

Preparing and Conducting Focus Groups

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I. Checklist of Tasks

1. Define the objectives and population of the study — what do you want to learn, and about whom? (The objectives often, but not always, determine the population.)

2. Decide if focus groups are appropriate.

Focus groups are appropriate for:

- Learning the whys, wherefores, and hows — not for measuring how many
- Obtaining depth of information
- Issues that can benefit from group dynamics
- Exploratory (before quantitative research) or confirmatory (after quantitative)

Focus groups can be used for many kinds of studies:

- Perceptions, attitudes, and feelings
- Habits and usage
- Products and services
- Program evaluation
- Advertising
- Packaging

3. Choose a moderator — internal or external

Advantages of an internal moderator:

- Less expensive.
- May be more knowledgeable about topic.
- Confidentiality.

Disadvantages of an internal moderator:

- May have less experience in methodology (conducting groups, using group techniques, interpreting data).
- May have conscious bias (if he or she has anything at stake or has strong feelings about the topic) or unconscious bias (if he or she has worked within the university culture for a while).
- May have other responsibilities that detract from time that can be devoted to analyzing results.

4. Split the population to be studied into groups according to differences that you hypothesize might be significant to the issue being researched:

Ex: Members/non-members, Donors/non-donors, Users/non-users, Age, etc

5. Set dates for the groups
 - Choose dates at which key staffers can observe.
 - Make sure there are no scheduling conflicts (ie. with other university activities in the region, holidays, special events, Monday Night Football with local team, etc)
6. Determine location for groups — on campus, traditional, non-traditional

Advantages of on campus and non-traditional locations:

 - May be less expensive.
 - May be more appropriate or convenient for the population.

Disadvantages of on campus and non-traditional locations:

 - May not be possible for others to observe.
 - May require you to do your own hosting, catering, taping, and clean-up (lots of details to take care of).
7. Reserve the location — at least 4 weeks ahead of time.
8. Work with the facility (if a traditional focus group facility is used).

How to reduce costs: Catering, taping, recruiting
9. Arrange for recruiting.
 - Pull data on your population — this may take one or two weeks — Be sure to include data you need to achieve desired balance (ie. class year, degree, major, etc.)
 - Hire interviewers — students, volunteer staff, focus facility, or independent recruiters
10. Write the invitation (if the alumni are pre-qualified) or the screener (if they need to be qualified).
11. Recruit the participants (phone or e-mail)
 - Use the invitation or screener to obtain *commitments* — approx 2 weeks before groups are conducted. This requires close supervision to ensure a balanced demographic mix within each group.
 - Confirmation letter (including map and directions) — immediately after commitment
 - Reminder — 2 days before groups are conducted
12. Write the discussion guide. (Elicit comments from key staff and revise accordingly).
13. Conduct the groups. (Debrief after the first group and make any necessary changes.)
14. Analyze the tapes and present the report.

II. Sample Invitation — by Telephone

Hi, my name is _____, and I'm calling for the Stanford Law School. This is not a fund raising call — I'd simply like to invite [ALUMNI NAME] to an event we're having. Is [HE/SHE] available at the moment?

Thanks. The Law School is currently trying to improve the way it communicates with alumni, and is talking with alumni to better understand the kind of information you want and how best to provide it. So I'd like to invite you to share your thoughts in a small group discussion being held on the evening of Wednesday, September 16th at

6:00pm — (donors)

8:00pm — (non-donors)

Your feelings and opinions will be of great help to the Law School and its ability to be responsive and relevant to your interests. The discussion will last about an hour and a half, I think you'll find it enjoyable, and food and refreshments will be provided. Would you like to participate?

Good! The discussion will be held at Nichols Research, which is located at 333 West El Camino Real, at the corner of Mathilda and El Camino in Sunnyvale. Once again, the date is Wednesday, September 16th at [6:00pm/8:00pm].

In order to ensure that everyone's opinions can be heard, the discussion is being limited to a small number of alumni, so it is VERY IMPORTANT that each person who agrees to attend the discussion DOES attend. Can we count on you to DEFINITELY be there?

[IF THERE IS ANY HESITATION AT ALL, CANCEL THE RECRUIT AND SAY:

"I'M SORRY, WE NEED TO BE SURE THAT EACH PERSON WE INVITE WILL DEFINITELY PARTICIPATE. I APPRECIATE YOUR INTEREST, BUT WE'D BEST RESERVE THE SPOT FOR SOMEONE WHO IS CERTAIN HE CAN ATTEND. THANKS ANYWAY."]

Good! Please put the date on your calendar, but we'll also call back a few days before the discussion to remind you of the time and place. We'll also be sending you a confirmation letter with directions to Nichols Research, so I'd like to check that your current address is [ADDRESS].

Thanks again. We look forward to talking with you on the 16th.

III. Sample Invitation — by E-mail

Dear [NAME],

The university is currently trying to better understand the relationship alumni have with Stanford and what it can do to remain relevant in your life today. What are your perceptions, feelings, and concerns about the university? What are your thoughts about our current efforts to keep you informed, involved, and engaged – and what resources, services, and programs might we provide that would be of value to you? The first step to being more responsive to the needs and interests of alumni is to sit down in person and listen to what you have to say.

