# The Visitor

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## FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWING
## A Helpful Technique for Agricultural Educators

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Suppose you had a magic box, a very special magic box that could predict the future of your educational program. By looking into the box you could determine if your program would be successful and if it would meet the interests and needs of the client. Think of the potential! Ineffective plans could be spotted quickly and revised or eliminated before they were implemented. Efforts could be directed towards the very best plans. Time and money would be saved. Unfortunately magic boxes don't exist, but there is something that might help. This "thing" is an evaluation tool, or more precisely a market research tool called the focus group interview.

Business and industry use focus group interviews to determine potential customer response to their products and the procedure is often used on new products prior to mass production. It is costly and relatively unwise to manufacture large quantities of a new product to sell unless you know how it will be received by customers. Features of the product that are particularly appealing to the customers are often incorporated in later promotion and advertising efforts. The less desirable aspects of the product are given special attention and subjected to elimination or reduction. Often this technique yields new insights as to why consumers make certain purchasing decisions. For example, people drink soft drinks for reasons other than thirst and a craving for sweets. Focus group interviews revealed that social facilitation and escape were important considerations in drinking these beverages. [1] It is no accident that soft drink manufacturers promote the sociability and escape aspects of their products. The decisions on promotion are often tied to findings obtained in focus group interviews. Over the years this focus group interview procedure has gained considerable popularity primarily because it works well enough to justify its cost.

Educational and public service programs possess a characteristic which has been troubling to program planners. We don't know how people will respond to these programs, and therefore we are unable to market or promote our programs effectively. Historically we have tended to develop programs by using theory, experience or traditions; each of which has value but misses a key aspect of the program development process. They do not provide us with information **in advance** of how the client or student will respond to the program. As a result we are destined to learn the hard way, by trial and error. Much can be accomplished by using focus group interviews to develop and improve educational and service programs.

Focus group interviews are organized group discussions which are focused around a single theme. The technique evolved out of group interviews conducted by psychiatrists and psychologists which were conducted for people sharing common problems. In the early 50's the private sector began to adopt and refine the procedures for use in market research.

A typical focus group interview consists of a series of group interviews, usually a minimum of three different groups and each group consisting of 8 to 10 people. The moderator/discussion leader introduces the topic of concern and then follows a predetermined questioning route. The group discusses the questions and shares insights and ideas. The moderator is careful to probe and seek additional clarification of certain responses. The entire group interview usually lasts less than two hours. The discussion is typically tape recorded and used with moderator notes for later, more careful analysis. The responses in each interview are then compared and attention is placed on identification of patterns of responses among the various groups.

The group interview process works well because it taps into the key aspects of individual decision-making and the dynamics of the group process. People usually do not make decisions

in isolation, but rather after listening, discussing and sharing concerns with others. Interview procedures that capture the isolated individual responses may not reflect the dynamic real-life process most people encounter when making decisions. In settings where individual responses are sought, people tend to respond in a socially acceptable and polite manner. Evidence suggests that this is less true in a group interview environment. Strother has found that individuals tend to be more cautious in making individual responses as opposed to results obtained from group discussions. When polled, individuals indicated that they would vote for female candidates for elected office. In group settings voters would not respond in the "conditioned" manner and provided more reflective assessments of their hesitations in voting for female candidates. [2]

Focus group interviews are sharply different from other group experiences such as planning committees, task forces, and advisory groups. Focus group interviews are a means of obtaining information and the function of the group is to provide that information and not to plan, advise, or vote. Emphasis is not on consensus but on the diversity and range of opinions of individuals within the group. To accomplish this task several elements are essential, including: careful selection of participants, development and pilot testing of interview questions and interview route, a skillful moderator, and a healthy respect for the limitations of the tool.

