etc.

## **Take responsibility for refreshments**

Arrange for food (either complete meals or snacks) and beverages to be available on time.

## **Arrange the room**

Arrange chairs and table. Be attentive to background noises that would affect the audio recording as well as room temperature and lighting.

## **Welcome participants as they arrive**

You are the host. Make participants feel welcome and comfortable.

## **Sit in designated location**

Sit outside the circle, opposite the moderator and closest to the door. Greet those arriving late and find them a place to sit.

## **Take notes throughout the discussion**

## **Operate recording equipment**

Be familiar with the tape recorder. Turn over or insert another tape as quietly as possible.

Label the cassette tapes.

## **Do not participate in the discussion**

Talk only if invited by the moderator. Control your nonverbal actions no matter how strongly you feel about an issue.

## **Ask questions when invited**

At the end of the discussion the moderator will invite you to ask questions of amplification or clarification.

## **Give an oral summary**

Provide a brief oral summary (about 3 minutes). Invite participants to offer additions or corrections to the summary.

## **Thank participants and hand out the honorariums (if applicable)**

### **Debrief with moderator**

Discuss overall impressions, notable quotes, key ideas or insights presented, and how this group compared to other groups.

### **Give feedback on analysis and reports**

Read reports and provide feedback.

# Beginning the Focus Group Discussion

The first few moments in focus group discussion are critical. In a brief time the moderator must create a thoughtful, permissive atmosphere, provide the ground rules and set the tone of the discussion. Much of the success of group interviewing can be attributed to the development of this open environment.

The recommended pattern for introducing the group discussion includes: (1) The welcome, (2) The overview and topic, (3) The ground rules and (4) The first question. Here is an example of a typical introduction:

## **Sample Introduction**

*Good afternoon and welcome to our session. Thank you for taking the time to join our discussion of how we can make downtown Milwaukee a more attractive environment for visitors. My name is Bill Ryan and I represent University of Wisconsin-Extension. Assisting me is Judith Ruetsche, a graduate student in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. We are attempting to gain information about how to improve the visitor experience of business, convention and leisure travelers to the City. We have invited key hospitality industry professionals who have firsthand knowledge of Milwaukee's visitor.*

*You were selected because you have certain things in common that are of particular interest to us. You are all employed in the hospitality industry and manage employees that come in daily contact with visitors to Milwaukee. We are particularly interested in your views because you are representative of Milwaukee's tourism leadership.*

*This afternoon we will be discussing ways to improve the visitor's experience. For example, we will identify what kinds of retail, service, dining and entertainment amenities might be missing downtown. We will also discuss how we can more effectively market to the visitor. There are no right or wrong answers but rather differing points of view. Please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said.*

*Before we begin, let me remind you of some ground rules. Please speak up, but only one person should talk at a time. We're tape-recording the session because we don't want to miss any of your comments. If several are talking at the same time, the tape will get garbled and we'll miss your comments. We will be on a first name basis, and in our later reports there will not be any names attached to comments. You may be assured of complete confidentiality. Keep in mind that we're just as interested in negative comments as positive comments, and at times the negative comments are the most helpful.*

*Our session will last about an hour and a half, and we will not be taking a formal break. Well, let's begin. We've placed name cards on the table in front of you to help us remember each other's names. Let's find out some more about each other by going around the room one at a time. Tell us your name and your work affiliation.*



# Asking Questions that Yield Powerful Information

## 1. Use open-ended questions

## 2. Avoid dichotomous questions

These are questions that can be answered with a yes or no.

## 3. "Why?" is rarely asked

- Can make people defensive and that they need to provide an answer
- When you ask why, people usually respond with attributes or influences. So
- It's better to ask what prompted, or what features did you like . . . ?

## 4. Use "think back" questions

Take people back to an experience and not forward to the future.

