

VIEWING FOCUS GROUPS: 11 TIPS

1. Recruiting and group size.

We normally recruit 12 people to assure that each group will have between 8 and 10 participants. If the audience is known to have a higher than average rate of no-shows, or the time the group is scheduled is less than optimal, we will over-recruit. Our practice is also to reconfirm with recruits on the day of or the day before groups.

Small Groups - Once in a very great while, bad weather, traffic, or simple bad luck may result in a low turnout. Take heart. The smaller the group, the more airtime there is for participants to express their views.

Large Groups - More frequently, recruiting exceeds expectations, but more is not always better and it may be desirable to “dismiss” one or more attendees to maximize the quality of the interaction. (The size of room, the style of the moderator, and the structure of the planned discussion will dictate what is a good size.) When more than enough people show up, your Project Director and/or Moderator will review the roster with you to decide which attendees should be released. Of course, we not only thank these people for their trouble, but also pay them the same honoraria as the people who stay.

2. Consider the Source.

You will normally get a preliminary roster that summarizes key information on each person whose attendance has been confirmed. Take note of people whose characteristics stand out in some way both on the roster and, once the groups begin, as people introduce themselves. Keep these characteristics in mind as you listen to their contributions to the discussion.

3. Keep track of the participants.

Your packet will include a diagram of the table so that as participants introduce themselves you can create your own chart of who's who, take down participants' names, their locations at the table and what stands out in your mind about them. These charts have two important uses. When you view a series of groups, they will inevitably start “running together” in your memory. Your table diagrams will be helpful in keeping everything straight. And, if you are going to take notes, you can number the places around the table and speed up your note-taking by using these numbers as short-hand to refer to who said what.

4. Be patient.

Group process is . . . well, a process. A successful group depends upon participants getting comfortable with each other, as well as with the moderator. But building this rapport sometimes takes what may seem like a long time. If you are chomping at the bit to get at the meat of your questions, relax in the knowledge that the situation is under control. You'll be amazed at the ground that gets covered once the group is warmed up.

5. The goal is insight, not entertainment.

A successful group is one in which the moderator elicits the desired information and insight. While this seems obvious, it is easy (particularly after sitting behind that one way mirror for two or three nights in a row) to mistake an entertaining group for an informative one. Many informative groups are, thankfully, also entertaining but others are not. Judge the quality by what's being said, how many people are saying it, at what pace and in what order. In the best groups, people interact with each

other, not just with the moderator. That is, they interrupt each other, address each other, and even question each other. They do not direct all their answers to the moderator.

6. *Watch as well as listen.*

There's a lot to be learned by reading body language. Note where the chairs are in the beginning of the group. As people become more engaged or interested they will generally physically "move in." On the other hand, when a topic turns people off, they will close up (arms across their chests) and back off (literally move away from the moderator and the table.) You will also want to watch for other obvious signals, for example, how many people are nodding as they are listening, or shaking their heads, seeming to be paying attention or seeming to be dozing off.

7. *Beware of the vocal participant (and watch the non-vocal one.)*

Extreme participants cause extreme reactions – they can dominate a group, turn off discussions, inspire alignment with their points of view or alignment against it. Similarly, viewers can be overly influenced by participants whom they find appealing (for example ones that share their opinions) or offensive. As you reflect on groups, try to balance and sum the points of view expressed by each of the participants, regardless of how much airtime they use, or their personal charm (or lack of it).

8. *Trust the moderator.*

A good moderator will not necessarily follow the Discussion Guide question for question. Instead, their goal will be to elicit answers to the key questions the Guide includes. The moderator who really understands your strategic interests may introduce an entirely new line of questioning upon hearing an unexpected response. Occasionally, this initiative may prove unproductive, but more often than not the risk that an experienced moderator takes in deviating from the plan pays off.

9. *Be prepared for real-time back room editing.*

Moderators differ in how they like to communicate with their clients on the other side of the glass. Some do not mind questions being brought into the room on slips of paper during discussions. Some prefer to wear an earpiece that allows constant feedback from the back room. Most of STAT's moderators prefer to take advantage of natural pauses in the discussion to personally check in with the back room. You can use this time most effectively by having accumulated a written list of any additional questions you would like asked and by appointing a single spokesperson to go through your requests with the moderator.

10. *Don't jump to conclusions.*

Often two groups drawn from the same population of people will react very differently to the same questions. Don't call the game at the end of the first inning.

11. *Recalibrate.*

At the conclusion of each group, reflect on what you've seen and heard. Take a moment to note your most significant reactions while they are fresh in your mind. Scan the discussion guide with an eye for any areas of exploration that may be valuable to beef up or skinny down in the next group. Bring these to the attention of the moderator.