

Transportation Outreach Planner

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Public Outreach Strategies

Focus Groups

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Recommended Target Groups

Education

College Education
High School Diploma
No High School Diploma

Language

Creole
Other
Spanish

Disability

Hearing Impaired
Other
Physically Challenged
Sight Impaired

Income

Low Income
Middle to Affluent

Vehicle Ownership

Non-vehicle Owner
Vehicle Owner

Race and Ethnicity

Race and Ethnicity

Age
Seniors
Working Age Adults
Youth

Strategy Class

- General

Strategy Types

- Civic Engagement
- Promotional

Description

A focus group is a qualitative research technique used to gauge public opinion, perceptions, and attitudes. Predominantly used in the marketing and advertising industries, transportation agencies can use focus groups to inform policy, project, or program development. Specifically, a focus group is a structured small group discussion led by a trained facilitator. Participants are carefully selected based on specific criteria and asked to respond to the pre-established questions intended to elicit their perspectives, insights, and opinions.

Special Uses

Focus groups can be used to: ²

- Assess public perceptions, beliefs, and opinions about specific issues, projects, or policies
- Obtain community input from hard to reach populations
- Compare opinions from various segments of the public
- Supplement community input from public meetings
- Test assumptions

When to Use

Agencies can use focus groups whenever it is necessary to obtain public input. They can be used to ascertain public concerns prior to implementing a media strategy. They can also be used to assess how the public will respond to proposed projects or policy alternatives. As a qualitative research tool, the results derived from focus groups provide a structured technique for gauging public opinion at a single point in time.

Cost

* Low (up to \$999)

Focus groups are relatively inexpensive compared to other research techniques, such as surveys. Expenses include the cost of hiring a neutral facilitator to oversee the process, supplies, and room rental. Although it is possible to pay participants to be part of a focus group, public agencies generally do not engage in this practice.

Low (up to \$999)	*
Moderate (\$1,000 to \$9,999)	**
High (\$10,000 to \$50,000)	***
Very High (Above \$50,000)	****

Disclaimer: The cost estimates provided are intended to be a guide. Project costs will vary depending on the size and nature of the project.

Time

* 1 to 3 months

Focus groups can be organized in a short amount of time and are generally two or three hours in duration. They can be organized within a few weeks. The most time consuming aspects of organizing a focus group include the selection of participants, and the time required to prepare the focus group questions and agenda.

1 to 3 months *

Disclaimer: The time estimates are approximations. The

6 months to a year
Multiyear

**

duration of a project may vary depending on various factors,
including size and budget.

Implementation Guidelines and Suggestions

The following serve as recommended guidelines and suggestions for organizing a focus group: ³

- **Select who will oversee the focus group process and moderate the focus group meeting.** Agencies should consider hiring university or private research firms to oversee the focus group process. Having a research firm that has experience in administering focus groups will help to ensure the validity of the focus group results. Although it is possible to use in-house staff to conduct the focus group, it is generally best to have a neutral party oversee the process and moderate the meeting. Below are the key responsibilities of the focus group moderator:³
 - Maintain the group discussion focused on the focus group questions
 - Elicit opinions from each participant
 - Avoid having a single participant dominate the proceedings
 - Ask probing questions that will generate deeper insights
- **Determine the objective of the focus group and develop the agenda and questions for the meeting.** The objective of the focus group will help to guide the focus group discussion. Once the objective is determined, it is possible to develop the focus group questions and plan how the meeting will be structured. The focus group meeting discussion should not be longer than two hours and should be limited to five or six questions. Questions should be:⁴
 - Open ended
 - Flow from general to more specific and complicated queries
 - Be value neutral
 - Help to achieve the objective of the focus group
- **Identify and invite participants.** Determine the number of people that will participate in the focus group and establish the screening criteria for selection. Focus groups should have between eight to twelve participants, as larger groups are more difficult to control and smaller groups may not generate dynamic discussions. Organizers should also strive to have diverse representation in the group in order to spark conversation and obtain as many different views as possible. Establishing screening criteria for selecting participants will help to ensure diverse participation. In some cases, participants receive a stipend for being part of the focus group. This helps to encourage participation. If stipends are given, participants need to sign a disclosure form which states that they were compensated for their participation. The research firm that will be conducting the focus group should oversee all aspects of the selection of participants in order to ensure the validity of the process.⁵
- **Obtain signed releases from focus group participants.** The release specifies the conditions for participation. While it provides permission to quote participants and report on the discussions, it also explains how the identities of participants will be protected. If the participants receive a fee for participation, the release explains that they received an incentive for being part of the focus group.⁶
- **Select a meeting site that is comfortable and can accommodate participants.** The meeting site should be in a location where participants feel comfortable expressing their opinions. The questions listed below should be considered when selecting a site:⁷
 - Does the site encourage conversation?
 - How will the site affect the discussion?
 - Can the seating be arranged in a "U" shape or around a table, which facilitates discussions?
 - Can the site accommodate all participants comfortably?
 - Is the site accessible to persons with disabilities?
 - Is the site close to public transportation and parking facilities?
- **Develop a discussion guide for the focus group.** In order to ensure that the focus group stays on track and does not exceed a two-hour time frame, it is important to developing a discussion guide for the proceedings. The discussion guide will serve as a guide for the facilitator and will help to ensure that the discussion closely follows the agenda. The discussion guide should contain the following:⁸
 - Opening Remarks: The opening should include a welcome statement, an overview of the purpose of the focus group, an explanation of the focus group process, and introductions from participants.
 - Question Session: This section is devoted to the focus group questions. The majority of the time should be set aside to discuss these questions.
 - Closing: In the closing participants should be given the opportunity to provide additional input. The closing

remarks should also provide an explanation of how the results of the focus group will be used and include a brief statement thanking the participants for attending.

