



TIPS & TRICKS FOR VIRTUAL FOCUS GROUPS

A set of lessons learned for conducting seamless, data rich virtual focus groups



A FEW KEY BENEFITS

Aside from all the wonderful benefits of a traditional focus group, a virtual discussion has its own added values.

- The online format might make it easier for participants to attend, as they do not need to factor in travel time or find child care.
- By bringing participants together virtually, geographic location is less of a barrier and schedule coordination can be easier.
- With participants joining from their own homes, there is no added financial or administrative burden to secure a physical space for the focus group.

FOCUS GROUPS FROM AFAR

An effective facilitator is critical to the success of a focus group. The role of the facilitator is to elicit rich discussion and obtain meaningful responses to the questions being asked. To do this, facilitators must establish a safe, non-judgmental environment and keep participants talking. This holds true for both in-person and virtual focus groups.

When we lead trainings on in-person focus groups, many of our tips and tricks for effective facilitation equally apply to virtual settings: having and reviewing a moderator's guide, building rapport from the start, honoring all opinions, strategically using silence, setting and maintaining ground rules, using non-leading questions and comments, and managing time. When it comes to virtual focus groups, some additional tips and tricks may help further strengthen your online discussions.

No Driving, Please!

Participants will join from a variety of locations. All communications about the group, including invitations and the consent form, should state that participants cannot drive while participating in the discussion and, if their video shows they are driving, they will be removed from the group until they are somewhere safe.



Explore how to...

Video call platforms offer different sets of features, so you'll want to explore the different capabilities before facilitating the call.



- Create & start a secure meeting
- Appoint a co-host
- Send a meeting invitation
- Record a meeting
- Mute and unmute yourself
- Turn your video off and on
- Open the participant window
- Use the chat function
- Share your screen
- Save & download chats

Foster a Safe Virtual Space

As a facilitator, it may be harder to read non-verbal cues that might indicate agreement, disagreement, or a desire to speak. You may also have to build in time for participants to mute and unmute. Sharing "tech tips" at the start can be a helpful way to ensure everyone knows how to engage in the discussion. To protect the privacy of group members and/or to share more sensitive topics, facilitators may encourage the use of headphones, the chat feature, and participating from somewhere more private, when possible.

Less is More

A virtual focus group is best with about half the participants of an in-person discussion. We have found that a group of five to six participants is ideal. The length of an ideal virtual discussion is also about half of an in-person group. Plan for the conversation to be no longer than one hour.

Learn Your Platform

Make sure you are well-versed in the functionality of your platform. This includes features that can add interactivity to your group, such as the chat function and polling. This also means taking the time to learn about security features, such as a waiting room, to ensure that you don't have unwanted visitors to your group. Having a second person to assist with managing the technology can help your group run more smoothly.

Try a "Slide Guide"

While you may certainly want a moderator's guide with a more detailed script for narrative, timing, questions, and extension questions, a simple set of slides can be a useful way of visually presenting the main question. With advanced screen sharing, the facilitator should be able to see the slides and the platform navigation window to manage the virtual call. The visual reminder of the questions can help participants process and remember the topic at hand.