Switch

Embracing Active Travel for Health

SWITCH Project

Focus Group Guidelines

Version 3.2

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1 Introduction

Focus groups can reveal a wealth of detailed information and deep insight into an issue. When well executed, a focus group creates a cordial environment that puts participants at ease; allowing them to thoughtfully express their opinions and feelings about a subject in their own words. Surveys are good for collecting information about people's attributes and attitudes but if you need to understand things at a deeper level then use a focus group. If you've ever participated in a well-run focus group you'd probably say it felt very natural and comfortable to be talking with a group of strangers. What you didn't know perhaps were the many hidden structures behind it all. A good focus group requires planning – a lot more planning than merely inviting a few key people to casually share their opinions about a topic. Outlined here are the details for conducting a high quality focus group. Also included are step-by-step instructions for making sense of all the information you collect in the groups.

In these focus group guideline below are the areas covered:

- Defining a focus group
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- Designing focus group questions
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- Conducting the focus group
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2 Defining a focus group

A focus group is a small group of six to ten people led through an open discussion by a skilled moderator. The group needs to be large enough to generate rich discussion but not so large that some participants are left out.

The focus group moderator nurtures disclosure in an open and spontaneous format. The moderator's goal is to generate a maximum number of different ideas and opinions from as many different people in the time allotted.

The ideal amount of time to set aside for a focus group is anywhere from 45 to 90 minutes. Beyond that interval most groups are not productive and it becomes an imposition on participant time. Focus groups are structured around a set of carefully predetermined topics – usually no more than 10 – but the discussion is free flowing. Ideally, participant comments will stimulate and influence the thinking and sharing of others. Some people can find themselves changing their thoughts and opinions during the group.

A homogeneous group of strangers comprise the focus group. Homogeneity levels the playing field and reduces inhibitions among people who will probably never see each other again. It takes more than one focus group on any one topic to produce valid results – usually three or four. You'll know you've conducted enough groups (with the same set of questions) when you're not hearing anything new anymore, i.e. you've reached a point of saturation.

A focus group is not:

- A debate
- Group therapy
- A conflict resolution session
- A problem solving session
- An opportunity to collaborate
- A promotional opportunity
- An educational session
- A question and answer session

3 Focus Group Approach

Between the 1st After Survey and the2nd After Survey cities will conduct a focus group to gather information on SWITCH campaign. The focus group method was chosen for its ease of use and the richness of data produced when issues are interrogated in depth. The focus group method is a technique designed to elicit a vivid picture of the participant's perspective on the SWITCH campaign. During the focus group discussion the participants will be considered to be knowledgeable. The researcher's moderation techniques are motivated by the desire to learn everything the participant can share about the walking, cycling and other competing behaviours. This will also give you an insight into how people interpret and order the world, usually achieved by being attentive to the causal explanations. Focus groups discussions will be used to understand social norms in the community about mobility behaviour as well as when, why and how active travel can be used. This method will offer a holistic picture of how the SWITCH campaign is perceived in the targeted population, and how to improve awareness of SWITCH, and ultimately how to transfer the SWITCH approach.

4 Steps in Planning Focus Groups

4.1 Introduction

The success of the focus group implementation will result only from the careful planning and attention to important executional details. Planning is crucial, but sometimes people quickly skip over it. Planning begins by being clear about the purpose of the method. You have to ask yourself the following questions:

1. What is the problem that the study wants to address?
2. What led up to the decision to do this study?
3. What is the purpose of the study?
4. What kind of information do you want?
5. What types of information is of particular importance?

6. Who wants the information?
7. How will you use the information?

4.2 Select the Team

Conducting focus groups requires a small team, comprised of the moderator and the assistant.

1. The Moderator - his/ her job is to keep the group “focused” and to generate a lively and productive discussion, being able to plan the group; the moderator needs to have effective leadership skills as he/she will need to recognise how to obtain a balanced input from a diverse group of people. The moderator also needs good communication skills, and needs to be able to encourage a variety of levels of communication amongst participants in the focus group and this communication may include asking open questions, promoting debate, probe for further details, encourage participant-participant discussion rather than participant-moderator discussion. Although the moderator ‘leads’ the focus group, their role is only to keep the discussion on track and should not influence the opinions of the group.
2. The assistant - his/ her role will be to receive the participants at the venue and help them to fill the attendance list. The assistant will also give the participants their number tags. The assistant will also make hand-written notes and observations during the discussion, which serves as a “back-up” in case something happens with the recording equipment.

4.3 Recruiting and preparing for participants

In an ideal focus group, all the participants are very comfortable with each other but none of them know each other.

