Conducting Focus Groups Meetings

by Peter W. Vaughan

Why Focus Group Meetings?

Focus groups are carefully planned discussions held to find out how people feel about or respond to an issue, service or commodity. As a Pride campaign manager, in the planning phase of your campaign you or your designee will facilitate a series of focus group meetings which encourage discussion and allow for shared ideas and comments about a specific topic or environmental threat that you will address in your campaign. The focus group will help you understand your target population's attitudes and opinions so you can best focus your campaign's objectives and hence your survey questions. A focus group gives you important qualitative information that is useful in designing your pride campaign, while your survey will give you more important quantitative data that is useful to measure the effects of your pride campaign.

Background on Focus Group Meetings

A focus group meeting is typically composed of between seven and twelve individuals who share certain attributes in common with the topic being discussed. For example, if you wanted to find out how farmers viewed the use of fire and other potentially harmful environmental farming techniques, you might invite 10 farmers to attend a focus group meeting in which the questions would be geared to those issues. Focus groups are hosted by a moderator, who asks a prearranged set of questions in an impromptu way, group participants consider the issue and put forward their own points of view without having to come to any kind of general agreement.

While focus group meetings serve to promote self-expression amongst participants, candor and honesty may come freely for some, while for others it may be more difficult. It is your job to create an environment that allows for free and open discussion. Focus group interviews tend to work well because humans are social beings that converse with, and in turn are influenced by, those who live around them. Typically people do not make decisions in isolation and focus group meetings provide an environment which encourages discussion, promotes disclosure and allows the researcher to see what influences attitudes, as well as to discover which opinions are held with unqualified certainty, and those that are more flexible.

Focus groups strive to find out how individuals think and act, and are usually repeated several times with different groups of people to discuss the same topic to detect patterns. Focus groups provide qualitative data giving an insight into a population's feelings, understanding and beliefs on a specific issue.

Focus groups have a number of advantages over other research techniques:

- Because no elaborate equipment is used, focus groups are flexible, and inexpensive. They can be completed and analyzed in a short period of time.

- The moderator can encourage group participants to discuss sensitive subjects, making in-depth probing for hidden sentiment possible. This allows the researcher to explore unforeseen issues, which would be impossible in a more formalized and rigid questionnaire survey.

- Focus group meetings, which are usually taped and transcribed, generate more interesting responses than questionnaire surveys and the results can be easily understood by the lay person. Since the focus group meetings are tape recorded, they can be reviewed time and again to reveal sentiments such as anger, uncertainty, or forcefulness.

Focus groups are an inexpensive way to do research and yield qualitative data that provides a counter-point to the quantitative data collected in a questionnaire survey. They can be used to design an outreach or other program, test its effectiveness while it is under way, or to assess the results once it has finished.

Focus groups do, however, have a number of disadvantages over other survey techniques:

- It may be difficult to solicit randomly selected interviewees to participate, and your group will be an "opportune" sample. In which case, it may be difficult to use the results of your study to make generalizations for an entire population.

- The best focus group meetings are those where each participant has his or own say in a free form discussion. However some individuals may monopolize the conversation and inhibit other members of the group from speaking. Success may vary considerably with some focus group meetings yielding little useful data because of non-participation, while others may be full of useful commentary and be very stimulating. This is why it is important to assemble focus groups carefully.

- Considerable skills, experience and wisdom are needed to interpret and infer the results. Care needs to be taken to avoid lifting comments out of context and drawing the wrong conclusions. Your participants do not need to come to consensus on their opinions, but rather be able to freely express them.

- Finally, focus groups can be difficult to assemble, and it takes time and a measure of persuasion to get individuals to come together and share their experiences and thoughts with one another, particularly when discussing a sensitive topic, or one where criticisms may be made in an open discussion about well known people.

STEP 1: DETERMINE THE NUMBER AND MAKE UP OF THE FOCUS GROUP MEETINGS YOU INTEND TO CONDUCT.

