

Tips for Facilitating Focus Groups For a Local Church Communications Audit

Set a time and place convenient to getting the people you want.

Include a snack and beverage

Consider having two facilitators. Everyone hears different things and hears things differently. It's advantageous to have two sets of ears and sets of notes.

In selecting facilitators, decide who people will respond to most openly and who is good with groups. The pastor may be good with groups but it is unlikely the focus group will speak openly. If the groups feel like they may hurt the feelings for the person responsible for communications, again, he/she may not be the best choice.

Set a time frame – probably one hour – and *stick* to it. Do not go over the promised time.

Keep focus groups rather homogeneous – that is, mostly of the same age range, lifestyle, level of involvement. The key here is that everyone feels free to talk and not intimidated by the presence of others, plus it's easier to look at responses demographically. However, you know your congregation, this may not be an issue. This also means the pastor is not to be present. Sorry.

Consider 10-12 attendees per group, as more than that may limit the number of questions getting asked. You may have to invite more people in order to get that number of course.

Invite persons via a letter from the pastor. Include a way for them to respond by a certain deadline. Follow up if no response is received. Send a reminder about the meeting at least 2 days in advance either by a card, phone call, or email.

Consider tape recording the conversations for accuracy.

Open with an explanation of the purpose of the focus group, saying you are conducting the group on behalf of the whole church; that anything they say will be held in strictest confidence; and explain process and procedure (everyone is invited to talk but they won't be called upon to talk, however, it is to the survey's advantage to have the opportunity to hear everyone's opinions). All opinions are to be respected.



Give or have someone prepared to offer a prayer.

Begin by asking one of the questions. Offer very little discussion but encourage discussion by the group. The facilitator's job is to get responses and not to share opinions.

If a different question than written seems appropriate due to discussion, ask it but know it may cut out another planned question, so know the most important questions or desired outcome from the outset.

If someone dominates, say something like, "Those are very good observations, let's also hear from someone else."

If discussion isn't going in a helpful direction, say something like, "I know there is more that can be said on this subject but in the interest of time, let's move on and you can always email responses to us later."

Facilitators should not attempt to answer questions they are not sure of the answer to or which do not pertain to communications. Instead, they can say they will be sure to pass along the question to the appropriate person. DO note the question, however.

Quite often when talking about communications, other issues will arise – complaints about a person not responding in a timely fashion to their needs, ministry or worship that doesn't connect with them, and so forth. Note these but don't allow the group to dwell too long on them or for it to become a complaint session. Those things are probably communications issues, just not the kind of communications the audit intended to look at. If something becomes a theme in multiple focus groups, it may need to show up in the findings.

Look for questions that would be good to add to the written and online surveys.

Following all the focus groups, facilitators need to brief the communications person, committee, pastor on what they heard, keeping identities anonymous if that was what was promised.