## 5. Carefully prepare focus questions

Identify potential questions. There are five types of questions

1. Opening Question (round robin)
2. Introductory Question
3. Transition Questions
4. Key Questions
5. Ending Questions

## 6. Ask uncued questions first, cued questions second

Cues are the hints or prompts that help participants recall specific features or details.

## 7. Consider standardized questions

Sentence completion, conceptual mapping

## 8. Focus the questions

Sequence that goes from general to specific

## 9. Be cautious of serendipitous questions

Consider but be cautious of these. Often best to save for last.

## 10. Have appropriate ending questions

- *All things considered question* - This question asks participants to reflect on the entire discussion and then offer their positions or opinions on topics of central importance to

- the researchers. Example: "Of all the things we discussed, what to you is the most important?"
- *Summary question* - After the brief oral summary the question asked is: "Is this an adequate summary?"
  - *Final question* - The moderator reviews the purpose of the study and then asks the participants: "Have we missed anything?"

**Sample Focus Group Questions Used in Milwaukee**

*The following focus group questions were designed to obtain the perceptions of several consumer segments that use Downtown Milwaukee as a place to live, work and recreate. Each set of questions is intended to look at various strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for improving the overall downtown environment. Several questions are also intended to explore the entrepreneurial environment in Downtown Milwaukee.*

**Hospitality Industry Professionals**

1. *Think back to a situation or situations when you have heard visitors talk about their visit to Milwaukee. What positive comments about Milwaukee do you recall?*
2. *Think back to another situation what negative comments about Milwaukee were shared with you. What do you recall?*
3. *Is there a difference between the needs of business travelers and leisure travelers? If so, how do they differ? What kind of amenities such as specific retail services, dining and entertainment would attract more visitors/customers to downtown Milwaukee?*
4. *Compared to other cities, what amenities do you think are missing in downtown Milwaukee; in other words, are there specific products, services or experiences that visitors/customers are repeatedly asking for?*
5. *Are there any special services or events you offer your visitors/customers? If so, what kind? What kind of packages do you offer your customers and are they effective in improving their experience here in Milwaukee?*
6. *What kind of local initiatives (in terms of products AND collaborations/network) would help you to improve your business?*
7. *All things considered, if you could change one thing in Milwaukee, what would it be?*

### ***Downtown Workers***

- 1. For a moment, think about the Greater Milwaukee area. Think about places like Brookfield, Racine, Brown Deer, New Berlin and Franklin. What do you feel are the advantages of working in Downtown Milwaukee compared to other surrounding communities? What are some potential disadvantages?*
- 2. Think about other cities around the nation where you may have worked, visited, or perhaps considered as a place of employment. What characteristics of those cities make them more desirable than Downtown Milwaukee as a place to work? What characteristics make them less desirable?*
- 3. In thinking about these ideal characteristics, consider the future of Downtown Milwaukee. From your perspective as a downtown employee, what could be done in Downtown Milwaukee to create your ideal workplace?*
- 4. If you were to start your own business, what advantages does Downtown Milwaukee possess as a place to locate a business over other areas?*
- 5. What do you feel are some potential barriers to attracting new businesses into Downtown Milwaukee or retaining existing businesses?*

### **Downtown Residents**

1. *For a moment, think about the Greater Milwaukee area. Think about places like Brookfield, Wauwatosa, Brown Deer, New Berlin, Mequon and Shorewood. What do you feel are the advantages of living in Downtown Milwaukee compared to other surrounding communities? What are the disadvantages?*
2. *Think about other downtowns around the region, state or nation where you may have lived, visited, or perhaps thought about living. What characteristics of those downtowns make them more desirable than Milwaukee as a place to live? What characteristics make them less desirable?*
3. *In thinking about these ideal characteristics, consider the future of Downtown Milwaukee. From your perspective as a downtown resident, what could be done in Downtown Milwaukee to create your ideal home?*
4. *Consider the amenities present in Downtown Milwaukee. Amenities could include entertainment and cultural venues, dining establishments, and shopping opportunities. Which amenities most contribute to your quality of life in Downtown Milwaukee? What additional amenities would improve Downtown Milwaukee as a place to live?*
5. *From your perspective as a resident, what do you feel are some potential barriers to attracting new residents into Downtown Milwaukee or retaining existing residents?*