The more focus group meetings you conduct the more likely their findings will reflect the knowledge, values and attitudes of a target area's population. However they can take time to set up correctly, conduct and transcribe. Conducting only one meeting on any given subject is risky because some groups may be more animated than others. Further, if one group has a particularly domineering participant, he or she may unduly influence or stifle the others. Multiple groups with participants of similar backgrounds, examining the same topic, will give better results. Typically, a focus group study will involve at least two group meetings, but could involve as many as twenty. The number of focus group meetings you hold will depend on the characteristics of your communities and your site.

Things to consider when planning your focus groups:

The focus group survey is not meant to be statistically representative of the target population, but you do want to capture the breadth and depth of feelings and ideas on the main topics that are present in the target population. Depending on the local cultural context, groups may need to be designated by the following criteria:

1. Gender: Men and women need to be sampled and it may not be advisable to hold discussions with the both sexes together. Having said this, it can be advisable to conduct a small number of "mixed gender" sessions to see if comments and attitudes change when the sexes meet together.

2. Residence: If the target population has urban and rural communities, focus group meetings will need to be conducted in both.

3. Age: Do older and younger men need to be in different groups? How about older and younger women? Students should normally be in groups separate from adults.

4. Marital Status: Other cultural issues will need to be taken into consideration, such as whether married and unmarried women can be in the same group.

5. Religion: Can people of different religions be in the same group?

6. Tribe: In some places, people from different tribes may need to be in different groups.

You may also want to identify specific groups like “Farmers”, “Fishermen”, or “Loggers”.

Step 1: Refer to your stakeholder matrix as a guide. How are these people similar, or different? Make a list of the key sections of your target population that you will have to group separately from each other. It may be that you need to separate married and unmarried women in rural villages, but not in urban areas. This list might look like this:

- Married women in rural villages
- Unmarried women in rural villages
- Married and unmarried women in urban town
- School children in rural primary schools
- Male farmers in rural villages
- Male fishermen in rural villages
- Muslims living in rural villages
- Christians living in rural villages

Step 2: Then, think about broad topics that you want to get more information about:

- Why do farmers use fire, slash and burn, or other environmentally destructive practices? What alternatives would be most useful to them?
- Why do fishermen use cyanide, or explosives to fish or other unsustainable fishing methods?
- What are the barriers of using alternative farming/fishing methods?
- Why do women go into the forest to collect forest products?
- What are their attitudes towards certain species you are considering as your campaign's flagship species?

Step 3: Then, match the question to the group you want the information from. You may be able to cover more than one topic in a focus group, so for example, you may want the information on flagship species from every group, so you might have a 15-minute section in every group that will assess candidate flagship species.

Group 1: Male Muslim fishermen in rural villages to discuss (1) fishing practices and especially those that damage fish habitat and (2) the flagship species.

Group 2: Male Christian farmers in rural villages to discuss (1) agricultural techniques and (2) the flagship species.

Group 3: Rural married women to discuss (1) the traditions and uses of medicinal plants and other forest products and (2) the flagship species.

You will quickly see how easy it is to come up with a large number of groups, especially if you want to do two replicates of each group in different villages as discussed above. One study did 150 focus groups to try to capture all the diversity of a country of 30 million people. While all of the focus groups got done, none was ever analyzed or made available to the project because data analysis became so overwhelming of a task. You will have to prioritize and decide what are the most important topics you want to discuss and from whom it is most important to get information. Hopefully, your stakeholder meetings and your site analysis/literature review will prepare you to make good decisions.

Try to keep the number of groups to around 10, and under 20 unless there is a really good reason for doing more. Remember, each focus group will take time to (1) plan and set up, (2) conduct, (3) transcribe, (4) analyze, and (5) incorporate into your report, so each group you add adds a fair bit of work. Make each group count!

If your target population is very homogeneous (all the same religion, all rural, all make their living in the same way, etc), and your Pride campaign is going to be quite focussed (trying to reduce forest fires and taking of forest products from a particular park) you may be able to get by with only 5 or so focus groups. You should openly discuss the focus group plans (who to interview and what to discuss) in your first stakeholder meeting, and also solicit help in organizing the focus groups from your group of stakeholders.

