

# Market Research for Nutrition Professionals: Focus Group Discussions



Effective nutrition programs should meet the self-perceived needs of the target population, both in content and in delivery. Focus group discussions are a useful form of qualitative market research that can easily be used to provide feedback on the future acceptability of programs by identifying opinions, attitudes, perceptions and beliefs about specific behaviors, the factors influencing those behaviors, program ideas and intervention strategies, and for fine tuning actual program components prior to program implementation.

## A FOCUS GROUP:

- Is a directed discussion with six to eight individuals with similar characteristics representing your intended target audience (e.g., adults with Type 2 diabetes if you are designing a program for adults with Type 2 diabetes);
- Is directed by a moderator representative of the target group (to establish trust), trained to ask questions that stimulate group conversation and to practice unconditional positive regard, a technique that allows respondents freedom to make both negative and positive comments about the topic;
- Uses discussion questions that are carefully designed to address the primary purposes for the discussion such as program design, program name, curricula drafts, handouts, cultural appropriateness, acceptability and suggestions for improvement;
- Provides a non-threatening and non-evaluative climate;
- Allows respondents to talk in their own words about the issues;
- Allows the investigators to hear the attitudes, perceptions, beliefs and opinions of each group member, and allows for in-depth exploration of issues as they are raised; and
- May be audio or videotaped to facilitate analysis.

Depending upon program needs, one or more topics for focus group discussions can be planned. Usually two to three groups per topic, 1 to 1-1/2 hours long, will suffice, unless new material is uncovered requiring further elucidation. For example, one might plan two sets of focus groups for a new diabetes program. The first set may be used to identify the behaviors of interest and influences on these behaviors; the second set could evaluate program materials and delivery systems. Although the questions should be broad and open-ended (e.g., "tell me your concerns about your diabetes treatment plan"), additional probing questions should be planned in case the conversation does not explore issues thought to be important. In the diabetes example, a probe might inquire about specific diet concerns if none are raised in response to the more general questions.

The strength of focus groups is the use of discussions to generate information on all aspects of an issue that occur to people. Nutrition professionals can easily add market research via focus groups to each stage of program development. The combined results allow planners to rethink, reformat or otherwise adapt the proposed program to better meet the needs of the audience.

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## FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

Morgan DL & Krueger RA, eds. *The Focus Group Kit*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. 1997.