



Covid-19 Audience Outlook Monitor

Qualitative Research Tools

Basic Tips for Recruiting and Moderating Successful Virtual Focus Groups

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Basic Tips for Successful Virtual Focus Groups

Planning, Scheduling, and Recruitment

1. **Do a minimum of two discussion groups for each topic.** Doing pairs of focus groups is a best practice that helps to overcome outlying opinions that may dominate a particular discussion.
2. **Schedule the group for a Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday.** Avoid holidays and major media events. Select a time that makes general sense for the characteristics of your group (e.g. working professionals-after 5:30 p.m., retirees-late morning, at home parents of young children during school hours).
3. **Allow time in between groups.** You can schedule your groups for the same day, but don't put them back to back. Allow for at least an hour between same day meetings to summarize your notes and reset your mind to prepare fresh for the next group. To give people options for participant and give yourself a break, it is best to schedule them on different days.
4. **Schedule a one-hour time slot.** Plan for 45-minutes of questioning and allow 10 minutes for introductions and ice-breaker conversation, and 5 minutes for closing comments or questions.
5. **Begin recruitment 1 to 2 weeks in advance.** Allowing enough time, but not too much time, is important for a good focus group. It also allows you time to send out a reminder and replace anyone who may drop out.
6. **Recruit 6 people for each group, and expect 1 or 2 to no-show.** A virtual focus group should be limited to 4 or 5 participants to allow for everyone to have a chance to contribute to the conversation. A minimum of three people is necessary for productive discussion. More than 6 gets to be overly cumbersome, as every respondent needs to be given a chance to answer every question.



Moderating the Focus Group

1. **Stick to one topic.** While you may be tempted to squeeze in time for a variety of questions, virtual focus groups are short and you'll get more out of them if you stick to one topic.
2. **Set a conversational tone.** People are more likely to open up if your tone is conversational and natural. Put people at ease at the beginning of the meeting by smiling and welcoming the group with a bit of light conversation.
3. **Follow the protocol.** The protocol is there to set the ground rules and to keep your discussion on topic and offers probes for exploring people's opinions. If the conversation leads you to new probes, try not to ask yes or no questions, but to begin questions with "why?" or "how?" or "what makes you say that?"
4. **Encourage individuals to engage with each other, not just you.** In a virtual environment it's important to be deliberate in encouraging people by name to reflect on ideas and comments that arise in the conversation.
5. **Use the parking lot trick.** Sometimes the conversation will naturally jump off track or jump ahead in your protocol. If conversational naturally leads to questions that are out of order that's ok. But if comments feel as if they are leading you off track, pause the conversation and tell the group that we'll put that topic in the parking lot for now and return to it at the end if there is time for that discussion. You can also offer to have an offline conversation with the respondent after the group if the topic is disrupting the group.
6. **Don't offer your opinion or correct people.** Embody the role of "listener". The role of the moderator is to guide the discussion and prompt people to share their opinions whether you agree with them or not. It's tempting to join in the conversation, but it's important that you remain neutral and maintain your role as moderator.
7. **Manage the group.** Invite people by name to answer questions, to build on or respond to what another participant has said. Often there will be one or two participants that are more outgoing or opinionated. To avoid participants dominating the discussion, pivot to a round robin style of calling on people until everyone has had a chance to share their thoughts.



8. **Explore differences.** Inevitably there will be differences of opinion. If people in your group disagree about something, don't take sides. Explore the meaning behind the differing opinions with your probes (e.g. tell me more about what makes you say that.)
9. **Echo back themes.** When moving from one question or topic to another, it is often helpful to summarize and echo back to the group any key themes within what you heard. This also helps to ensure that you are not misunderstanding the feedback. (e.g. "So, what I'm hearing is....is that accurate?")
10. **Start and end on time, but don't turn off the recording.** Sometimes the most valuable information surfaces at the close of a meeting, particularly for participants who may have held back comments during the conversation.

