Focus Group Interviews Review

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Introduction

There are various definitions of focus groups. Broadly defined, we can state that focus groups are qualitative exploratory research technique based on the face-to-face and in-depth discussion of a particular topic (Edmunds & American Marketing, 1999). Furthermore, focus groups can be defined as a task-oriented but informal talk (Puchta & Potter, 2004) or a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive and socially-interactive environment that encourages homogeneous participants to share different internal points of view without necessity for consensus, for the reason of obtaining inductive and naturalistic information (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Potential advantages

Focus groups have several advantages and reasons for implementation. Focus groups are good for testing new ideas or concepts, improving existing programs, identifying needs and attitudes, developing plans, generating additional ideas, assessing usability, or developing questionnaires for further testing. In addition, focus groups allow probing and clarifications (Edmunds & American Marketing, 1999). Focus groups have been implemented in educational assessment, and they are good for assessing the programmatic changes based on students' perceptions and attitudes (Hendershott & Wright, 1993), they can generate hypothesis for future quantitative studies (Brodigan, 1992), and even inform about the planned changes in addition to asking about the opinions (Creason, 1991).

Potential disadvantages

In addition to their advantages, focus groups have been criticized on various points. Some of the potential disadvantages are the sample size and participant selection process, the fact that questions are not asked the same way each time, participant's responses are not independent because of the interaction, results are difficult to quantify, or that conclusions depend on the analyst's interpretation (Fern, 2001). Furthermore, additional disadvantages noted are that the researcher has much less control over data since participants can digress into a discussion (Hendershott & Wright, 1993) and that focus groups are not usable for making final decisions, for exploring personal or sensitive topics, for answer specific quantitative questions, or for an audience that doesn't understand the purpose of the research (Edmunds & American Marketing, 1999).

Design theories

Although the first implementations of focus group interviews were in the marketing research (Fern, 2001), they are now used in the context of education, participatory action research, etc. (Puchta & Potter, 2004). These different implementation cases resulted in different approaches for conducting focus groups. For example, they can be constructed in a form of structured or unstructured interviews (Creason, 1991). In addition, focus groups can be structured as single-category design (conducting focus groups until you reach the point of theoretical situation, the point when you're

not gaining new insights), multiple-category design (sequential or simultaneous groups with several audiences), double-layer design (adding additional layers such as geographic area), or broad-involvement design (with primary target audience and secondary audience with important perspectives) (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Methodology

In structuring and developing focus group interviews, researchers have to be attentive about several major points.

Number of participants per group

The guiding principle for forming focus groups is selective homogeneity, while random sampling is often not appropriate (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The size of the group should depend on the group composition and the factors such as cultural value orientations, interpersonal relations, social status, age, and gender (Fern, 2001), along with having the range of ages of participants within two years (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The ideal size for a focus group for most noncommercial topics is six to eight participants (Natishan, Schmidt, & Mead, 2000), and should never exceed ten participants because it limits discussion opportunities and are difficult to control (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Number of groups

Some of the recommendations related to the number of groups state that interviewing should be made from the data collected from at least three focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2000). This separation of the participants into different groups can provide heterogeneity across groups for providing the diversity of perspectives. In general, the number of groups might depend on the application and the research purpose, with the number of groups ranging anywhere from 1 to 50 or more depending on the research purpose (Fern, 2001).

Number of goals

The number of research goals that focus group interviews can focus on might depend on the type of information chosen to be disclosed or not disclosed, being either personal or impersonal. Furthermore, research goals can relate to task performance effectiveness, user's reaction, and group member relations (Fern, 2001). Some of the implementations of focus groups focused on four goals related to team performance issues (Natishan et al., 2000) or two major issues investigated (e.g., participants perceptions and behavior) (Hendershott & Wright, 1993).

Length of interviews

The length of the interviews depends on the number and structure of questions. These questions need to be structured so that they are conversational, understandable to the participants, easy to say, clear, usually short, usually open ended, usually one-dimensional, lead to a well-thought-out direction, and age-appropriate (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Some sources recommend having a structure with opening, introductory, transition, key, and ending questions (Krueger & Casey, 2000), while other distinguish between different sections of the potentially 2-hour long interview as introduction (5 min), data collection (10 min), warm up discussion (20 min), subsequence discussion sections (around 75 min), the final section (5 min) (Greenbaum, 2000). In general, focus group sessions last between 1.5 and 2 hours (Natishan et al., 2000).

Moderating

The effect of the moderator is considered crucial to the outcome of focus group research. This is the reason special attention should be dedicated to training and organizing. Usually, the moderator is the principal investigator, but there can be additional assistant moderator who takes comprehensive notes, operates recording equipment, handles environmental conditions and logistics, etc. Moderator characteristics can depend if the focus group task is exploratory or experiential. Important factors are adequate background knowledge and experience, along with listening and nonverbal communication skills (Fern, 2001). Moderator needs to be able to pause and probe, anticipate afloat discussion, respond to comments, observe body language (Krueger & Casey, 2000), guide, enhance, cue, expand, and listen (Creason, 1991). One of the key duties of the moderators is to manage between allowing participants to speak spontaneously and guiding them to say to write kind of things in the right time, and avoiding explicit disagreement relations (Puchta & Potter, 2004). Finally, the moderator has to assure even the smallest logistic details, such as having nametags and other appropriate writing material (Greenbaum, 2000).

Data recording methods

Data recording methods can range based on the device available for use. It is essential to have written notes and audio recorder (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Other methods, such as videotaping, are desirable since they can bring additional information, especially related to facial expressions and body language during discussions (Greenbaum, 2000).

Data

Use and analysis of data

There are different qualitative data analysis methods for focus groups, depending on the different implementations. In general, it is essential that data analysis is systematic, sequential, and verifiable. Data analysis can be transcript-based, tape-based, or memory-based (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The qualitative analysis can range from summarizing the discussion, identifying themes, up to elaborate coding schemes (Fern, 2001). For example, the analyst can create categories for sorting different types of comments, write descriptive summaries what each type of group said in response to a question, comparing and contrasting similarities and differences, and pointing out factors that can give emphasize weight to the responses (e.g., frequency, specificity, emotion, extensiveness of the answer, etc.) (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Specific details that need to be looked for are word choice, intonation, neutral, negative or positive opinions, subjective and objective evaluations, epistemic and descriptive accounts (Puchta & Potter, 2004), the order in which issues are discussed, the intensity or strength of feelings, the reasons behind feelings, deception, generalizability, or the average number of individuals who expressed a particular statement (Fern, 2001).

Measuring and ensuring validity and reliability

One of the approaches for ensuring validity and reliability is ensuring face validity. Face validity should be checked based on the group composition, group size and the number of interviews, the appropriateness of the interview location, group process, moderators characteristics style, data coding and analysis. In addition, there are three potential external threats to validity of data: compliance (responding as expected from questions), identification (responding similar to the another person), and internalization (conforming and not stating some internalized opinions) (Fern,

2001). The moderator should be able to reduce the effect of these factors through the leadership of the discussion. As previously stated, random sampling is often not appropriate (Krueger & Casey, 2000) since the investigator needs to ensure that respondents are representative of the relevant population, and that they are recruited independently of one another (Fern, 2001). Finally, pilot testing the questions before the focus groups interview can ensure understanding, or asking the participants to verify summary comments after the focus groups interviews are conducted (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

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