So I'd like to invite you to participate in a small group discussion at 6pm on the evening of Tuesday, September 24. The discussion will be held on campus, in the Frances C. Arrillaga Alumni Center, and there is plenty of free parking. The discussion will only take about 90 minutes, a light dinner will be provided, and I think you'll find it enjoyable.

To ensure that everyone's opinions are heard in full, the group is limited to a small number of alumni. So if you'd like to participate, **PLEASE REPLY TO THIS E-MAIL IMMEDIATELY, BEFORE THE GROUP FILLS UP.** I will promptly get back to you with a confirmation. Thanks

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IV. Sample Screener

Hi, my name is _____, and I'm calling for Stanford University. This is not a fund raising call — we're conducting a very brief survey of alumni, and I was wondering if [ALUMNI NAME] might have a minute to answer one or two quick questions.

First, do you receive *Stanford Magazine*?

Yes CONTINUE

No/Not sure THANK AND TERMINATE

And do you usually read some of the feature articles in *Stanford Magazine*, or do you usually look at the Class Notes and just skim through the rest?

Usually read articles INVITE TO 6PM GROUP

Usually skim/It varies INVITE TO 8PM GROUP

Don't look at Magazine at all/Not sure THANK AND TERMINATE

Stanford Magazine is currently taking a close look at how it can better serve alumni interests, and the first step is to sit down in person and listen to what alumni have to say. So I'd like to invite you to share your thoughts about the Magazine in a small group discussion being held on the evening of Wednesday, September 16th at

6:00pm — (readers)

8:00pm — (skimmers)

Your feelings and opinions will help improve the Magazine and make it more responsive and relevant to your interests. The discussion will last about an hour and a half, I think you'll find it enjoyable, and food and refreshments will be provided. Would you like to participate?

Good! The discussion will be held at Nichols Research, which is located at 333 West El Camino Real, at the corner of Mathilda and El Camino in Sunnyvale. Once again, the date is Wednesday, September 16th at [6:00pm/8:00pm].

In order to ensure that everyone's opinions can be heard, the discussion is being limited to a small number of alumni, so it is VERY IMPORTANT that each person who agrees to attend the discussion DOES attend. Can we count on you to DEFINITELY be there?

[IF NO, CANCEL THE RECRUIT AND THANK THEM ANYWAY.]

Good! Please put the date on your calendar, but we'll also call back a few days before the discussion to remind you of the time and place. We'll also be sending you a confirmation letter with directions to Nichols Research, so I'd like to check that your current address is [ADDRESS].

Thanks again. We look forward to talking with you on the 16th.

V. Sample Confirmation Letter

[Letterhead stationery or e-mail]

Mr. Joe Alumnus
100 Cardinal St.
Palo Alto, CA 94301

Dear Joe,

Thanks for accepting my invitation to participate in the alumni discussion with recent graduates on Monday, November 15 at 6pm. Please accept this note as confirmation that a space has been reserved for you.

The discussion will be held on campus, on the first floor of the Frances C. Arrillaga Alumni Center, which is located at the corner of Galvez Street and Campus Drive. Free parking is available in front of the building and in all of the lots. (Permits and meters are not enforced after 4pm.) I have enclosed a map and directions.

Please try to arrive fifteen minutes early so we can get started - and finished - on time. The discussion will only take about 90 minutes, and a light dinner will be provided. So please come hungry.

As I mentioned in my invitation, we'd like to better understand what's important to your relationship with Stanford now, and how our programs, services, and resources can best meet your needs and interests. I think you'll find the discussion enjoyable.

In order to ensure that everyone's opinions can be heard, the discussion is being limited to a small number of alumni. Because you accepted my invitation, your participation is anticipated and I am counting on hearing your thoughts. So please don't forget to put the discussion on your calendar.

Thanks again for your cooperation. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to call or e-mail me. I look forward to seeing you on November 15.

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VI. Sample Reminder - by E-mail

Dear [NAME],

Just a reminder about the alumni discussion with recent graduates this Monday (November 15) at 6pm.

The discussion will be held on campus, on the first floor of the Frances C. Arrillaga Alumni Center, which is located at the corner of Galvez Street and Campus Drive. Free parking is available in front of the building and in all of the lots. (Permits and meters are not enforced after 4pm.) I have enclosed a map and directions.

Please try to arrive fifteen minutes early so we can get started - and finished - on time. The discussion will only take about 90 minutes, and a light dinner will be provided. So please come hungry.

As I mentioned in my invitation, we'd like to better understand what's important to your relationship with Stanford now, and how our programs, services, and resources can best meet your needs and interests. I think you'll find the discussion enjoyable.

In order to ensure that everyone's opinions can be heard, the discussion is being limited to a small number of alumni. Because you accepted my invitation, your participation is anticipated and I am counting on hearing your thoughts. So I look forward to seeing you on Monday.

Thanks again for your cooperation. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to call or e-mail me.