Homogeneity is key to maximizing disclosure among focus group participants. Consider the following in establishing selection criteria for individual groups:

- Gender – Will both men and women feel comfortable discussing the topic in a mixed gender group?
- Age – How intimidating would it be for a young person to be included in a group of older adults? Or vice versa?
- Power – Would a teacher be likely to make candid remarks in a group where his/her principal is also a participant?
- Cliques – How influential might three cheerleaders be in a group of high school peers?

Participant inclusion/exclusion criteria should be established upfront and based on the purpose of the study. Use the criteria as a basis to screen all potential applicants. In the SWITCH focus group discussion approximately 6-10 people will participate, with equal distribution of male and female. The participant should be 18 years and above, a SWITCH campaign participant, and he/she has ability to consent to participate and the willingness to be audio taped.

Focus groups participants can be recruited in any one of a number of ways. Some of the most popular include:

- ***Nomination*** – Key individuals nominate people they think would make good participants. Nominees are familiar with the topic, known for their ability to respectfully share their opinions, and willing to volunteer about 2 hours of their time.
- ***Random selection*** – If participants will come from a large but defined group (e.g. an entire high school) with many eager participants, names can be randomly drawn from a hat until the desired number of verified participants is achieved.
- All members of the same group – Sometimes an already existing group serves as an ideal pool from which to invite participants (e.g. Chamber of Commerce).
- ***Same role/job title*** – Depending on the topic, the pool might be defined by position, title or condition (e.g. parents of teen-agers).
- ***Volunteers*** – When selection criteria are broad, participants can be recruited with flyers and newspaper ads.

In the SWITCH Focus Groups a random selection of participants will be done since they come from a large defined group of SWITCH campaign participants. Names will be randomly drawn until a desired number of verified participants is achieved. Once a group of viable recruits has been established, call each one to confirm interest and availability. Give them times and locations of the focus group and secure verbal confirmation. Tell them you will mail (or email) them a confirmation letter and call to remind them two days or a day before the scheduled group discussion.

Over-invite in anticipation of a no-show rate of 10 to 20 per cent. But you will never want a group of more than 10 participants. Offer an incentive. A monetary incentive of 30 - 50 EUR per participant is probably the minimum you should consider. Other incentive ideas include coupons, gift certificates, paid time off to attend the group, or an opportunity to win a big-ticket item at a drawing conducted at the end of the focus group.

Devise a form to track invitation phone calls. Include an “Address” box for mailing the confirmation letter and a “Comments” box. Organize the times, locations and people involved for all the groups you have scheduled.

Reduce barriers to attending when possible by offering:

- Evening or weekend groups for those who work during the day
- Transportation or cab fare
- Child care services
- Interpreter services
- A familiar public setting

Tell participants that the focus group will take about one and half to two hours. Give them a starting time that is 15 minutes prior to the actual start of the focus group to allow for filling out necessary paperwork, having a bite to eat, and settling in to the group.

Arrange for a comfortable room in a convenient location with ample parking. Depending on your group, you may also what to consider proximity to a bus line. The room should have a door for privacy and table and chairs to seat a circle of up to 12 people (10 participants and the moderator and assistant moderator). Many public agencies have free rooms available. Arrange for food. At a minimum, offer a beverage and light snack (cookies, cheese/crackers, veggie tray, etc.). It is OK to offer a full meal but be sure to add an additional 30 to 45 minutes to the entire process so that everyone can finish eating before the group begins.

4.4 Decide on the time and location

Focus groups normally last about an hour and a half to two hours, though they may be longer in some cases. Plan a time of day that is convenient for the participants and responsive to their life circumstances. Groups should be conducted in locations that are also convenient and comfortable for participants, are quiet, and have some degree of privacy. Depending on the community, it may be necessary (and reflect a greater degree of cultural sensitivity) if the group meets in a public space. It is up to you to judge the situation and decide on the best, most appropriate location. Set a date, reserve a space, and arrange for food and drinks.

4.5 Prepare the focus group topic guide

The topic guide is an outline that is already been prepared and has topics and issues to be explored in the SWITCH evaluation. The topic guide was designed with the overall research questions in mind and was constructed to ensure that topics covered in the focus groups relate to the SWITCH evaluation objectives.

Focus group participants won't have a chance to see the topics they are being asked to discuss. Therefore, to make sure they understand and can fully respond to the topics, questions should be put across into the discussion in no specific order, but covering all the topics. Any questions asked by the moderator should be:

- Short and to the point
- Focused on one dimension each
- Unambiguously worded
- Open-ended or sentence completion types
- Non-threatening or embarrassing
- Worded in a way that they cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" answer (use "why" and "how" instead)

There are three types of focus group questions:

1. Engagement: introduce participants to and make them comfortable with the topic of discussion
2. Exploration: get to the core of the discussion
3. Exit: check to see if anything was missed in the discussion

4.6 Revising Focus Group Topic Guide

Straying from the focus group guide is strongly discouraged because the questions on the guide are essential in order to gather the data that is needed for the needs assessment. However, if you should have to revise a question or two in order to be enhance the cultural sensitivity or responsiveness of the guide, please make sure this is done in collaboration with the objectives of the focus group discussion Also, please be aware that certain types of questions impede group discussions. For example, yes-or-no questions are one-dimensional and do not stimulate discussion. “Why” questions put people on the defensive and cause them to take “politically correct” sides on controversial issues.

