Focus Group Facilitator's Guide

Step 1  Preparation

• Room Set-Up
  Arranging a proper meeting room will keep everyone alert and comfortable. The lighting
  should be bright. Remember low light = low energy. If one table is not adequate to seat all
  participants, arrange tables in a horseshoe so that everyone can see and hear each other
  easily.

• Provisions
  Provide a tablet of paper and a pen for each attendee, and supply beverages. Coffee, tea,
  soft drinks and bottled water are nice touch. If you are sampling new menu items, be sure to
  have adequate utensils on hand, as well as extra napkins, plates, and glasses.

• Name Tags
  Name tags are essential. People feel more comfortable when the pressure to remember
  names is eliminated. Select large self-adhesive tags or pin-on badges that allow first names
  to be printed in letters large enough to be read from a distance of 10 feet.

• Menus and Marketing Materials
  Have your current menus on hand for easy reference. If you're having a focus group to
  assess a new menu have enough mock-ups on hand for everyone and provide copies of
  your old menus for comparison.

• Recording
  You will want to take notes on key points as you lead the discussions, but a back-up tape
  recording will be invaluable to review after the program. Tape recordings are a very effective
  way to capture the nuances and details of the session and to share the proceedings with
  others on your management team. If possible, have a digital clock on the table set at 12:00
  when you start recording. When significant conversations occur and you cannot capture the
  essence in writing, make a note of the time so you can easily find the section on the tape
  and replay it after the session.

• Thank-you Gifts
  Have your thank-you gifts prepared in advance. Gift Certificates should be presented in an
  attractive envelope with the participant's name on the outside. A personalized note is a nice
  addition. Have a few extras on hand. It's not uncommon for a participant to bring an
  unexpected guest to your session. Be gracious and be prepared.

Step 2  Opening Protocols

• Greeting
  Greet your guests immediately. If your restaurant is open during your focus group, instruct
  the host or hostess on how to greet and direct focus group participants to the correct
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location. Be on hand to personally greet your guests and instruct them about name tags and seating.

- **Introduction**
  Introduce yourself. Sounds elementary, but many people forget this important step. Don't assume anything. Give highlights of your professional background and schooling prior to your current position. Depending on your own style and personality, a bit of information about your personal life may be appropriate. Practice your introduction until it is memorized, polished and natural. First impressions will set the tone for the session. Be poised, friendly and sincere. And of course, remember to smile and make eye contact with each of the participants.

- **Thank you**
  Thank your customers for participating in the Focus Group. Again, participants will take their cues from your level of professionalism. Articulate how much you appreciate their attendance and the importance of their candid comments. Ask them to consider each question carefully, and to give open, honest feedback. This is not the time to be politically correct. You want to know what they are really thinking.

- **Agenda and Timeline**
  Go over the agenda for the session and the timeline for each part. If you have refreshments available in the room, tell your participants that they may help themselves throughout the session. If you wish to conduct a more formal session, have refreshment brought in during scheduled breaks. Advise your attendees of these breaks in advance. Assure your participants that it is your intention to stay on schedule.

**Step 3   Ice Breakers**

- **Participant Introductions and Background**
  The easiest ice breaker is to simply ask your participants to introduce themselves and offer some additional information such as a favorite hobby, how long they've lived in the area, what do or did for a living. Proceed around the table starting with the person to your immediate left.

- **Dining Out Patterns**
  Ask each participant to describe their dining out habits, e.g., how many meals per day, how many days per week, special occasions, fast food, dinner only, for business only, etc. Proceed around the table starting with another person. Vary your starting point with each round of questions or exercises throughout the focus group so each person has a chance to go first—and last.

- **Dining Out Experiences**
  Ask each participant to describe their most unusual dining out experience, best service, worst service, celebrity spotting, funniest incident, etc.

- **Favorite Meal**
  Ask each participant to describe their perfect meal in less than 1 minute.
Ice breakers serve two purposes. First, in order for people to feel comfortable speaking freely in a group, they need to know something about the others. This first round of questions is meant to be very casual and unintimidating. Conduct as many ice breakers as necessary. Some groups mesh easily after one question. You be the judge.

Second, by selecting questions related to the dining out process, you get some background on the kinds of individuals who are your best customer. What if you discovered that the majority of the attendees had several traits in common like: level of education, a history of living in the midwest, recently retired, like to entertain their friends outside their home, or love organic vegetable gardening? This would give you valuable data about where to focus some target marketing in the future.

Step 4  The Session

• **Menu Items Session**
  Serve the item to be evaluated and allow the participants time to take several bites. You can start the first round of questions while they finish the item or you can let the participants finish sampling the item and fill out the rating card first.

  Again, proceed around the table, starting from with a different person each time. Minor interruptions are acceptable, but if participants start to interrupt consistently, advise them to make notes on their pad as a way to remind themselves of their points when it's their turn.

  After distributing the rating cards, proceed around the table and ask each participant to share their ratings and comments. Then ask the following questions:

  • *Would you order the item again?*
  • *Would you recommend it to others?*
  • *Would you like to see it added to our regular menu?*
  • *Was there anything you didn’t like about the menu item?*

• **General Sessions**
  Here are some sample questions to ask in a General Session Focus Group.

  • *What single entree would you like to see on our menu?*
  • *What single dessert would you like to see on our menu?*
  • *What’s the best thing about our restaurant?*
  • *What are your top 3 home prepared meal preferences (steak, chicken, seafood, pasta, etc.)?*
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- What price ranges do you target when eating out?
- Would you buy special coffee drinks like cappuccino, café latte, espresso?
- Who would you consider our closest competition?
- What is the biggest distinction between them and us?
- If you owned this restaurant, what single thing would you change?

Step 5  The Conclusion

- The Wrap-up
  A brief statement is in order once you have concluded the session. A sample is given below.

  SAMPLE CLOSING STATEMENT

  "That concludes our Focus Group Session for today (this evening). I'd like to thank you all for giving such careful and insightful answers to our questions. And we hope you had some fun in the process. Our goal is to deliver great value each time you visit us. Seeking the opinions of our best customers is an essential part of our commitment to that goal. Our success depends on it. We appreciate the opportunity to learn what you want and expect from us and thank you for your time. We have gift certificates for each of you as a token of our appreciation. Enjoy them with our best wishes. We look forward to seeing you again soon."

Step 6  The Results

- The Report
  As soon as possible write up your notes, then listen to the highlights of your tape and revise your notes as appropriate. Share the results at your next management meeting.