Focus groups are adaptable. For example, if you discover in your first focus group that one of your candidate flagship species is absolutely unacceptable to one of your target groups, then you may eliminate asking about that species from future groups and save yourself some time. If something comes up in the third group that you had not thought to ask about, you can ask it in subsequent groups. Focus groups are not like a questionnaire survey where you need to ask exactly the same questions of every person.

STEP 2: ASSEMBLING PARTICIPANTS FOR YOUR FOCUS GROUP MEETINGS.

Focus group meetings involve people and are typically composed of between seven and twelve individuals. The group must be small enough for everyone to have a say, yet large enough to provide a range of perceptions. If the groups are too large participants may want to talk but are unable to have their voices heard. Too many people make it more difficult for you to manage a free and open discussion.

Having chosen the communities in which your focus group meetings will take place, you will need to set “selection criteria”, or composition of each group, and identify suitable participants. While randomly selecting your interviewees is ideal, it is only of value if the group of candidates meets the right criteria. For example if you want to interview farmers and ask them about the value of using a new farming technique, randomly selecting seven people off the street is unlikely to get you your target group. Better would be to randomly select seven farmers from a list drawn up by a local Banana Growers Cooperative in your area.

Session participants should be grouped together by their similarities, for example, community members from the village of Montreal or community tour guides or young people aged 18-25; but with sufficient diversity among themselves to allow for different beliefs. There are various ways to identify potential group participants:

- Contact a responsible leader within each of the selected communities. Ask him or her to select individuals that meet the required criteria. For example to identify a group of women aged less than 35, he might try a local youth group, factory or college. To identify tour guides, he or she might approach the local tourism office, hotel managers to assist in identifying suitable candidates. Likewise, to identify men aged over 35 with children, he or she might target “mothers and fathers groups”, farmers’ organizations, sports clubs, the police or fire service.

- Ask your contact how you might get in touch with the individuals s/he recommends, get their names addresses and phone numbers. Also find out what remuneration may be required, and if he/she knows of a suitable venue to host the meeting. Also ask for some background information on each of the participants. In some campaigns, focus groups included both “strangers” and those who may have known or worked with one another. No significant differences were found in the results.

- If you cannot identify a suitable community leader you may have to go out and locate participants yourself. It is advisable to have a local person accompany when you initiate contact.

- In some locations you may consider selecting your participants through the telephone directory. You can randomly pick names, phone the individuals and invite them to participate. You will need to give them some background information on why their assistance is required and to confirm that they meet your “group criteria” by asking them some preliminary screening questions.

- Yet another alternative is to use groups of individuals that are meeting for a different reason. For example, tack your session on to the end of a conference, parent/teacher meeting etc, once they meet your selection criteria.

Once you have a list of possible candidates and, after selecting a venue, date and time for the meeting you should either write a personal letter of invitation to the proposed participant, or contact them in some other way to request their attendance and to provide background information of what you expect from them. (See sample letter).

Note that it is common for people to say that they will attend a meeting and then not show up. So, if you invite 12, you might expect to have only 8-9 actually show up. Even if you want to have somewhat smaller groups, do not just invite 7 people.

Sample: Letter to Focus Group Participant

Mr. Brett Smutts,
PO Box 15,
North Rima

February 7th, 2005

Dear Mr. Smutts,

Your name was given to me by Mr. Benedict Joseph, from the Andrean Pig Farmer's Cooperative. He suggested that I write to you to invite you to participate in a group discussion on the "Farming in Andrea". This discussion will bring together a small group of dynamic individuals to discuss the difficulties and challenges of farming in Andrea, particularly on the slopes surrounding Mount Hillbilly adjoining Andrea's Central Forest Reserve. While you need not give your name, we will be tape recording the session and using the commentary generated to help assess the need for agricultural diversification. Your knowledge and understanding of the issue will be of tremendous value and we would greatly appreciate your assistance.

The discussion, which will last approximately one hour, will take place at 7.00 p.m. on Thursday, March 20th in the library at West Rima Elementary School. You are also invited to a complimentary dinner which will be held immediately after the session at the Parrot's Landing Restaurant. If you would like transportation to the venue, this can be arranged.

