

Chapter 19: The Use of Focus Groups in Audience Research

Rosalyn Rubenstein
Toronto, Ontario

In the museum literature, several articles and debates address the issue of approaches and methods of audience research (see references on "Method" cited in Screven, 1984). Is one approach or method better than the rest? First, the answer is "no." Second, this is not even the particular question which one should ask, because it is not a question of one better than another, but rather, of choosing the most appropriate approach and method -- or combination of methods -- to answer the particular research questions and problems. In other words, how can one design the research to get the desired information. Indeed, developing the research design is one of the major challenges of any audience research project. To do this well, the designer of a research project should be familiar with a variety of approaches and methods.

This paper discusses one of the methods which I have used in audience research projects, focus groups, also called focus interviews or focused group interviews. These have been used for a variety of audiences and purposes at several Canadian institutions. I have had success with focus groups in these projects because they did provide results which answered the research questions.

The focus group method is commonly used in commercial or consumer research. However, it is less often associated with museums. Although both Adams (1983) and Loomis (1987) cite its use in museums, there is no accompanying description in these sources. For this reason, the current chapter provides an overview of focus groups in museum settings. For further information on focus groups the reader is referred to Higgenbotham and Cox (1979).

The chapter will be divided into several parts. The first part gives a general description of the focus group method. Second, the process of a focus group is described by breaking it down into its component parts. Third, examples from case studies are provided to show how focus groups have been used and the sorts of data which emerged from the projects. Finally, conclusions are drawn about the projects to which focus groups

are appropriate. The paper also makes reference to aspects of this methodology in consumer market research and revisions which I have made in order to apply the technique to museum audience research.

General Description of the Focus Group Method

Focus groups are a qualitative method of research. They take the form of in-depth discussions with groups of about eight to twelve participants, lasting from one to two hours. Focus groups are led by an experienced and well-trained discussion leader or moderator who follows a guide with topics, questions, probes, and target timings. Participants are encouraged to stick to the discussion topic but to say whatever is on their minds. This loosely structured format allows one to identify the range of audience reactions, attitudes, issues, expectations, and perceptions with respect to the project topic. Because the format is loosely structured, it requires knowledge and rigorous training in order to be used effectively.

Description of the Focus Group Process

The Study Guide

A guide, or "study guide," is developed in advance for the focus group sessions which includes questions, probes, and target timings for each of the session topics. The guides are based on the objectives of the research project, and take the following into account:

- The types of questions which are suited to a group or questions which people are happy to answer and discuss in front of other people.
- Questions which lend themselves to discussion such as open-ended questions and general probes.
- The length of the session or the number of items which can be adequately discussed in a period of one to two hours.
- A general format which allows the moderator to facilitate a relaxed, thoughtful, and focused in-depth discussion.

The general format for a session study guide may be described as follows. First, an icebreaker allows the group participants to relax and become acquainted with each other. Second, the moderator introduces the focus of the discussion topic. Third, the guide is set-up to allow for topic development. This is crucial. The questions and probes must flow in such a way that in-depth discussion can develop in the session. Finally,

the discussion may end with a general request for any additional comments or ideas relevant to the discussion topic.

Sometimes, the discussion part of the session is followed by a brief survey, perhaps to acquire specific demographic information from participants, and sometimes another question or two relevant to the discussion topic. This gives participants the opportunity to answer questions privately and after they have given the issues some thought. An alternative is to hand out surveys at the beginning of a session to obtain information before participants have discussed the issue with the others. While these brief surveys are distributed among participants, the session study guide is seen and used only by the person responsible for leading or moderating the Focus Group discussion.

Number and Composition of Groups

The number and composition of the focus groups will depend upon the project objectives as well as project time-frame and budget. Four groups is typical for a project but more or less is possible, and very large numbers of groups are uncommon. It is advisable to duplicate the composition of your most important groups.