**Focus Group Interviews: What They Can Do And What They Can't Do**

Focus group interviews are particularly suited for obtaining certain types of information and quite deficient at other tasks. They are well suited for finding out how people respond to current or potential programs or products. They will not tell you how many people will attend or use the service and the method is not a valid indicator of the extent of participation. They will give you insights as to how and why the product or program is appealing, if people like the idea or concept, or areas of potential concern. They can provide helpful advance information about an educational program, how it might be promoted or conducted in order to meet the needs and interests of your audience. At times focus group interviews are used in combination with quantified survey tools in order to determine the range of opinions and the extent of various opinions.

**Determine the Questioning Route**

After you have determined that focus group interviews are a suitable tool for your situation, the next step is to develop the interview questions. Pay attention to wording of individual questions and the sequence of those questions. Focus questions so that they are directed to topics on issues, opportunities, or situations of particular concern. Focus group interviews are not a broadside, but rather focused on specific programs, products or concerns of clientele. A questioning route is established that follows a natural sequence of questions. Occasionally in practice the route is detoured as questions are not necessarily followed in a lockstep manner but at that natural time when respondents are ready for the issue. Try to achieve spontaneity. Typically the session begins with an overview of the ground rules, a description of why the session is being conducted, and an opening question that each person can answer in order to get engaged in the sharing procedure.

**Selecting the Participants**

Participant selection requires thought and planning. Individuals are selected because they possess certain social, economic, educational, or demographic characteristics. Attention is usually placed on obtaining a relatively homogeneous group with similar characteristics and background. Determine the audience you are interested in and use these characteristics as selection criteria.

Audience selection is of particular concern in doing focus groups within the agricultural community. Fairly often we are interested in reaching new clientele; those who have not participated in past educational opportunities. Our typical planning strategy is to ask existing users why non-users are not involved. This procedure has some value, but more often than not, it will simply reinforce status quo methods and marketing. Focus group procedures would call for a series of interviews with homogeneous groups of non-participants. A series of focus group interviews with these new audiences would likely shed valuable insights as to the conditions surrounding their potential future participation.

An area of concern is getting people to actually attend the group interview session. In the private sector the market research firm will offer a gift, a meal, or a financial incentive to participants. There has been some hesitation in the public sector about paying participants $15 to $20 or more to attend a group meeting, and yet this procedure has proven to be effective. You are asking for information, for their insights and opinions and participants may be more willing to share if they receive something in return. Generally it is wise to over-recruit for focus group interviews. Typically 15 individuals will be invited and 8 to 12 will actually participate.

**The Need for Skillful Moderators**

Much of the effectiveness of focus group interviews depends on the skills of the moderator. The skillful moderator makes the group feel

comfortable, relaxed and creates a thoughtful permissive atmosphere. Encouragement is given to respondents to provide answers that are complete in order to achieve the most accurate description of their viewpoints. Skillful moderators know when to probe for greater depth of response and when to move on to the next category of questions. In addition the moderator should have an adequate background knowledge of the topic being discussed. The primary task of the moderator is to draw out the perceptions and opinions of all participants without undue influence from dominant individuals. The goal is to achieve the friendly informal atmosphere that is a delicate balance between being people-oriented and task-oriented. Beginning moderators would be well advised to review relevant literature [3], seek opportunities to observe expert interviewers, and learn from practice.

**Analysis of the Focus Group Session**

Focus group discussions are typically tape recorded. The need for tape recording is explained to the participants at the beginning of the session. Attention is placed on stressing that each person's comments are important and should be recorded and yet confidentiality of responses will be maintained by the moderator. When resources permit, the recordings are transcribed and the written manuscript is used for later analysis. This transcription tends to be expensive and in practice many moderators replay the recording and consult their notes as they prepare a summary of each group interview session.

**A Healthy Respect for Limitations**

As with any evaluation tool it is important to be aware of the limitations and potential misuses. This technique can yield insightful descriptions of how individuals perceive potential programs or products but it cannot indicate the extent of those opinions. Just because 9 out of 10 individuals in the group interview support the concept, it does not mean that 90% of the population will have similar feelings. In a number of situations the focus group procedure is used as the first step in determining the range of perceptions. This is then followed by a quantified survey procedure to systematically sample a larger group and measure the extent of those options. If it is important to determine how many people have certain opinions, then quantified survey tools must be used to supplement the focus group interviews.