Should you require any additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me at my office or via my home telephone number at 456 2430. I would be most grateful if you could indicate your interest in joining our discussions before February 15th.

Yours sincerely,

Fidel James
Country Program Manager,
RARE

14 William Ave,
RIMA

In this letter, you will need to explain that you are conducting a study to help assess the need for dialogue on best agricultural practices [for example] in the participant's community. To do this, their assistance is required to discuss a range of issues, to help conduct a need's assessment and to get their views on the matter. Explain that they will be among a small group of select individuals chosen to assist, and that their knowledge and understanding will be of tremendous value. Tell them that although they need not give their names, their comments will be recorded and transcribed for later analysis. Your letter [or call] should spell out the date, time and venue of the meeting, as well as indicate whether they will receive any form of remuneration for their participation. Follow up this letter of invitation with a telephone call on the day prior to the meeting.

To accommodate your participants, you may find that the sessions will have to be held in the evening or at weekends. Try to identify a central, easy to find, neutral venue which has some comfortable chairs and that is quiet and free of distraction. Remember you will be recording the sessions and sound quality is greatly reduced by the sound of traffic, air conditioning or loud noises from adjacent rooms. Also ensure that there are no visual distractions to divert the attention of the participants.

You may need to provide some form of incentive to encourage participation. Remember that your group's members will have to give up an hour of their time and may have to travel to the meeting's venue. A modest monetary award will probably be sufficient, or a meal, T-shirt or some other token of appreciation. If people honestly believe that their participation will help resolve or improve a widely perceived community problem or issue, they may be willing to participate without remuneration. In the Saint Lucia project, we provided focus group participants with a beverage and modest snack.

STEP 3: IDENTIFY THE MODERATOR & PREPARE SOME KEY QUESTIONS.

Just as the selection of focus group participants meeting your criteria is vital, so is the selection of a suitably qualified and competent **moderator** for the sessions. In most cases, the Pride Campaign Manager (you) will be the moderator. However, in cultures where it would be inappropriate for you to have such a meeting with members of the opposite sex, you will have to identify and train a moderator of the opposite sex from yourself. To train a moderator, use a similar approach as was used to train you during your Pride course (1) have them read this handout, (2) talk to them about the purpose and mechanics of focus groups,

(3) have them do a practice group to gain experience and confidence, and (4) provide feedback to them on how they might have done the focus group better.

- The moderator must be a skilled, enthusiastic communicator, who is able to exercise an easygoing and unassuming command over the group. S/He will need to keep the discussion moving and on topic, while showing respect for the participants, however "bizarre" some of their responses may be. He or she should also have an understanding and appreciation of the subject matter under discussion in order to put the comments into context and to follow up on crucial areas of interest. A sympathetic manner and a sense of humour are useful assets, as is knowledge of local slang, or a country's "second language".

- Since participants need to feel relaxed with the moderator, and to be willing to open up, it is often best if the moderator is approximately the same age as the group's participants. You might also want to identify an Assistant Moderator to help with note taking. If you do not have a tape recorder, you will need an assistant to take notes; do not try to moderate and take notes at the same time.

The moderator should listen and not dominate the session, s/he should stay neutral and not influence the participant's attitudes. His or her role is to promote discussion, while keeping the meeting on track. Sometimes the moderator of focus group meetings will be you, but sometimes you may have to ask someone to assist you. When culturally possible, you should always be present to take notes and listen to the discussion.

- Well thought out questions are central to a successful focus group meeting. While they should appear to be asked spontaneously, many will have been thought out long before the session begins. The moderator should have a written "focus group guide", some key questions which will begin the discussion and serve to bring it back on track if participants stray too far off the discussion. Good questions should not have simply yes or no answers, but should move the discussion along, while at the same time drawing out peoples' thoughts on a particular subject. Participants should be encouraged to answer the questions, based on their own experience, and based upon what they may have seen or heard from others. "Why" questions are often better posed as "what if". Keep the questions brief and unambiguous. You should use several types of question:

