

# Make the Most of Focus Groups

NASAA Assembly 2008  
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## Workshop Objectives

- Discern when focus groups make sense
- Design effective focus groups
- Oversee implementation of focus groups

## Focus Groups are Qualitative Research

- Focused, moderated, & interactive discussion
- Usually 6-10 people, representative of a specific constituency
- Discussing opinions & attitudes in response to specific questions
- 90 minutes to 2 hours



## Basic Steps for Focus Groups

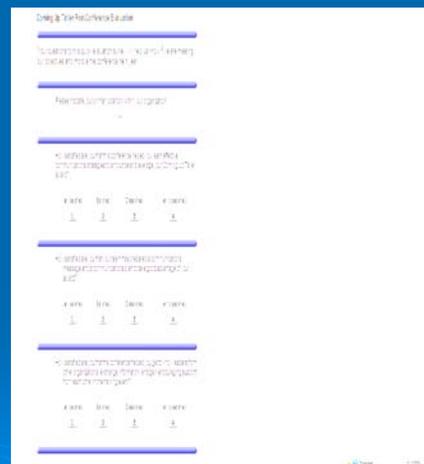
- Define objectives
- Confirm focus group is appropriate method
- Develop questions
- Select location
- Recruit moderator
- Identify and recruit participants
- Conduct focus groups
- Analyze and report findings

# Feasible Objectives

- Assess needs in planning
  - “What are capacity development needs of nonprofits?”
- Evaluate results
  - “What is the impact of our community development grants?”
- Test new policies or programs
  - “How will constituents respond to a new e-grant system?”
- Market research
  - “What is the potential for cultural tourism?”
- Sample public opinion for advocacy
  - “What do citizens understand to be the value of arts education?”

# Combine with Other Methods

- Mine existing data
- Scan other research
- Surveys
- Interviews
- Web & online networks
- Public hearings



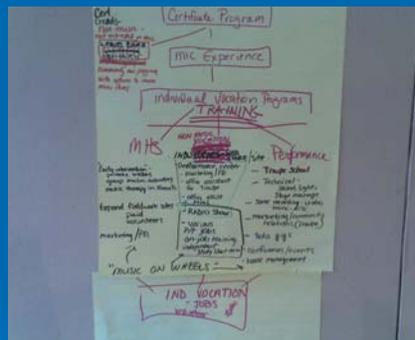
## Questions Suited to Focus Groups

- What are your professional needs?
- What cultural traditions are important in your community?
- What results have you seen from this program?
- If we adopted this policy, how would it affect you?
- What do you think of these goals?



## Leave Some Questions to Policy Makers

- What policies should we design?
- How shall we allocate resources among competing interests?
- How shall we solve a complex problem?
- What should be our plan?



A messy planning problem

## Advantages

- Relatively simple and inexpensive
- Quick results
- Enables access to specific constituents & communities
- Believable and usually understandable results
- Demonstrates willingness to hear constituents

## Criticisms and Risks

- Soft data
- Moderator influences discussion
- Participants may not be candid
- Dominant personalities may influence others
- Group think is possible
- Biased interpretation of results possible
- Risky to generalize from non-representative sample to larger population

## Effective Uses of Focus Groups

- Access constituents & communities
- Assess needs
- Explore “whys” behind divergent opinions
  
- Clarify an issue for subsequent research
- Identify opinions to quantify with surveys
  
- Generate ideas and potential solutions
- Learn unexpected information
- Demonstrate respect by asking for advice

## Writing Questions

- Know your objectives
- What are participants likely to know?
  
- Draft short list of short, open-ended questions
  
- Shorten list
- Sequence questions
- Write probing questions
- Test and revise



...said Alice, "would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

## Practice Writing Questions

- Identify a program, plan, or policy
- What information do you need?
- Write 2-3 group questions
- Test your questions with a colleague

## Selecting Participants

- Determine what sector should participate
  - Define target population
- Select individuals representative of sector
  - Screen for selection criteria



# Recruit Participants

- Letter or email
  - Explain purpose
  - Use of information
  - Importance
  - Present questions
  - Offer incentive?
- Phone follow up
- Email reminder



# Select Location



## Recruit Moderator

- Skilled professionals make a difference
  - Corporate market research staff (ask your board)
  - Marketing or social science faculty
  - Planning, evaluation, or marketing consultants
- Moderating yourself may work
  - Testing a program design or policy change
  - Getting feedback on a draft plan
  - Asking about need
  - However, grantees will temper comments to their funder
- Amateur moderators may skew results
  - It is easy to hear only what you expect or hope for
  - Discussions need skillful, light-handed facilitation

## Moderating Focus Groups

- Share refreshments & mingle
- Open with purpose & process
- Participants introduce themselves
- Summarize questions
- Ask each question
  - Probe for details and explanations
  - Encourage discussion
  - Summarize
- Be flexible & responsive
- Draw out quiet people & reign in digressions

## Recording Options

- Direct observation through one-way mirror or participation
- Audio or video taping
- Take notes
  - One or two note takers



## Report Results

- Transcribe tapes
- Do content analysis
  - Read transcript
  - Look for patterns
  - Assign codes
  - Mark text with codes
  - Count instances of coded patterns
  - Select typical quotes
- Summarize
- Draw conclusions
- Report findings

### Key focus group findings

Most arts marketing staffs reported that audiences were increasingly unpredictable and buying tickets later.

Subscriptions were generally higher and single ticket sales lower than last year.

All used multiple Arts Council services. Cooperative advertising is effective.

Arts Council staffs are responsive.

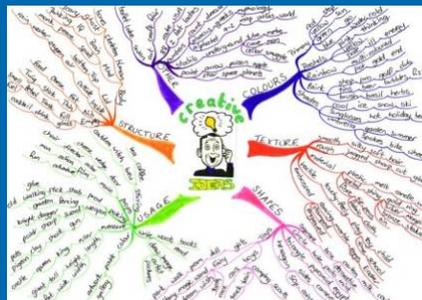
## Use Results

- Compare focus group results to other data
- Triangulate
- Draw conclusions
- Report to senior staff and/or commissioners
- Use data to inform decisions



## Other Models

- Focus forums
- Open Space
- Teleconferencing
- Online focus groups
- Planning charrettes
- Mind mapping





Focus groups indicated that Boris Yeltsin should add energy to his image and appeal to youth.

He won the Russian election.

## Resources

- *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*, Third Edition, 2000, Richard A. Krueger
- *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research (Qualitative Research Methods)*, 1997, David L. Morgan