

300 YEARS MAKES A DIFFERENCE: USING FOCUS GROUPS TO IMPROVE RECREATION MANAGEMENT EFFORTS

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Abstract: The purpose of this management presentation was to provide participants with a set of skills and knowledge background on how to best utilize focus groups to assist managers in improving their understanding of resource conditions, and management actions, as perceived by visitors. Methodologies describing research design, implementation, and qualitative data analysis were addressed.

Information was presented on the following components:

- 1) Purpose of focus groups
- 2) Conducting focus groups: advantages and limitations
- 3) Designing focus group questions
- 4) Recruiting participants
- 5) Principles of conducting focus groups
- 6) Facilitation of focus groups: skills and techniques used in the process
- 7) Effectively ending focus group sessions, debriefings, and follow-ups
- 8) Analyzing and reporting results from focus group sessions
- 9) Executive summary reports

The session ended with a facilitated focus group. Workshop participants were asked to volunteer in a focus group facilitated by the presenter. The session was intended as an opportunity to examine how focus groups are conducted, and how information provided by focus group members can be analyzed and incorporated into reports to assist managers in meeting their management goals.

Introduction

Focus groups comprised of visitors have tremendous potential to provide valuable information about facilities, parks, and wilderness areas to managers.

Focus groups are inexpensive and time-effective methods for understanding how visitors define experiences, and what they see as concerns or problems. Moreover, it gives insight into their opinions of managers. Research strongly indicates that the use of focus groups, in combination with surveys and interviews, is a useful tool in the effort to improve management of recreation areas. Focus groups operate under the following assumption: people have attitudes and perceptions about their environment that are often influenced by interactions with other people (Krueger, 1998). Although these attitudes and perceptions are both personal and strongly held, Albrecht (1993) suggests that a number of group members realize that their opinions are often reconstructed as a result of what they hear from others within the focus group. Data provided by focus groups can accurately predict visitor expectations of onsite conditions and management practices, which in turn, help resource/recreation managers develop successful strategies to maintain quality (Absher, McAvoy, Burdge & Gramann, 1988). Over the past several decades, focus groups have been utilized primarily for private-sector marketing purposes. More recently, they are being employed to address issues in natural resource management (Winter, Palucki & Burkhardt, 1999; Flood, 2001).

Purpose of focus groups: Is to generate open discussion about specific topics or questions that managers need to learn more about in order to better understand responses visitors may have to management actions, visitor perceptions of services provided, visitor opinions of managers, and have a better understanding of how visitors define quality experiences. Carefully selected focus group members can provide valuable evaluation input before, during, and after a program or service has been implemented.

Conducting focus groups - advantages and disadvantages: Focus groups provide valuable insights in a short period of time and are cost effective. When focus group members are carefully selected, powerful insights from individuals who are closest to the issues with vested interests are revealed. Once valuable information has been received, managers can facilitate responsive recreation planning while improving service delivery. One weakness of the focus group process is that samples are often too small which reduces

