Reviewing Your NRP Plan

Part 2
Tools: Focus Groups and Surveys

FOCUS GROUPS

What is a Focus Group?

A focus group is "a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment." It is about feelings, beliefs, perceptions and opinions. It is not a quantitative research method or a brainstorming session.

Focus Groups are especially useful for:

1. **Planning**
2. **Priority Setting**
3. **Strategy Reviews**

The purpose of focus groups is to:

Collect essential information about the opinions and interests of neighborhood residents.

In addition they help:

- Educate Residents
- Spread Information
- Collect Opinions

What are the advantages of using a focus group?

1. **Provides an opportunity for obtaining in depth information**
2. **Helps develop survey questions**
3. **Allows the observation and recording on non-verbal communications**
4. **Can be conducted inexpensively**
5. **Results are readily available**
6. **Allows you to hear form a broad range of constituencies**
7. **Encourages the exchanging of ideas and the generation of new ones**
8. **It is more personal than a survey or some other techniques**

What are the limitations of focus groups?

1. **A facilitator is needed to conduct a group**
2. **Conversation can be difficult to control and easily diverted to niche issues**
3. **Time is limited**
4. **Assembling groups can be time consuming**
5. **Data can be difficult to analyze**

When should you use focus groups?

1. **Collecting opinions, beliefs and attitudes about issues of interest to the neighborhood organization**
2. **Checking out your assumptions**
3. **Encouraging discussion about a specific topic**
4. **Building energy, ideas and excitement about a topic**
5. **Providing an opportunity for the facilitator and participants to learn about a topic or issue**
   (First two are the most relevant for NRP)

How do you conduct a focus group?

1. **Determine why you are holding a focus group. This will help you define the purpose for the focus group a provide a frame of reference for the other steps. Clear purpose will help you:**

   - Get the information you need
   - Develop focused questions
   - Inform potential participants of the reasons for the group

2. **Establish a timeline – Planning should begin at least 6 weeks ahead of the actual session. The timeline should show when you will address each of the steps below:**

3. **Identify the participants – This includes:**

   - deciding how many participants you need and will have to invite,
   - identifying key attributes needed of participants,
   - brainstorming possible participants / participant categories. (Use guidelines such as “2 characteristics in common” and “homogeneity and heterogeneity” to refine the list and secure names and contact information.)
   - Suggested number of participants = 7 to 13
   - Number to be invited = 1.5 or 2.0 times the number in the final group

- 2 characteristics in common – participants should have at least 2 characteristics in common
- Homogeneity and Heterogeneity – need for some, but not too much variety in the group

4. Generate the questions to be asked.

- Questions should be either warm-ups or targeted.
- No more than 5 questions for a two-hour session.
- Questions should be : 1) open ended 2) focused 3) more from the general to the specific

5. Develop a script. Script should include:

- Opening - introduction and warm-up questions
- Questions – meat of the meeting
- Closing – wraps up the group

6. Select a Facilitator. Facilitator need not be a consultant but does:

- Set the tone for the group
- Make sure everyone gets a chance to be heard
- Gets full answers
- Probes responses
- Monitors time
- Keeps the discussion on track
- Maintain civility during the group meeting

The facilitator can be a:

- Volunteer
- Staff Member
- Consultant

7. Select an appropriate location. Access, comfort and message from the setting are important.

8. Conduct the focus group.

9. Interpret and report the results. Identify:

- Trends
- Surprises
- Quotes that make the review live

10. Write a report on the meeting.

11. Translate the results into action! Use in planning Phase II !

SURVEYS

What is a survey?

A survey is a method of collecting information from people about their ideas, feelings, plans, beliefs, and social, educational, and financial background.

What form does a survey take?

Usually, surveys take the form of questionnaires or in person or telephone interviews.

Questionnaires and interviews have many common features. Both rely on directly asking people questions to get information, need instructions to be clear, must be concerned with who will be asked the question (sampling), when and how often (design) and with the processing, analysis and interpretation of data.