⇒ **Opening question**: This is a general question that everyone answers at the beginning of the focus group. It helps to identify the characteristics that participants have in common. For example: *Tell us your name and one thing you enjoy doing.*

⇒ **Introductory questions**: These serve to introduce the general topic of discussion and provide an opportunity for participants to reflect on past experiences. For example: *Who farms in the area around Mt. Hillbilly and what crops do you grow?*

⇒ **Transition questions**: These questions move the conversation into the key questions and help the participants see the broader aspects of the topic. During this stage the participants begin to see how others view the subject under discussion. For example: *With agriculture so vital to the Andrean economy, high quality produce is vital to satisfy consumer demands both in Andrea and overseas. What influences your ability to produce a high quality product?*

⇒ **Key questions**: These questions drive the study and are those that will be given the most attention during analysis. For example: *Should farmer's be allowed to cultivate on steep lands, recognizing the risks of erosion and the likelihood that in the process of transporting produce to market, there will be a significant reduction on quality? What can we do to help farmers while at the same time protecting key watershed areas?*

⇒ **Ending questions**: These questions bring closure to the discussion, enabling participants to look back over the session. For example: *What does the future hold for farming in Andrea?*

It is likely that people will bring up issues that the moderator had not thought about prior to the focus group. The moderator will have to make a judgement call as to whether the topic is relevant and useful to what he/she is trying to learn, or whether it is too far off topic. If too far off topic, gently return the participants to the topic by saying "I understand, but I would like to go back to talking about..."

- Sample [key] questions will be discussed in class.

CONDUCT YOUR FOCUS GROUP MEETINGS

Each focus group meeting should comprise not less than seven individuals and not more than twelve. You will require a tape recorder, microphone, batteries, cassette tapes, note pad, pencil and name tags at the focus group meeting. You will also need a list of the key questions to be addressed at the session.

- You and the moderator and any other assistants should plan to arrive at the meeting's venue well ahead of the scheduled time. You will need to set up the tape recorder, check sound levels and ensure that there are sufficient comfortable seats for the group participants.

- Be sure to check the tape recorder; many focus groups have been ruined because the moderator thought the recorder was working, but the microphone did not pick up the voice of some participants, or a loud air conditioner or fan drowned out the sound of people's voices.

- Be sure you have adequate batteries, blank tapes, microphone(s), whatever visuals you plan to show (pictures of candidate flagship species, for example).

- The seats should be arranged in a circle so that the participants can all see each other as well as the moderator. When the participants arrive, the moderator should greet them, thank them for coming and make them feel welcome. Upon arrival each participant should be asked to fill out an interviewee form, see SAMPLE PROVIDED IN CLASS and a name-tag. **NOTE:** They need only write their first name on the tag, or if desired a fictitious name. If you do not have nametags, you can make a little "map" with each participant's name on it so that you can address each by name during the session.

- Once all the participants are present seat them randomly, introduce yourself and provide an overview of the reasons for hosting the gathering.

For example:

My organization is investigating the difficulties and challenges of farming in Andrea, particularly on the slopes surrounding Mount Hillbilly adjoining Andrea's Central Forest Reserve. Today we have invited you to discuss some of these issues, in particular those surrounding this topic. We hope that you will be as open and candid as possible. You will notice that the session is being recorded. This is so your comments can be reviewed and used to help us understand local needs and to develop the program.

You were selected because you are all involved in agriculture and, as such, are experts on this topic. Tonight we shall discuss your experiences in farming and the challenges you face. Please speak up, there are no incorrect answers and it does not matter if your opinion differs from your neighbors, we are here to listen and to learn. Please remember that because we are recording the session you should try to not talk all at once. We will try to keep the session to about an hour, after which I'm hoping that you will all join me for dinner. To begin let me go around the room and ask each of you your name and about your own farm.

- The moderator should then turn on the tape recorder and start the session by using some introductory questions, after asking these he or she can move to the transition, and then to the key questions.

- The moderator always needs to solicit differing opinions by asking questions such as: "Do you agree?' or "Does anyone have any other ideas?". The moderator should also probe by asking questions such as: "Describe what you mean?" or "Would you like to expand on what you are saying?" Do you have any stories about that?