5 Conducting the focus group

Ideally, a team consisting of a moderator and the assistant conducts the focus group. The moderator facilitates the discussion; the assistant takes notes and runs the tape recorder. These notes will be used to clarify data that is unclear on the audiotapes. Audio recording is preferred because it allows for accurate capture of the original conversation. It also allows for playback to capture key issues. In addition, the interview takes less time than if notes were being written. The local languages will be used in the discussions. The audiotapes for the focus group discussion will be reviewed to ensure that adequate probing was followed during the discussions. EIP staff will provide support and supervision of the focus group discussion, on request.

The ideal focus group moderator has the following traits:

- Can listen attentively with sensitivity and empathy
- Is able to listen and think at the same time
- Believes that all group participants have something to offer no matter what their education, experience, or background
- Has adequate knowledge of the topic
- Can keep personal views and ego out of the facilitation
- Is someone the group can relate to but also give authority to (e.g. a male moderator is most appropriate for a group of all men discussing sexual harassment in the workplace)
- Can appropriately manage challenging group dynamics

The assistant moderator must be able to do the following:

- Run a tape recorder during the session
- Take notes in case the recorder fails or the tape is inaudible
- Note/record body language or other subtle but relevant clues
- Allow the moderator to do all the talking during the group

Both moderator and assistant moderator are expected to welcome participants, offer them food, help them make their name tents, and direct them in completing pre-group paperwork.

Name tents should identify participants with a number written largely for anonymous identification of individuals as they make comments.

At a minimum, all participants should complete a consent form. The participant will read the consent form provided to them and if they cannot read the assistant will read for them. Make sure participants understand their rights, and ensure them on confidentiality. If the participant accepts to be part of the focus group discussion, then they will have to sign the consent form.

It may be important to collect demographic information from participants if age, gender, or other attributes are important for correlation with focus group findings. Design a short half page form that requires no more than two or three minutes to complete. Administer it before the focus group begins.

The assistant will then begin recording the focus group discussions using both recording equipment, and the hand-written notes. Hand-written notes should be extensive and accurately reflect the content of the discussion, as well as any salient observations of nonverbal behaviour, such as facial expressions, hand movements, group dynamics, etc. The assistant should monitor tape recording equipment and may also play a key role in keeping track of time.

Once consent forms and demographic surveys are collected and reviewed for completeness, the questioning begins. The moderator uses a prepared script to welcome participants. Often participants do not know what to expect from focus group discussions. It is helpful for the moderator to outline the purpose and format of the discussion at the beginning of the session and set the group at ease. Participants should be told that the discussion is informal, everyone is expected to participate, and divergent views are welcome. Ground rules should be set as well before the focus group discussion starts.

Before asking the first focus group question, an icebreaker can be inserted to increase comfort and level the playing field. Example:

“If you had a limitless budget, where would you go for vacation?”

The moderator has a responsibility to adequately cover all prepared questions in the focus group topic guide within the time allotted. Focus group topic guide provides a framework for the moderator to explore, probe, and ask questions. Initiating each topic with a carefully crafted question will help participants share their experiences but in a focused and meaningful manner. It is helpful to follow the focus group guide as much as possible when facilitating a focus group, to increase the credibility of the research results. Using a guide also increases the comprehensiveness of the data and makes data collection more efficient. If participants give incomplete or irrelevant answers, the moderator can probe for fuller, clearer responses. A few suggested techniques are:

- Repeat the question – repetition gives more time to think.
- Pause for the answer – a thoughtful nod or expectant look can convey that you want a fuller answer.
- Repeat the reply – hearing it again sometimes stimulates conversation
- Ask when, what, where, which, and how questions – they provoke more detailed information
- Use neutral comments – “Anything else?”

The moderator also has a responsibility to get all participants to talk and fully explain their answers. Some helpful probes include:

- “Can you talk about that more?”
- “Help me understand what you mean”
- “Can you give an example?”

It is good moderator practice to paraphrase and summarize long, complex or ambiguous comments. It demonstrates active listening and clarifies the comment for everyone in the group.

Because the moderator holds a position of authority and perceived influence, s/he must remain neutral, refraining from nodding/raising eyebrows, agreeing/disagreeing, or praising/denigrating any comment made.

A moderator must tactfully deal with challenging participants.