Mailed, self-administered questionnaires are the cheapest method, followed by phone interviews

How is the information obtained in questionnaires and interviews?

By asking questions !! The questions may be either fixed or forced choice, or open ended.

Fixed choice is usually better because these responses:

- Can be scored quickly and objectively
- Are best at measuring complex behaviors
- Can have more than one right answer
- Are the least threatening of the question types

Is piloting a survey really necessary?

Yes. It helps produce a survey that is usable and will provide the information that you need. It identifies problems with question clarity, response ambiguity and the ability of respondents to follow the questionnaire or interview.

How high should the response rate be?

For a large, complex survey statistical procedures should be used to answer this question. For a simple survey of a limited population, the decision is "how many people must respond for the results to be believable"? Except when done statistically, the desired response rate is entirely subjective.

The general rule – higher is better

What are the steps involved in conducting an effective survey?

1. **Decide on the type of survey (i.e. mailed, questionnaire, telephone, or face to face interview)**
2. **Select the survey's content and questions and test the form.**
3. **Decide who should participate (i.e. every resident, heads of households, a sample of residents) and when (just once? each year for five years?)**
4. **Decide who will administer (i.e. conduct) the survey**
5. **Analyze and interpret the results**
6. **Report the results orally and in writing.**

How do you choose between questionnaires and interviews?

Questionnaires – limited responses to preset questions
Interviews – allow explanation, elaboration and information or respondent reactions

Six criteria that can be used:

1. **Reliability and validity: choose the method that is most precise and accurate for your purposes and situation.**
2. **Usefulness or credibility of results: find out which option potential respondents would see as least objectionable**
3. **Cost: Questionnaires are usually less costly per population but generate a much lower response rate.**
4. **Anonymity: Questionnaires allow people to respond when they want and at their own speed. Interviews require more structure and reaction to the interviewer may bias responses.**
5. **Complexity of Information: Interviews allow explanations and probing. Questionnaires do not.**

What do I need to know about survey content?

As a starter, to select the content you have to define that attitude, belief or idea being measured.

Choose content that people will give you because they remember details, events or issues and can and will give you a response.

Survey items may be closed or open-ended. Closed items are easier to score – open-ended questions are opportunities to state a position in the respondents' own words – but they may not be easy to interpret.

When writing closed-end questions use simple sentences and language; keep questions concrete and close to the respondents' experience; be aware of words, names, and views that may bias responses; check your own biases at the door; do not get personal; use a single thought in each question.

How do I decide what content to include?

Include content that collects information on what you want to know. Don't ask for information that you can't act on.

What is the form of a survey item?

Items may be phrased as questions, or statements.

What form can closed-ended (fixed or forced choice) items take?

Responses to these types of questions can take the form of:

- Yes / No
- Checklists
- Rating Scales

Rating scales usually ask respondents' to make comparisons in the form of ranks (1=top, 10=bottom) or continuums (1=definitely agree; 2=agree; 3=disagree; 4=definitely disagree)

How long should a survey form be?

It should only be long enough to give you the information you need. Self-administered questionnaires and phone interviews should be 30 minutes or less and contain the fewest items. Face to face interviews can be up to an hour and include many questions.

How do I start the survey?

1. **Always begin with an introduction. The introduction states who you are, why you are calling, the purpose of the survey, and how long you expect the interview/completion of the questionnaire to take.**
2. **Focus the first question on the topic you are asking about.**
3. **Next question should be objective oriented.**
4. **Subjective questions can follow.**
5. **Move from the most familiar (i.e. the respondents' knowledge of what NRP has done in their neighborhood) to the more general (what NRP has done for the City).**
6. **Be careful about the ordering of questions! The response to one may bias the response to the next.**
7. **Place easy to answer (such as demographic) questions at the end.**
8. **Questions that may be controversial or sensitive should be placed toward the end.**
9. **Be logical in the progression of your questions.**

Does it matter how a questionnaire looks?