Recruiting of Participants

Who does one get to go to the focus groups and how does one go about getting them to attend? Recruiting of participants takes place in a variety of ways. Market research companies often advertise, in newspapers for example, for individuals to assist in market research. The work takes about two hours for which the individual receives a cash payment of perhaps \$20 or \$25 (The amount will vary depending upon the composition of the group, such as teenagers or high-ranking executives). Interested individuals respond to the advertisement by telephone and are asked a few questions -- screened for various characteristics -- to see if they are eligible. If the individual meets the screening criteria, the time, date, and location for the focus group session is given. Usually the potential participant is telephoned a few days prior to the session to confirm attendance. At the end of the focus group session the participant receives a plain unmarked envelope containing the cash payment. Meanwhile, the name, phone number, and some information about this individual has been entered into a database of potentially agreeable participants of future focus groups, and this database is constantly growing. Companies may have restrictions on the number of times a person may attend sessions to avoid filling groups with "professional" focus group participants.

In my work in museum audience research recruiting has taken place in a number of ways, but all potential participants are encouraged to take part by offering them some sort of incentive. In keeping with the character of non-profit institutions cash payments are replaced by other incentives at little or no cost to the museum. These include free admission passes, invitations to exhibit openings, small souvenirs, posters, and catalogues. Free passes and other small gifts thank participants for their time, promote goodwill, and encourage repeat visits.

One effective way of recruiting group participants is through telephone lists supplied by the institution, such as membership lists and program registration lists. A second method is to recruit in-person and on-site at the museum for a focus group later that day. A third method is to recruit people at an alternative site such as a shopping mall. All of these methods will work. The one chosen depends upon the group composition that is required, such as local visitors, tourists, or non-users. However, whichever method is chosen, the recruiting process should be closely supervised to avoid any unintentional bias.

Participants of focus groups are usually very pleased to take part in the sessions, and enjoy the opportunity to discuss the museum and to have input into future planning.

Room Requirements

There are requirements for an effective focus group room. These include comfort, quiet, and set-up for discussion. Many market research companies have special focus group rooms which include two-way mirrors -- so clients can watch and listen -- audiotaping, and videotaping equipment. But you can prepare an appropriate room in your own institution as a focus group room and reduce project costs.

Refreshments should be nearby or available in the room itself. This too will facilitate a relaxed and comfortable discussion.

Analysis and Report

Sessions are usually audiotaped for purposes of analysis, but videotaping is also a possibility. By reviewing the tapes the analyst organizes the discussion quotations, sentiments, and reactions by project objective, study guide question, and the issues which emerged in the groups.

Reports generally fall into two categories. First, there are reports which present overviews of the results of the discussions with few or no direct quotations. Second, there are reports which present the results including the direct quotations from the proceedings. Know which one you are getting!

The Moderator

The moderator is key to the success of the focus group method. Although there is a session study guide for the groups, it is a guide only. The concept of focus groups is to let the participants consider and speak in-depth about their reactions and what they feel are the issues. The moderator must draw out these issues and reactions, and, at the same time, follow the guide in such a way that it responds or relates to the expressed sentiments. Concerns of the moderator include:

- Helping participants feel relaxed and comfortable.
- Ensuring that everyone speaks, by preventing more talkative participants from monopolizing the group and encouraging quieter participants to speak.
- Responding to issues and comments, but not answering questions which the participants are to answer or discuss.
- Staying neutral and unbiased.
- Keeping everyone on track and focused on the discussion topic.
- Facilitating discussion among participants.

One of the most important concerns of the moderator is making sure that participants discuss what they, themselves, think and feel (such as reactions to a programming idea) and not what they think other people may feel (such as how the public may react). The moderator must explain that the museum wants participants to discuss their own attitudes and opinions rather than the perceived attitudes of others.

The moderator should always thank participants for their time and input, explaining that the results of the discussions will be used to develop and improve programs and services to the public.

The moderator must be trained in the skills of leading a focus group. Training includes: how to handle problem participants; how to encourage participants without putting words in their mouths; how to be sensitive to both the content/feelings of the participant's statements and the objectives of the project; etc.