- He or she should also be careful not to bias comments by saying, "That's good" or "I agree with that". The moderator needs to remain a neutral player in the discussion.

Some other general rules for moderators include:

- Don’t reinforce what is being said with body language (nodding, smiling, frowning, etc.)
- Don’t suggest the answers you are looking for, don’t agree or disagree with the speaker.
- Do not be impatient, be a good listener, show attentiveness and interest.
- Do not be judgemental (don’t say “great response”, or “very interesting”).
- Do not cut speakers off unless they are on a far-off tangent to the discussion; then do so gently.
- Don’t let two participants speak at the same time; maintain a single conversation.
- Don’t let dominant participants take over the discussion.

The moderator should encourage any participants who appear shy or reluctant to air their opinions, as well as to exercise a measure of control over those that seem to dominate the session. He or she might ask: “Does any one else have an opinion, Diane what do you think?”

Some suggestions on how to handle difficult participants:

- ***The expert, who tries to answer every question***: Do not make eye contact, don't be afraid to ask for other people to answer the question

- ***The rambler who goes on and on***: Do not make eye contact, ask another person for a story about the question.

- ***The timid***: Do make eye contact, and ask them by name if they have any suggestions or ideas.

- ***The participant who gives partial answers***: Repeat what he/she said, and then ask if there is more, or can they tell a story about it.

You or the moderator (or the designated assistant) needs to write down the names [as shown on their name tags] of those who speak in the order that they comment, so that this can be matched with the tape. For example: 1: David; 2: Susan; 3: David; 4: Jane etc.

You or the moderator should use the question sheet developed prior to session, but must also be prepared to ask unforeseen questions that arise from one of the participant's comments. He or she should ensure that the session stays on topic, as well as keep an eye on the time. The moderator must make sure that he or she does not run out of time before asking the KEY questions or that the sessions run over the allotted time.

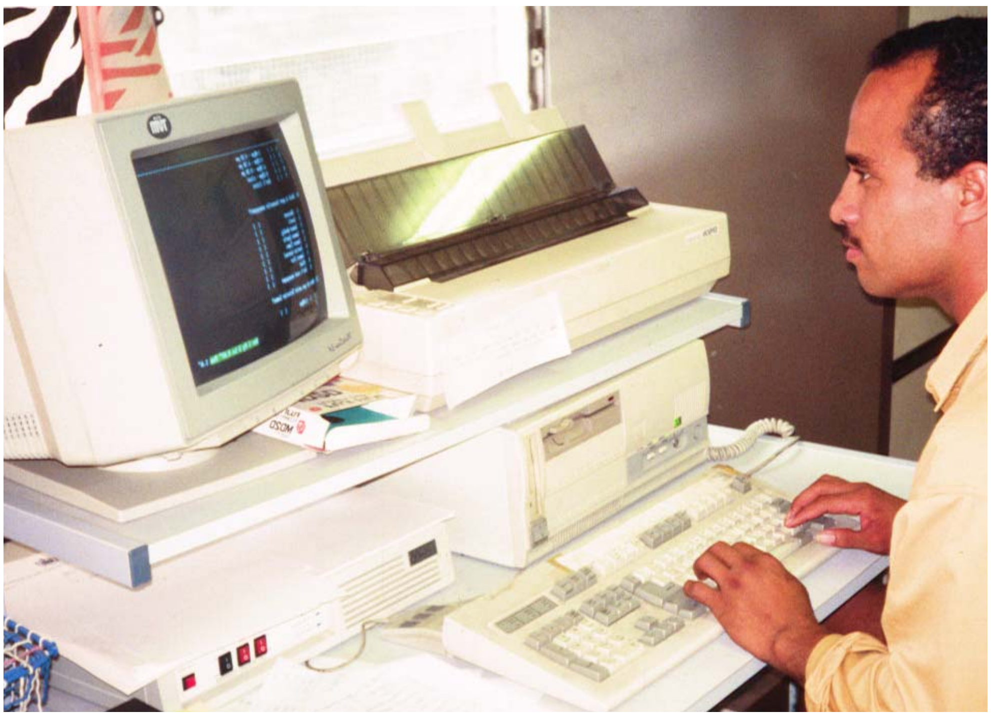
At the end of the allotted time, you or the moderator should try to summarize the discussion and invite any last minute comments. He or she should then thank the participants and pay them if remuneration has been agreed upon.