- **Make arrangements to record the proceedings.** It is important to have a written account of the meeting; therefore, someone should be assigned to take thorough notes or transcribe the proceedings. It is also recommended to have an audio recording or video of the meeting.⁹
- **Soon after the focus group meeting, create a report with the findings of the proceedings.** If a video or audio recording cannot be made of the proceedings, it is important to transcribe the notes of the focus group and analyze the results soon after the meeting in order to avoid memory lapses. The report should include the following information:¹⁰
 - Review of the purpose of the focus group and any relevant background information
 - Summary of the meeting discussion
 - Analysis of discussion themes and unexpected comments
 - Assessment of the context and tone of the discussion
 - Analysis of comments that triggered strong reactions
 - Review of the focus group results and conclusions
 - Comparison of focus group results to other techniques (i.e. surveys, interviews, etc.)
 - Explanation of how focus group results can inform policy makers or agency staff
- **Determine how the focus group results will be used.** In order to ensure that the focus group results are utilized, agencies should hold a meeting with key policy makers, agency staff, and stakeholders to present the findings, determine the implications of the results, and develop a follow-up action plan.¹¹

Lessons Learned/Challenges

Below are key points to keep in mind when coordinating a focus group:¹²

- **The small size of a focus group helps to lower barriers to speaking out.** Due to the size and informal discussion format of focus groups, participants are generally more apt to volunteer ideas and comments.
- **The facilitator should not allow any one person to dominate the discussion and influence the group.**
- **Facilitators should seek to obtain full answers to the focus group questions.** Statements such as "we need more money" are not useful. In such a case the facilitator needs to ask more probing questions that will help to clarify why more money is needed.
- **Monitor the time closely to ensure that focus group meetings do not exceed two hours.** The longer that a meeting lasts, the more likely that people will lose focus.
- **Focus Group questions need to be tested.** Testing the questions can help to ensure that they are easy to understand and free of value judgments or leading statements.

Case Studies

The Los Angeles Center for Transit-Oriented Development used focus groups, along with other research techniques, to assess 71 existing and under construction transit stations. A series of focus groups were held with developers, planners, and staff from other agencies. As a result of the study, strategies were identified for undertaking transit oriented development (<http://latod.reconnectingamerica.org/welcome>).¹³

The Orange County Transportation Authority (Authority), in cooperation with other transportation districts and authorities in Southern California, used focus groups for assessing options to coordinate and improve commuter and intercity rail services between Los Angeles and San Diego. The focus groups targeted rail transit customers as well as nonusers and sought to identify attitudes and perceptions regarding the existing rail service, and the potential for enhancing and coordinating intercity and commuter passenger rail services (<http://www.octa.net/pdf/lossan08.pdf>).¹⁴

For Further Information

The following links provide useful guides and information on how to organize and facilitate focus groups:

- Basics of Conducting Focus Groups: <http://managementhelp.org/businessresearch/focus-groups.htm>¹⁵
- Conducting A Focus Group: <http://www.cse.lehigh.edu/~glennb/mm/FocusGroups.htm>¹⁶
- Focus Groups Tip Sheet: http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~pbd/pdfs/Focus_Groups.pdf¹⁷
- Focus Group Fundamentals: <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/publications/pm1969b.pdf>¹⁸

Sources

- 1 U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), "USDOT FHWA/FTA Public Involvement Techniques for Transportation Decision-Making: Focus Groups," August 2002, 29, FHWA, 17 December 2011 (<http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/reports/pittd/contents.htm>).
- 2 FHWA, "USDOT FHWA/FTA Public Involvement Techniques for Transportation Decision-Making: Focus Groups."
- 3 FHWA, "USDOT FHWA/FTA Public Involvement Techniques for Transportation Decision-Making: Focus Groups."
- 4 McNamara, Carter, "Basics of Conducting Focus Groups," Authenticity Consulting, LLC, 12 December 2011, (<http://managementhelp.org/businessresearch/focus-groups.htm>).
- 5 McNamara, Carter, "Basics of Conducting Focus Groups."
- 6 Prevention by Design, "Focus Groups, Tip Sheet," 14 September 2006, University of Berkeley, 17 December 2011, (http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~pbd/pdfs/Focus_Groups.pdf).
- 7 "Conducting A Focus Group," Lehigh University, 17 December 2011, (<http://www.cse.lehigh.e/~glennb/mm/FocusGroups.htm>).
- 8 "Conducting A Focus Group," Lehigh University.
- 9 Prevention by Design, "Focus Groups, Tip Sheet"
- 10 McNamara, Carter, "Basics of Conducting Focus Groups."
- 11 McNamara, Carter, "Basics of Conducting Focus Groups."
- 12 McNamara, Carter, "Basics of Conducting Focus Groups."
- 13 Center for Transit-Oriented Development, "Los Angeles TOD Typeology & Case Study Project," 17 December 2011, (<http://latod.reconnectingamerica.org/welcome>).
- 14 Orange County Transportation Authority (Authority), "Orange County Transportation Authority LOSSAN Corridor Rail Service Integration Focus Group Report," 8 August 2008, Orange County, 17 December 2011, (<http://www.octa.net/pdf/lossan08.pdf>).
- 15 McNamara, Carter, "Basics of Conducting Focus Groups."
- 16 "Conducting A Focus Group," Lehigh University.
- 17 Prevention by Design, "Focus Groups, Tip Sheet"
- 18 Grudens-Schuck, Nancy, Beverlyn Lundy Allen, and Kathlene Larson, "Focus Group Fundamentals," May 2004, Iowa State University, (<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/publications/pm1969b.pdf>).