

Virtual Focus Groups in Extension: A Useful Approach to Audience Analysis

Abstract

As change agents, Extension educators may begin their program planning by identifying the audience's perceived barriers and benefits to adopting some behavior that will benefit the community. Extension professionals and researchers have used in-person focus groups to understand an audience, and they can also administer them as technology-based virtual focus groups. This article discusses the benefits and disadvantages of using this methodology and presents recommended best management practices.

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Introduction

Extension educators encourage behavioral changes in their community as part of their programming. They often seek to identify their audience's perceived barriers and benefits to certain behaviors, with a goal of emphasizing the benefits and reducing the barriers. This is one part of a comprehensive social marketing plan that leads to behavior change (McKenzie-Mohr, 2011). In short, we need to find out what is preventing our audience from adopting some behavior and what would encourage them to adopt it as providing the knowledge of how to do something is not always enough. This analysis of a specific audience is a critical step that should be undertaken as part of Extension program planning in any field. Focus groups are one way to achieve this.

We use focus groups to collect meaningful qualitative data about a particular topic, such as how a group feels about a particular behavior. They generally consist of no more than a dozen participants who discuss an established topic for 1 to 2 hours (Appleton, 2013). People have used focus groups for nearly a century (Appleton), and a relatively new method of understanding one's audience is the *virtual focus group*. The goals for a virtual focus group are the same as those for a traditional focus group, yet participants don't need to be in the same room, or even the same country. We can conduct virtual focus groups in real-time using computer-based technology, or lead them asynchronously (Appleton). Others have successfully used learning management systems such as

WebCT, Blackboard (Turney & Pocknee, 2005), and other platforms such as chat rooms and videoconference technology (Oringderff, 2004).

Some of the benefits of using a virtual as opposed to traditional focus group are the potential to include a greater number of participants with fewer time constraints (Oringderff, 2004), reduced cost associated with this research, and an increased accessibility to participants (Appleton, 2013). Another advantage to using virtual focus groups includes an increased anonymity that leads to greater levels of honesty from group members (Appleton). Participants may also be more willing to join in the focus group when they can do so from their location (Oringderff, 2004).

In addition to the standard challenges associated with the use of any technology-based method, there are some disadvantages to virtual focus groups. The nature of this method can lead to more disagreement within the group caused by an enhanced sense of freedom of expression and a lack of visual cues (Appleton, 2013; Oringderff, 2004). Further, this method limits participants' interactions with each other and the moderator. Additionally, virtual focus groups exclude non-computer users; if much of the target audience does not have access to a computer, this may not be the most appropriate method.

Guidelines

Recently, a number of best management practices for conducting virtual focus groups have emerged in the literature (Appleton, 2013; Gamon, 1992; Oringderff, 2004; Turney & Pocknee, 2005). The following list presents a summary of some of the experts' key recommendations for successfully conducting a virtual focus group. To ensure that the audience analysis runs smoothly and produces quality data:

- Use a moderator or team that is collectively skilled at selecting individuals for participation, crafting and ordering quality questions, moderating group discussions, and analyzing responses;
- Select technology that is available from your institution and familiar to you;
- Plan to recruit more members you think you need, and consider offering an incentive to encourage participation;
- Use a group that is large enough to provide diversity in opinion but small enough that individuals have an opportunity to share;
- Make time limitations, expectations, and procedures clear to all participants and moderator(s) well ahead of time;
- Use individuals that are comfortable using the technology and willing to follow instructions;
- Develop a timeline for discussion that is no longer than approximately 90 minutes;
- Manage the discussion using a trained and experienced moderator when possible; at a minimum, review methods used by other facilitators and have your protocol and script reviewed by others

beforehand;

- Use a moderator that can maintain control of the group and the technology; and
- Ensure that the discussion stays focused.

Conclusion

This article described a relatively new method of audience analysis. Virtual focus groups should be considered as a needs assessment tool for Extension, especially when the target audience is difficult to access (Turney & Pocknee, 2005). Virtual focus groups are a way to connect with individuals who are geographically distant from one another, unable to travel to a meeting site, or unavailable to meet the time constraints associated with using a public facility. Extension professionals may find this method desirable when assessing the barriers and benefits perceived by audiences such as: small business owners who cannot leave their place of business during the day; national, international, statewide, or otherwise broadly distributed groups; those who may be more inclined to share information in group due to the anonymous nature of this method; and those who are physically unable to travel for any reason.

By following the guidelines from others who have used this method, Extension professionals can better understand their clients' perceptions and identify the barriers and benefits to adoption of a specific behavior.

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