Examples from Case Studies

Information for General Review and Planning

Focus groups can yield useful information from users and non-users of museums, including:

- Overall reactions, attitudes, expectations, image, and perceptions.
- Reasons for and for not visiting.
- Reactions to existing and proposed programs and services.
- Needs and desires.
- Likes and dislikes.
- Sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction.
- Reasons for the expressed attitudes.
- Ideas for future programming and services.

Such inquiries can lead to a better understanding of an institution's audiences, including identification of an institution's existing and potential audience segments (for example, non-users, occasional users, and frequent users) and the psychographic profiles of these different audience groups. These studies can also identify planning issues, guidelines, and priorities for communications, programming, and visitor services. New ideas for the planning of future programs and services may also emerge in the discussions, as well as issues and criteria for future evaluation and research. While these studies may prove useful at any time, they are most effective at times of review and change, such as part of a strategic planning exercise, building renovation and expansion, or the planning of a new museum. The Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature in Winnipeg, for example, conducted Focus Groups with non-users in conjunction with other data collection activities -- on-site behavioural observations, surveys of visitors, and a community survey -- as part of an institutional review and to assist in the development of a new marketing policy (Rubenstein & Barkow, 1986b). The Ontario Science Centre collected information from focus groups of tourists, local Toronto visitors, and non-visitors for general planning purposes (Rubenstein & Barkow, 1986c). Success with this project led to others, including one which focused on communications just prior to the hiring of a new advertising agency (Rubenstein, 1987a). This research resulted in a further identification of the different audience segments of the Ontario Science Centre, psychographic profiles of these audience segments, the issues that impact on visitation, attributes of an effective advertisement or promotion, and hypotheses of which audience groups would be most likely to attend the next major temporary exhibition. Overall, these

projects were not only useful, but were stimulating to planning efforts in general.

Information for Specific Programs and Services

Focus groups may be used effectively for information about specific programs and services. For example, feedback from representatives of potential audience groups of an upcoming exhibition can provide overall reactions and attitudes towards the concept of the exhibition, interest in attending or not attending and why, general background knowledge of the exhibition topic, any general misconceptions or confusions about the topic, and suggestions for specific displays. In this way focus groups are useful as a method of front-end evaluation in the early stages of planning. The National Museum of Science and Technology in Ottawa recently used focus groups in this way. The information gleaned from the focus groups was followed-up by a survey for further specific and quantitative information on visitor baseline knowledge and interests (Rubenstein, 1988).

Focus groups can be a useful way to obtain information concerning services and programs, other than exhibits, in the early stages of planning. For example, the Ontario Science Centre conducted focus groups to assist in the development of a new membership program. Focus groups were held with potential audiences for membership. Study guide topics included: reactions to the concept of membership, reasons for membership, expectations, and desires for different membership benefits and categories (Rubenstein, 1986). When something new or different is proposed, focus groups can be a useful starting point for collecting information because the range of issues and reactions have not as yet been identified. Other examples of this use of focus groups include projects to identify issues and reactions to new applications of computers in museums (Rubenstein & Barkow, 1985; 1986a).

Once a new service or program is underway, focus groups can assist in fine-tuning and improvement. Such was the case in a project for Continuing (adult) Education at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. Groups were held with program users and non-users towards the end of the two-year pilot period for this program. By that time the program was established, but there were a number of hypotheses concerning issues for further development and improvement. The research project tested these hypotheses and defined the issues. The project also showed that focus groups are useful for testing overall program objectives, and for identifying outcomes such as learning and motivation to join the museum. This is because the semi-structured format allows participants

to discuss their own personal experiences, what they themselves get out of a program, and how this relates to their participation in the institution as a whole (Rubenstein, 1987b). The issues defined in the discussions also led to refinements of the regular program surveys.

Focus groups can provide psychographic information about audiences, reactions to institutions as a whole, and feedback to specific programs and services. Focus group projects can identify issues, guidelines, and priorities for planning, evaluation, and research. This qualitative form of research is particularly appropriate at times of review and change, when programs and products are new or embryonic, and the range of issues and reactions have not as yet been identified. The results gleaned from focus groups can also be used to develop an effective survey.

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