**How it is Being Used**

Staff members of the Minnesota Extension Service have conducted several focus group interviews and have been impressed within the results. In one of the more extensive studies, focus groups were conducted on a potential course offering — teaching computer skills to farmers. We had expertise and the capability to teach such a course but we also had doubts about how it would be received by consumers. Focus groups revealed some valuable perceptions that significantly altered our plans for teaching the course. The participating farmers displayed a hesitancy to participate and use computer tools, primarily due to a fear of failure. The new technology seemed sophisticated, mysterious and a potentially unwise investment. Farmers provided very definite criteria as to how a potential course should be conducted, specifically in relation to travel distance, need for hands on experience and a desire for practical and simple instruction. As a result the plans for offering the course went back to the drawing board for revision. The interview process did require some resources but had we not had the information, a costly program would have been offered which would have missed the mark. [4]

Focus group interviews have also been conducted with community leaders in Southeast Minnesota on Extension's role in minimizing groundwater pollution. Other county staff have used the technique to determine perceptions of education lessons on civic awareness, qualities of successful 4-H clubs, and reasons for participation in Extension home study groups. In each situation the moderators were pleased with the breadth and quality of information resulting from the interviews.

**Focus Group Interviewing in Agricultural Programs**

Focus group interviewing has enormous potential for those who plan and conduct educational programs in agriculture. Potential programs could be tested with focus groups before they were offered, and then revised, if necessary to ensure that the programs were on target. In addition, focus groups can offer valuable clues as to how to advertise the educational opportunity or how to reach new clientele. The focus group technique fits nicely into the traditional way that farmers share information. Farmers typically enjoy the opportunity to share ideas or concerns, and focus groups provide a comfortable and relaxed opportunity to gain insights as to future educational programs in agriculture.

**How to Learn More About Focus Group Interviewing**

The University of Minnesota Office of Special Programs, 475 Coffey Hall, St. Paul Campus, has several resources available on focus group interviewing. One helpful publication is "Focus Group Interviewing: Step by Step Instructions for Extension Workers" which is available from

OSP for $7.50. In addition the Office of Special Programs is offering 2 day workshops where adult educators can gain an intensive, yet practical introduction to the technique. Focus group interviewing will also be taught at the Minnesota Extension Summer School in Duluth during June 22-27, 1986, in a 2 credit AgEd Course "Interview and Observation Methods". Additional graduate level courses in focus group interviewing can be available through the Division of Agricultural Education, University of Minnesota.

**Summary**

Our experiences would underscore the value of focus group interviews. It is relatively low cost, it yields valuable insights as to participant response to current or potential programs, and it can be used with successful results even when staff have limited group interviewing skills.

**Footnotes**

1. Danny N. Bellenger, Kenneth L. Bernhardt, and Jac L. Goldstucker, "Qualitative Research Techniques: Focus Group Interviews" *Qualitative Research in Marketing* (Chicago: American Marketing Association, 1976) pp. 7-28.

2. Raymond D. Stother, "Voters' Bias Shuts Door on Female Leaders," Minneapolis Star and Tribune, July 2, 1984, p. 9A

3. Noteworthy references include:
   William H. Banaka, *Training in Depth Interviewing* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971)
   Raymond L. Gorden, *Interviewing Strategy, Techniques and Tactics* Homewood, Illinois: Dorsey Press, 1969)
   James B. Higginbotham and Keith K. Cox, *Focus Group Interviews* (Chicago: American Marketing Association, 1979)
   Robert K. Merton, et al., *The Focused Interview* (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1956)
   Michael Q. Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation Methods* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1980)

4. Nora Leven, "Computer Education Needs for an Agricultural Application," Office of Special Programs, Agricultural Extension Service, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, 1983.

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