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Using Focus Groups to Understand What New Residents Want and Need in a Community

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Focus Groups

Using Focus Groups to Understand What New Residents Want and Need in a Community

If you want to find out what new residents are looking for in a community, you need to ask them. An effective way to do this is to conduct a focus group.

A focus group is a structured discussion with preselected individuals. The goal is to collect information or gauge opinion on a specific issue or idea. The group is led by an impartial facilitator in a comfortable, nonthreatening environment.

Focus groups are traditionally used in market research to determine consumer opinions of products or services. In community development work, focus groups provide a way to learn, build trust, problem solve, and, ultimately, influence strategic community planning and development.

Focus group interviews typically last about two hours and involve a small group of individuals (between five and 15). Communities might want to target a certain age group of new residents, such as young families or early retirees, or they may want a mix of ages and demographic characteristics to get a broader understanding of what new residents want in a community. Sometimes it is helpful to also hold a focus group with established, longtime residents to compare and contrast the responses — new residents vs. longtime residents.

Benefits

Focus groups provide an opportunity for individuals to express their views in detail, to hear the opinions of others, and to collectively develop suggestions about community issues. Since focus groups are based on open communication and critical deliberation, they can lead to improved community relations, trust, and a sense of ownership in the process and outcome.

Limitations

A focus group has several limitations:

- Focus groups do take some time and may require other resources in the preparation, gathering of the information, and reporting.
- Finding and selecting the participants, creating the interview discussion guide, and recruiting an effective facilitator can be a challenge.
- Focus group findings are often difficult to record, analyze, or summarize because of their conversational nature.
- Since focus groups involve such a small number of participants, it is often difficult to generalize the results to the larger community. To counter this, an additional survey (either online or a traditional mail survey) could be sent to a larger sample of new residents. A survey, which uses multiple choice or open-ended questions, could be an excellent follow-up to focus groups, especially if new questions are raised as a result of the focus group discussion.

What Are the Steps in a Focus Group?

Step 1: Clearly define the purpose

One of the most important steps in conducting a focus group is having a clearly defined purpose. In this case, it is finding out what new residents are looking for when they relocate to a new community. But often that general purpose can be fine-tuned.

- Does the community want to know if its website and social media locations are highlighting the right community assets?
- Is it easy for potential new residents to get relocation information to help answer their questions?

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- What role do major employers play in showcasing the community? Having clarity of purpose, goals, and objectives directly affects the quality of the focus group process and outcome.

Step 2: Identify and clarify the role of the facilitator

An effective facilitator is critical to the success of a focus group. This individual should be perceived as neutral and be able to direct the discussion without influencing participants or expressing personal views.

The facilitator begins the discussion, poses appropriate follow-up questions, asks for clarification when necessary and allows the conversation to move in new directions while ensuring the discussion is relevant to the topic. The facilitator should also be able to redirect the conversation when it is becoming negative or unproductive and be skilled at keeping the group on task.

Step 3: Develop the discussion or interview guide

Prior to convening the focus group, create a discussion guide with a:

- specific introduction — explaining the purpose and how the information will be used
- body — main questions to be addressed
- conclusion — share the target date for reporting back to the group and community

The body of the discussion guide will typically consist of about three to seven questions based on the group's purpose, goals, or objectives. If multiple focus groups are being conducted on the same topic, each group should follow the same general discussion guide so that information can be compared among the groups.

When the guide is being developed, start with questions that are nonthreatening and easy to answer so participants become comfortable with talking in the group setting. Estimate how much time each portion of the discussion will take and plan for no more than two hours total. Provide an opportunity for all involved to review and comment on the results of the session. This can be done by providing a summary copy of the discussion by mail or email to the participants.

Developing Questions

Creating effective questions is critical to the outcome of the focus group. It is important to incorporate different types of questions to produce varying responses from the participants. Questions typically focus on behaviors, opinions, values, feelings, or knowledge.

Sample introductory questions in the guide could include:

- To get started, let's introduce ourselves. In your introduction, can you please tell us who you are, the community where you currently live as well as the community that you left? Did anyone move with you?
- Were any of you former residents of this community?
- Have you lived in a rural community before, and if so, where?

The main body questions might include:

- How did you discover this community?
- Describe what attracted you to this community. As a new resident, what do you see as the community's assets? What are some of the areas that might need improvement?
- As a new resident, did you feel welcomed? Please describe the ways the community either helped you feel welcome or could have helped welcome you.
- Images are used in many ways to market communities. What are some images that positively represent this community? (note: ideas/suggestions can be shared or photographs currently being used in marketing materials can be shown and feedback recorded)
- Does the community slogan or logo accurately reflect the community? As a new resident, what should it say?

A concluding question could be:

- What advice would you give to communities in developing strategies to attract new residents?