Absolutely! Poor layout can confuse or irritate respondents.

Some guidelines include:

- Put one question on a line with plenty of space for responses
- Have enough space to make appropriate marks
- On branching questions be sure the path to take is clear

How can I maximize responses to self-administered questionnaires?

1. **Send respondents' a pre-letter informing them that a survey is coming and detailing its purpose.**
2. **Prepare a short formal letter to accompany the questionnaire. It should again describe the survey aims and participants.**
3. **Offer to send respondents a summary of the results.**
4. **If you ask questions that may be contrived as personal, explain why they are needed.**
5. **Keep the questionnaires as short as possible.**
6. **Consider incentives that may encourage people to respond.**
7. **Be prepared to follow-up and send reminders.**

How would we do interviews?

First, select interviewers that fit in well with the respondents. Use interviewers who can speak clearly and understandably. Provide extensive training to interviewers.

For the interview:

- Make a brief introduction
- Impress the person being interviewed with the importance of the interview and answers
- Be flexible
- Interview people alone.
- Ask questions as they appear in the interview schedule. Same questions – same way
- Follow the instructions given in training and on the interview form.
- Monitor progress

To sample or not to sample – that is the question

The answer depends on:

- How quickly data are needed
- What type of survey is planned
- Cost
- Credibility of findings
- Familiarity with sampling methods

What are the types of samples?

Probability* and *Non-Probability

- Probability sample means everyone has an equal chance of being chosen. Produces a representative sample.
- Non- probability samples target specific populations or groups. They are not intended to be representative of a general population.

How do you do a probability sample?

Probability sample should mirror the population to which the survey findings will be applied.

The most common methods are:

- Simple random sample
- Stratified random sample
- Simple random cluster

How do you do a simple random sample, and what are the advantages and disadvantages?

Arrange the population (i.e. all addresses in the neighborhood, all property owners etc.) in any order. Use a random number table to select which members of the population are in the sample.

Advantages:

- Simplest of all sampling methods
- Easy to use tables for drawing a random sample and readily available
- Computer programs can draw random samples for you

Disadvantages:

- Produces greater standard errors in the results
- Cannot be used if you want to break respondents into sub-groups or strata

For a telephone random sample the "+1" approach is a good one to use – select the numbers randomly but add "1" to the last digit (i.e. 474-5276 is drawn but 474-5277 is called)

What is a stratified random sample and its advantages?

Stratified random samples first subdivide the population into subgroups or strata and then select respondents from the subgroups for the sample.

Advantages:

- More precise than simple random sampling
- Allows samples to be chosen that represent various groups in the population

Disadvantages:

- Requires more effort than simple random sampling
- Usually requires a larger sample size to produce statistically meaningful results. (20 person minimum)

What is a simple random cluster sampling

Simple random cluster sampling is often used for convenience – samples organizational units or groups (i.e. block clubs). Presupposes that the population is organized into natural or predifined clusters or groups.

Advantages:

- Can be used when it is unethical or inconvenient to randomly select individuals
- Administrative simplicity

Disadvantages:

- Not Mathematically efficient

What are the different non-probability sampling methods?

Systemic, Accidental* and *Purposeful

- Systemic – pick a unit and use that unit as the basis for selecting from a list
- Accidental – interview people that are both available and cooperative
- Purposive – Selection is based on “knowledge” (i.e. key informants)

How large should a sample be?

- **Size can be determined using statistical methods, or by what number of respondents’ will be credible.**
- **Should be large enough to be representative of the population from which it comes.**
- **Sub-groups differences should be discoverable.**
- **Confidence at 95 percent should be the target (i.e. 95% chance that the population and sample will be the same, 5% chance that they will not)**
- **In general the size should yield useful data.**
- **For neighborhoods, a 5% sample of the population will usually be more than enough to generate credibility and comparability.**

How does response rate affect the results of sampling?

Simply stated, the lower the response rate, the lower the credibility of the results and the approximation of the population.