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VII. Sample Discussion Guide

Introductions Approx 5 minutes

Moderator intro, room set-up, taping, procedure, selection process

Participant intros - what was the last Stanford event you attended before Leading Matters?

Before Approx 20 minutes

How did you hear about Leading Matters? Probe:

Save The Date box, the invitation, phone or email from a volunteer, Stanford Where You Live email, other email, word of mouth, web site

If recall receiving the box: *Did* you save the date, as it suggested?

Pass around the box and the invitation – what did you think of them?

What did the box, the invitation, and the price suggest about the event? Probe:

Event would be special, high quality, informative, fun
Stanford is being wasteful

What interested you about this event – what were the reasons you decided to attend? Probe:

Features: Faculty, president, deans, student panel, student research exhibit, dinner/multi-media

Scope: Included both undergrad and graduate, topics spanned all 7 schools

Benefits: Social, intellectual stimulation, better understanding of what's happening at Stanford, better understanding of Hennessy's vision and goals for Stanford, just to support Stanford

Did you attend more for the event as a whole, or for the specific topics addressed in the sessions – would you have attended if the topics were different?

Did any Stanford event you previously attended whet your interest in attending this event? Discuss.

What are the reasons you attended this event but not other recent events in San Diego? (Mike McFaul/Democracy 2007, Rob Dunbar/Global Warming 2006, Stanford Day In 2004, Think Again 2001)

During Approx 40 minutes

What did you expect from Leading Matters?

Which expectations did it exceed? Meet? Fall short of?

Did you expect it to be a fundraising event?

What, if anything, was surprising (positive and/or negative)?

How do you feel about the balance between programmed sessions and free time?

What are your thoughts about the multimedia presentations – over the top, not all that special, other?

What was most memorable?

What are your thoughts about President Hennessy's conversation with the students?

What were they trying to communicate?

What was most memorable about it?

What would you like to hear from the president?

What would you have liked more of? Less of?

What, if anything, would you have changed or done differently?

Ask everyone to look through the invitation, and then discuss the promises in it that they thought were kept...and the promises they thought were not kept.

Feelings and other outcomes:

- Pride in their Stanford affiliation
- Understanding of Stanford today, and the research and scholarship going on
- How Stanford is leading or contributing in ways different from other universities
- Understanding of vision and goals for Stanford
- Understanding of The Stanford Challenge
- Interest in attending events
- Interest in staying informed about campus news and research
- Interest in connecting with other alumni – local and university-wide
- Interest in volunteering
- Interest in donating money

Was there a call to action? If so, what was it? What was your reaction?

If not, would you have been receptive to one? If so, a call to what kind of action?

After Approx 30 minutes

Did you talk about Leading Matters to anyone afterwards? To whom, and what did you say?

Did you use the flash drive and view the links? Did you save the flash drive for other use?

Did you read the wrap-up e-mail?

What did you link to from the e-mail or flash drive? Probe:

Leading Matters web site, photos from the event, suggested readings, Stanford on iTunes, screensaver, Honor Roll, speaker bios, Stanford Storybank, “Interaction” (magazine on multidisciplinary research), SAA site, *Stanford* magazine site, Stanford Challenge web site

How would you like to stay involved or engaged with Stanford now?

What are your thoughts about the Stanford community in San Diego?

About opportunities in San Diego to get involved with Stanford?

About the communications you receive from Stanford?

What would you like more of? Less of?

Wrap-Up Approx 5 minutes

VIII. Issues re: Conducting Groups

Creating safe, comfortable environment

Establishing rapport and trust

Keeping discussion on track

Changing the dynamics

Dealing with difficult or sensitive topics

Dealing with difficult participants

Eliciting USEFUL information

Projective techniques – some examples:

- Metaphors and imagery

- Picture stimuli

- Card sorts

- Sentence completions

- Obituaries

- Collages

- Anonymous comments

- User descriptions – attitudes, dress, lifestyle, interests, etc

- Personality associations (photos)

- Situational associations (photos)

- Conceptual mapping

- Expressive drawings

- Stories written as if product/service were human

IX. Reference

Books

Greenbaum, Thomas R. *Handbook for Focus Group Research*. Lexington Books (1993)

Edmunds, Holly. *The Focus Group Research Handbook*. American Marketing Association-NTC Business Books (1999)

Krueger, Richard A. *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. Sage Publications (1994)

Morgan, David L. *Successful Focus Groups: Advancing the State of the Art*. Sage Publications (Sage Focus Edition #156, 1993)

Stewart, David W. and Shamdasani, Prem N. *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice*. Sage Publications (1990)

Templeton, Jane Farley. *The Focus Group: A Strategic Guide to Organizing, Conducting and Analyzing the Focus Group Interview* Probus Publishing Company (1994)

Directories of Focus Group Facilities

The Greenbook from the American Marketing Association – Chicago: 800-262-1150
www.greenbook.org

Quirks Marketing Research – Minneapolis: 612-861-8051
www.quirks.com

QRCA (Qualitative Research Consultants Assoc) – New York: 212-315-0632
www.qrca.org