Step 4: Identify and recruit participants

Finding new residents can be relatively easy in small communities and a bit more difficult in larger ones. In a very small community, a few people

might brainstorm a list of new residents at the local coffee shop.

In larger communities, real estate agents, the school system, and utility providers all have access to lists of new residents but confidentiality issues typically prohibit giving out the contact information. Some communities have gotten around this issue by asking new residents signing up for their utilities to also sign a form allowing them to share their contact information with the local welcome wagon and to be a part of a local focus group looking at perceptions of new residents.

Another way to find new residents is to use the local media, newspaper, TV, and radio, as well as social media, and encourage people to volunteer to be a part of a focus group. Major employers, and local churches and organizations can also announce the opportunity.

One caution about recruiting new residents: Think about who should be targeted. For instance, does the community just want to hear the opinions of young families or do they want to hear from a mix of age groups? If representation reflecting the whole community is desired, the community needs to recruit in a way that provides the focus groups with diversity of ages, employment, culture, and race.

The number of focus groups needed depends on the size of the community. A rule of thumb is that when the responses sound similar from one session to the next, you know that you have captured the main themes — some communities evaluate the responses after three sessions to see if they need to conduct more. Another approach is to have the community conduct several separate focus groups that represent different viewpoints. Both methods work.

Once participants are identified, the written invitation should detail the purpose of the focus group, how the results will be used, and a reminder of the date and location. It is also helpful to address confidentiality issues — what is shared in the focus group, stays in the focus group. Again, the ideal number of participants per focus group is between five and 15 individuals.

Step 5: Prepare for the meeting

Plan the meeting at a time that is agreeable to all at a neutral meeting place. Focus groups work particularly well when participants are seated in a circle so they can see each other. Provide resources for participants such as notepaper and pens, name tags or name tents, and refreshments. The facilitator should have access to colored markers, flip chart paper, and possibly an assistant to help take notes or capture information on a flip chart. Sometimes the conversation is digitally recorded, but keep in mind that recording can change the group dynamics so consent should be sought before the meeting begins.

Step 6: Begin and facilitate the focus group

First, introduce the facilitator and welcome the participants. Agree on ground rules and an agenda. Consider including these basics in your ground rules:

- Speak one at a time.
- Speak for yourself, not what you think others believe.
- Differing opinions are expected and we may not agree on everything.

Make sure that every participant has an opportunity to speak and respond. Encourage discussion among participants and don't allow one person to dominate the conversation. Consider having a note taker sit in the room or have the facilitator write key ideas generated on a flip chart. Using the discussion guide, follow-up questions should be posed that encourage description and depth by avoiding yes/no inquiries.

Be careful when asking "why" questions as they may cause participants to feel defensive. Consider probing questions that will give participants a chance to provide further detail to their ideas, such as the following:

- Could you tell us more about that?
- Could you give us an example?
- What do you mean by …?

When the session has ended, reflect back by giving a summary of what was said or implied. At the end of the focus group, offer participants the option to comment on the findings or receive a copy of the report.

Step 7: Analyze the data

Review the notes and the audio recording, if it is available. Pick out all important key words, quotes, and ideas, and group them into categories or central themes.

Step 8: Report the findings

Structure the report with a background of the project or issue, a description of the process the group followed to develop the focus group, and a summary of the findings. Allow participants of the focus group an opportunity to comment on the findings to ensure you captured the comments, opinions, and ideas accurately. Report back to both the participants and the community about what was learned. This reassures participants that they were heard and that their views were accurately recorded. Offer both a detailed report and an executive summary so that the most vital information is easily accessible.

Using the Information for Community Development

The simple process of listening to new residents' perceptions can create significant insights for community stakeholders that can be incorporated into a variety of community improvement efforts. When the results are shared, one can almost expect to hear longtime residents saying, "I had no idea someone would view it that way" or "They see it as being a community asset while I just take it for granted."

New residents are critically important to a community's future workforce. Using focus groups to take the pulse of current new residents is one way a community can be more aware of what potential new residents are looking for as they shop for a new community.

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The Focus Group Checklist

- ○ Get consensus on the focus group goals, purposes or objectives. Check with the organizing group before you begin so that all involved are aware and comfortable with the goals.
- ○ Develop a discussion guide. This allows for questions to be carefully considered before the focus group meets and for consistency and comparability between more than one focus group.
- ○ Ensure a neutral environment; pay close attention to the location and time.
- ○ Find an effective facilitator who is seen as neutral by all participants.
- ○ Ensure adequate representation of all interested or affected parties.
- ○ Clearly record, identify, and summarize themes, topics, and action items, and verify accuracy of the information reported.
- ○ Report back to the group and community with an evaluation and summary that is clear and succinct.