STEP 5: ANALYZING YOUR FOCUS GROUP MEETINGS

Immediately after your session make a written note of anything that you think the tape recorder might have missed. Remember while a tape can pick up voice tones, it cannot record facial expressions or other non-verbal cues. Highlight any key points made, or if any specific questions elicited surprising or particularly noteworthy comments; as well as your general impressions of the group's openness and demeanor.

While it is best to "transcribe" the tapes, the transcription process can be very time consuming and you can analyze the results of your session straight from the tape and from your notes taken during the session and use these to draw conclusions and prepare your report.

Transcribing the tape should be carried out as soon as possible after the focus group session was held, ideally the following day, and preferably by either you/ the moderator or his/her assistant. First listen to the whole tape, then using the play back and stop/rewind buttons on your recorder transcribe what you hear. Remember to use your notes to ensure that you have the correct names against the individual talking. An hour long meeting has the potential to produce pages and pages of typed comments.



Here are some guidelines for typing up focus group transcripts:

- All transcription work should be considered confidential, the transcripts produced should only be circulated after they have been reviewed by your supervisor and permission has been obtained. They may contain sensitive information, and or criticism of groups and individuals.

- Transcribe verbatim i.e. every single word. Only "er, um etc can be omitted. Only "right", "OK", "yes" by the moderator can be omitted if it interferes with the respondent's speech.

- Transcribe in Microsoft *Word*.

- Use size 10 font and Arial. For example this type face and size.

- Page set up – margins from edge – top and bottom – 1.5 cm; left – 3 cm; right 2.5 cm; header 1cm; footer 2 cm.

- Use a header to appear on each page all in bold, in capitals and underlined, as shown in the SAMPLE HANDOUT PROVIDED, and a footer to appear on each page.

- For anything not spoken, use italics, e.g. additional information, such as *group laughs.*

- Start a new paragraph for each different speaker. Double line-space between speakers. Use **bold type** for the moderator's speech/questions.

- After typing in respondent's name, tab in before typing response

- If you are unsure of any words either a) put what you think it sounds like in italics e.g.: *franchised* or b) put… if no reasonable guess can be made. If large chunks are missed out because you cannot hear what is said put *inaudible* on a separate line and carry on.

- If several respondents all say, for example, "yes", just put general agreement on a separate line. Similarly if they laugh, record this by laughter on a separate line, if it is relevant.

- Numbers should be written if between one and nine, and as figures if 10 or more.

- If some item is being shown to the group to prompt a response. Then type Article X shown, or give a brief description summarizing the material and write this in italic.

- When you turn the cassette over put **END OF SIDE ONE**. At the end of the transcript, put **END OF INTERVIEW/FOCUS GROUP MEETING. Make sure your tapes are labeled so that you will know which focus group it contains.**

- If the tape had interference or was a poor recording which meant it was hard to hear, put this information at the beginning of the transcript in italics.

- When completed, and if possible, use your computer's spell check on the entire transcript.

- Save transcripts from different sessions in different files and keep all work on disk as hard and as a paper copy.

Remember too that findings from an initial focus group meeting on a given topic can be checked in a second or subsequent meeting on the same subject. After listening to the tape of the first session and reviewing its transcript you may think up some further questions that might provide additional insight. It is for these reasons that several focus group meetings on the same theme need to be held.

<u>If you tape record the session, but can not spend the time to type out full transcripts, here are some guidelines for what to do</u>:

- Try to listen to the tape recording as soon after the focus group as you can so that your memory is fresh and you can use any insights from this group in future groups.

- Pay particular attention to the section of the tape that deals with "key questions".

- Listen for comments that you think are especially "telling" about any of your main issues. Are any comments made with special emphasis, or did any stimulate any debate or further discussion, or were they spoken with emotion?