### ***Young Professionals***

- 1. If you were going to describe Downtown Milwaukee to a new area resident in their 20's or 30's, what words or phrases would you use?*
- 2. From your perspective as a person in your 20's or 30's, what do you feel are some potential barriers to attracting additional young professionals into Downtown Milwaukee to work, live or play?*
- 3. Think about other downtowns around the nation where you may have lived, worked, visited, or perhaps thought about living. What characteristics of those downtowns might make them more desirable than Downtown Milwaukee as a place to live, work or recreate? What characteristics might make them less desirable?*
- 4. In thinking about these ideal characteristics, consider the future of Downtown Milwaukee. From your perspective as a person in your 20's or 30's, what steps could Downtown Milwaukee take to attract more young workers seeking social, cultural and employment opportunities?*
- 5. Many people in their 20's or 30's have considered starting their own business. If you were going to start your own business, what aspects of Downtown Milwaukee make it a good place to start a business? What aspects make it less desirable?*

### **College Students**

1. *New students come to Milwaukee every semester. If you were describing Downtown Milwaukee to new students, what words or phrases first come to mind?*
2. *For a moment, think about your college experience in Milwaukee. As part of your college experience, think about cultural, social and shopping opportunities in the Downtown. How have these opportunities in Downtown Milwaukee contributed to your overall college experience?*
3. *Think about other downtowns around the nation where you may have lived, visited, or perhaps thought about living after college. What characteristics of those cities make them more desirable than Downtown Milwaukee as a place to live or work? What characteristics make them less desirable?*
4. *As a student, consider your vision of an ideal Downtown Milwaukee for social, cultural and shopping opportunities. From your perspective as a student, what could be done to improve Downtown Milwaukee in any or all three areas?*
5. *At some point, you will be graduating from your college. You will be faced with a choice to either stay in the area or leave for opportunities elsewhere. What aspects of Milwaukee would convince you to remain in the area? What aspects would influence your decision to leave?*

# Systematic Analysis Process

## Start while still in the group

- Listen for inconsistent comments and probe for understanding
- Listen for vague or cryptic comments and probe for understanding
- Consider asking each participant a final preference question
- Offer a summary of key questions and seek confirmation

## Soon after the focus group within hours analyze individual focus group

- Make backup copy of tapes and send tape to transcriber for computer entry if transcript is wanted
- Analyst listens to tape, reviews field notes and reads transcript if available
- Prepare report of the individual focus group in a question-by-question format with amplifying quotes
- Share report for verification with other researchers who were present at the focus group

## Within days analyze the series of focus groups

- Compare and contrast results by categories of individual focus groups
- Look for emerging themes by question and then overall
- Construct typologies or diagram the analysis
- Describe findings and use quotes to illustrate

## Finally, prepare the report

- Consider narrative style versus bulleted style
- Use a few quotes to illustrate
- Sequence could be question by question or by theme
- Share report for verification with other researchers
- Revise and finalize report
- Note themes, hunches, interpretations and ideas
- Compare and contrast this focus group to other groups
- Label and file field notes, tapes and other materials

## Immediately after the focus group

- Draw a diagram of seating arrangement
- Spot check tape recording to ensure proper operation
- Conduct moderator and assistant moderator debriefing

# Focus Group Analysis Tips

## Consider the words

Think about both the actual words used by the participants and the meanings of those words. A variety of words and phrases will be used and the analyst will need to determine the degree of similarity between these responses.

## Consider the context

Participant responses were triggered by a stimulus question asked by the moderator or a comment from another participant. Examine the context by finding the triggering stimulus and then interpret the comment in light of that environment. The response is interpreted in light of the preceding discussion and also by the tone and intensity of the oral comment.

