

## Strategies for Conducting Effective Focus Groups

The following guidelines related choosing participants for focus groups can help to generate information that is more reliable.

### Include People Who Can Provide the Information You Need

Data collection involves asking the appropriate people for the appropriate information. Suppose you want to learn about parents' attitudes and practices concerning teen alcohol use, and drinking and driving? You obviously want to ask parents. But you also might want to consider the following:

- Should parents have children of a certain age in order to participate? (for example, no younger than 15?)
- Do you want to include both mothers and fathers?
- Does the ethnicity of the parents make a difference?
- Should you include parents who drink and nondrinking parents?

Try to define your participants as precisely as possible. It usually makes sense to consider gender, age, occupation, geographic location, ethnicity, and language.

### Include Participants Who Are Similar to One Another

The less diverse your focus group, the better. If you want to gather information on Hispanic teenagers, teens who have recently emigrated from Somalia, and teens in the "heavy metal" subculture, organize individual focus groups for each category.

There are two reasons for this:

- An individual cannot represent a population. A focus group of 10 teenagers might not be able to provide a representative sample of all teens in your community. But it will probably generate more representative information than will one teenager included in a group spanning several generations.
- Research shows that people are more likely to reveal their opinions and beliefs and to talk about sensitive issues when they are with people who they perceive to be like themselves.

### Include Participants Who Do Not Know One Another

Participants are more likely to be honest and forthcoming when they do not know the other people in the group. The following may occur when participants know one another:

- They are less likely to reveal personal or sensitive information.
- They are more likely to express views that conform to those of others in the group (especially others whom they perceive as having some power or influence outside the group).
- They may respond to questions based on their past experiences with one another (which effectively reduces your sample size).

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