- Listen for personal anecdotes or stories that are relevant to your issues; these may help you understand how people experience the issue in their daily lives and again help you to design your messages.

- Type these excerpts, as you would the transcripts, into a *Word* file for later review and incorporation into your report.

- Keep the tape recordings so that you can refer back to them later in your project.

<u>Here are some guidelines for when you do not have a tape recorder and can not record the focus group</u>:

- There may be times when you do not have a tape recorder or it is broken or you do not have a good location to record. In that case, you will have to rely on a note taker.

- The note taker should be someone other than the moderator; it is not possible to moderate and take notes at the same time, you will break up the conversation too much.

- It is not possible to "transcribe" a session by taking notes and the note taker should not try to do so. They should listen very carefully and try to record the meaning of each person's comments (and should develop shorthand for labeling each idea so it can be traced back to the person). For example, they might just put the first initial of the person's name before they record what they said.

- There will be some especially "telling" comments made by some of the participants; in this case, the note taker should try to get an exact quote and indicate it by placing quotation marks around it in the notes.

- The note taker should not participate in the discussion; their only responsibility should be to take notes.

STEP 6: REPORTING ON YOUR FOCUS GROUP MEETINGS

When you have completed all of your focus group meetings and have on hand the transcripts or your detailed notes, you will need to draw some general conclusions and then prepare a brief report.

Look back over the findings of your literature review, paying particular attention to the synopsis of any documents that surveyed prevailing attitudes in the past. Now check whether these were corroborated or disputed by the results of your focus group meetings.

Are there certain attitudes and beliefs that cross over from one group to another? Things that were said especially frequently or with special emphasis? You need to look not only at the words used, but also the context they were used in. These should also be examined against the biographical data of the group. Did attitudes vary by sex, age or social group?

Include plenty of interesting quotes in your report, yet try to keep it brief, concise, and easy to read.

You can now use this information to form draft SMART objectives for your campaign, and to fine tune questions for your survey. Your focus group discussions provide you with information that helps you formulate and design your campaign; while your survey will give you much more quantifiable data that will help you measure change.

The experience you have gained by conducting these focus group meetings in the formative research phase of your campaign will be very useful to you as you develop campaign materials and additional focus group meetings you will organize to test the messages of your campaign products.

Biographical Information on Focus Group Participants

Have each participant fill out a form with this information on it prior to the focus group. Note, you may wish to add a question for a particular group, such as “Do you live within 5 km of Andrean national Park?” if that is important for you to know.

1. Name (first name only, can use a made up name if wish, purely for identifying who is talking).

2. Age.

3. Gender (M or F)

4. Marital status (Married, Never-married, Divorced, widowed, Other).

5. Occupation or main activity (student, farmer, homemaker, fishermen, etc).

6. Highest education level reached.

Glossary

Focus group guide: A written list of questions that the moderator wants to ask during the focus group. The questions should not be read out, but asked spontaneously. It is a guide, not a questionnaire, so if the conversation strays away from the guide and into something relevant and interesting, it is okay to follow the discussion until it gets off the main topic.

Incentive: It may be necessary to provide some form of "payment" to people who participate in your focus group. Ideally, these incentives are not the reason people participate, but may make it more feasible for them to do so. Incentives may include simple food/drink, bus fare to get to the meeting, or some other small acknowledgement of their participation.

Key questions: These are the most important questions asked during the focus group because they center on the main issues you are trying to find out.

Moderator: The person who conducts the focus group. They are responsible for posing the questions, making sure that all participants participate and are heard, and for probing to make sure that issues are fully discussed.

Statistically representative: A sample of your population is said to be "statistically-representative" if it meets the criteria that (1) it was drawn randomly or in such a way that every person in the target population had an equal chance to be selected, and (2) the number of people sampled is large enough so that you do not over-represent a certain group just by chance. Focus group studies almost never meet these two criteria and thus are not statistically representative.

Transcribe: A process of typing into a computer word processor package, such as "Word", the focus group discussion by listening to the tape recording and typing the words exactly as they were spoken during the meeting.