## Consider the internal consistency

Participants in focus groups change and sometimes even reverse their positions after interaction with others. This phenomenon rarely occurs in individual interviews due to a lack of interaction from other participants. When there is a shift in opinion, the researcher typically traces the flow of the conversation to determine clues that might explain the change.

## Consider the frequency or extensiveness of comments

Some topics are discussed by more participants (extensiveness) and also some comments are made more often (frequency) than others. These topics could be more important or of special interest to participants. Also, consider what wasn't said or received limited attention. Did you expect and not receive comments?

## Consider the intensity of the comments

Sometimes the participants will use words that connote intensity or tell you directly about their strength of feeling. Intensity may be difficult to spot with transcripts alone because intensity is also communicated by the voice tone, speed and emphasis on certain words. Individuals will differ on how they display strength of feeling and for some it will be a speed or excitement in the voice whereas others will speak slowly and deliberately. One of the clues to intensity is when an individual varies their past speaking pattern. For example: nontalkers start speaking, slow speakers talk faster, fast talkers speak slowly, quiet speakers talk louder, etc.

## Consider the specificity of responses

Responses that are specific and based on experiences should be given more weight than responses that are vague and impersonal. To what degree can the respondent provide details when asked a follow up probe? Greater attention is often placed on responses that are in the first person as opposed to hypothetical third person answers. For example, "I feel the new



practice is important because I have used it and been satisfied," has more weight than, "These practices are good and people in the area should use them."

## **Find the big ideas**

The researcher can get so close to a multitude of comments and details that trends or ideas that cut across the entire discussion are missed. One of the traps of analysis is not seeing the big ideas. It may be helpful to take a few steps back from the discussions by allowing an extra day for the big ideas to percolate. For example, after finishing the analysis the researcher might set the report aside for a brief period and then jot down the three or four of the most important findings.

# Reporting Focus Group Results

## Use a communications strategy

Rather than thinking of "a report," think of what type of communication strategy is needed. A variety of reports might be used to keep people informed. Consider: email messages, postcards, phone calls, bulleted summaries, selected quotes, moderator comments, midproject or final project reports, personal visits by members of the research team, etc.

## Use an appropriate reporting style that the client finds helpful and meets expectations

Ask users what kind of report would be helpful to them. What information are they looking for? What are the expectations and traditions of reports within the organization?

## Strive for enlightenment

Reports should raise the level of understanding of the client. The purpose is more to enlighten and convey new insights as opposed to repeating common knowledge which is already known by the sponsor of the study.

## Make points memorable

Help client remember the key points by limited the number of points you highlight. Too many points diminish overall impact. Begin with most important points and follow with lesser important points.

## Use narrative or bulleted format

Written reports can follow either a narrative format or a bulleted format. Don't surprise the client with a format different from what is expected.

## Give thought to the oral report

Oral reports should be brief, clear and concise. In addition, oral reports should allow opportunity for questions, indicate why the study is important and why the findings are meaningful, begin with the most important findings and engage the listener in an active manner.

### **About the Toolbox and this Section**

The 2011 update of the Downtown and Business District Market Analysis toolbox is a result of a collaborative effort involving University of Minnesota Extension, Ohio State University Extension, and University of Wisconsin Extension. The updated toolbox was supported with funding from the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development.

The toolbox is based on and supportive of the economic restructuring principles of the National Trust Main Street Center. The Wisconsin Main Street Program (Wisconsin Department of Commerce) has been an instrumental partner in the development of this toolbox.

This section was written from workshop materials developed by Mohammad Douglah, Evaluation Specialist, University of Wisconsin-Extension/Madison, Department of Life Sciences Communication. Applications to downtown and business district market analysis were added by Bill Ryan and Matt Kures of the University of Wisconsin-Extension.

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