Here are some appropriate strategies:

- ***Self-appointed experts:*** "Thank you. What do other people think?" ƒ
- ***The dominator***: "Let's have some other comments." ƒ
- ***The rambler***: Stop eye contact; look at your watch; jump in at their inhale.
- ***The shy participant***: Make eye contact; call on them; smile at them. ƒ
- ***The participant who talks very quietly***: Ask them to repeat their response more loudly.

When an idea is being adopted without any general discussion or disagreement, more than likely group pressure to conform to a dominant viewpoint might occur. To minimize this group dynamic, the moderator should probe for alternative views. For example, the moderator can raise another issue, or say, "We have had an interesting discussion, but let's explore other ideas or points of view. Has anyone had a different experience that they wish to share?"

When the focus group is complete the moderator thanks all participants and distributes the honorarium (incentive).

Immediately after all participants leave, the moderator and assistant moderator debrief while the recorder is still running and label all tapes and notes with the date, time (if more than one group per day), and name of the group.

6 Reporting the results of the Focus Group

Data analysis consists of examining, categorizing, tabulating or otherwise recombining the "evidence" collected during the focus group to address the initial propositions of the study. The purpose of the study drives the analysis. There will be four sources of information that are going to be used for analysis of the focus group discussion. First are the assistant's notes. The second is memory. The third is the debriefing form. The forth source is the audio tape-recording of the session. Occasionally the tapes are converted to either detailed or edited text documents called transcripts. Transcripts of tape-recordings, however, are expensive and time-consuming to produce. In lieu of transcripts, the team will listen to the tapes and makes notes of items they failed record during the session.

The scissor-and-sort technique, which is sometimes called the cut-and-paste method, is a quick and cost-effective method for analysing focus group discussion. The first step in applying the technique is to go through the audiotape and identify those sections of it that are relevant to measuring the board goal of the SWITCH focus group discussion. Based on this initial listening, a classification system for major topics and issues will be developed, and all statements related to each topic will be identified. Tallies will be used where statements in the same topic are encountered and have the same meaning. The amount of statements jotted down for any one topic depends on the importance of that topic to the overall research question and the amount of variation in the discussion. These statements may be phrases, sentences, or long exchanges between individual respondents. The only requirement is that the material be relevant to the particular category with which it has been identified.

After this has been done we will have each piece of phrases, statements to a particular topic placed together. This will yield a set of sorted materials that provides the basis for developing a summary report. Each topic is treated in turn with a brief introduction. The various statements will be used as supporting materials and incorporated within an interpretative analysis.In a nutshell below are the steps of analysing the focus group discussion.

1. Listen through the audio tape and look for patterns and similarities.
2. Group the answers into key points, keeping a list as you go. If a key point is repeated, place a tally mark next to that point. Continue listing key points until every answer has been accounted for.
3. Select quotes from the audio to illustrate and provide insights for your summary.
4. Frequency - how many times the key point was made by different people
5. Specificity - how detailed particular responses were
6. Emotions - how much emotion, enthusiasm, or intensity was expressed in a particular answer?

7 Check lists of Material needed for a focus group

Materials needed checklist:

1	Recording device (e.g. cassette tape recorder, digital voice recorder, MP3 player with voice recording, sound storage discs, tapes, cards, extension cord, extra batteries)	☑
2	Flip chart with focus group questions written out	☑
3	Refreshments (e.g., cookies and juice)	☑
4	Informed Consent form	☑
5	Sign in form	☑

6	Name tags or Numbers	☑
7	Brief demographic questionnaires	☑
8	Pen & paper for note-taking	☑
9	Extra pens for participants to sign consent forms and exercises	☑
10	Focus group discussion guide	☑
11	Watch or clock	☑
12	Gifts (Focus group participants are usually recompensed for their participation. The park or its cooperating association may provide a small gift as an incentive to participant, such as a poster, pin, book, or gift certificate. If the participant incurs travel time and expenses in order to participate in the focus group, the park can provide financial remuneration.)	☑

Room setup checklist:

1	Room with minimal background noise / traffic	☑
2	Chairs set up in a circle	☑
3	Table for the recording equipment	☑

Logistics Checklist:

1	Secure and set up space, food, transportation, childcare and any other onsite needs.	☑
2	Test the recording equipment. Be comfortable and familiar with equipment.	☑

Comments

Select a meeting place that is close to the activity being evaluated. It should be comfortable and as free of distractions as possible. Seating should be arranged so that all participants, including the moderator, can see each other. Although a private room indoors is preferred, a conference room at the visitor center, the back of an auditorium, and a picnic table have all been used as locations to conduct focus groups. It will depend on your particular situation as to what you deem appropriate.

8 SWITCH consortium

Five European cities take the lead in support SWITCH travel – supported by eight experts in alternative travel, health or economical aspects of mobility. This enthusiastic team combines practical expertise; a clear and transferable methodology; and tried and tested examples of locally effective campaigns

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