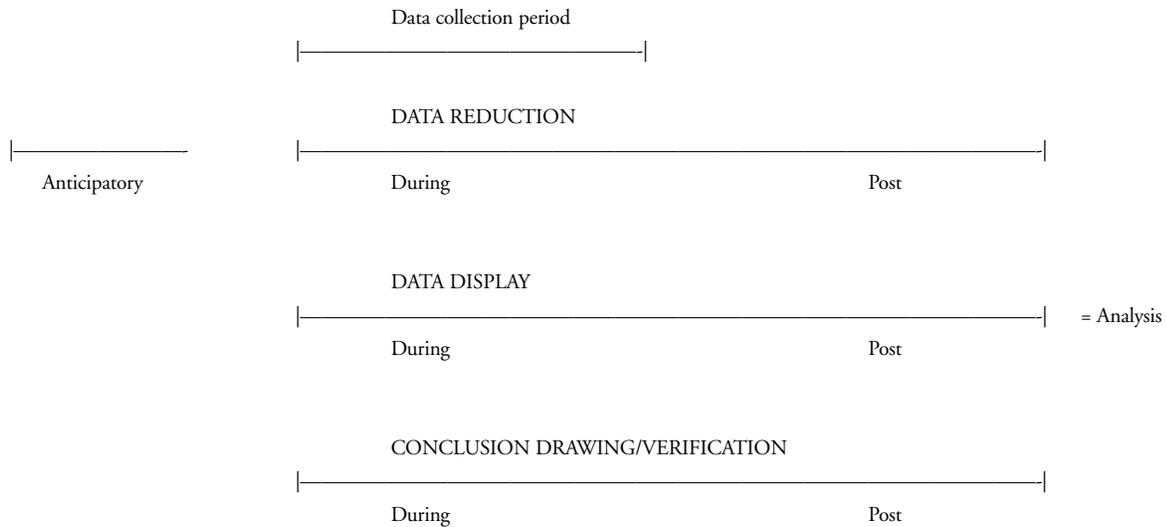


Figure 1. Components of Data Analysis: Flow Model (Miles & Huberman, 1994)

reliability. Secondly, members may be too conveniently selected (i.e., not reflecting the general populations' views). Results from social science research suggest that what people say may not always be reflected in their actions.

Designing focus group questions: The most critical issue for managers prior to the focus group session is determining precisely what they want to learn from members. If the management team is contemplating the use of focus groups, it should be driven by clearly written questions addressing specific issues that can assist managers in making more informed decisions. It is critical that managers a set of approximately five questions addressing specific concerns, conflicts, and public perception of managers.

Who should attend the focus group: The facilitator, eight to ten group members, a recorder (this person will ensure that the session is recorded on tape and that key points are written down), and an agency representative.

Recruiting participants: Above all, homogeneity is critical among group members. Focus groups are not intended to be debate sessions, but to offer opportunities for participants with similar interests and/or perspectives to share their perceptions. One strategy in identifying potential focus group members is to ask agency staff members to provide

a list of potential focus group participants. Also, letters can be sent to individuals throughout the area requesting their attendance in focus groups to address specific topic areas. Lists should reflect specific interest groups with an equal number of male and female participants. This is generally easy to accomplish with the help of agency personnel who are familiar with visitors with a long history of visiting the area. It is necessary to personally contact every member, send an invitation to attend the focus group, and include a map to the location (if needed), as well as a set of questions they should think about prior to the group meeting. Consent forms are used primarily for three purposes: To inform the group participant of the focus group goals, to get permission both to record the session and use his/her statements for research purposes, and to ensure that names and identities will remain anonymous.

Principles of conducting focus groups: Rules are clearly articulated to the members upfront by the facilitator regarding treatment of each other, and how the focus group will be conducted. It is important to emphasize that the role of the agency representative should be confined to acting primarily as an information provider. The agency representative should be an observer explaining the agency position and policies from a historical perspective and helping members understand how and why decisions have been made to achieve

specific goals. Due to an increasing number of legislative acts, managers are addressing many more complex issues each year that the public is often unaware of.

Facilitation of focus groups: skills and techniques used in the process: Select a group facilitator who is objective, and preferably not an agency employee. A skilled facilitator has the ability to keep the group focused on addressing a specific question, minimizing a member's ability to monopolize, and limiting the session to ninety minutes. The focus group experience, when facilitated properly, has enormous potential to empower members in knowing they are assisting in directing management.

Effectively ending focus group sessions, debriefings, and follow-ups: Limit the group meeting to ninety minutes. At the end of the session it is appropriate for the facilitator to summarize the session, ask if there are any questions, and thank participants for their time and assistance. In some cases, participants are offered refreshments and a meal, as well as reimbursement for their time and/or travel expenses. Participants should receive an official written thank you from the agency for their participation in the focus group session. Follow-up phone sessions are sometimes necessary to clarify an issue or verify statements made by participants during the session.

Reporting results from focus group sessions: Typically focus group sessions are recorded electronically and transcribed for analysis. During the session, an assistant takes hand written notes to verify the main points shared by participants, and to ensure that the session is recorded on paper in the event the audiotape fails to function properly. Near the end of the focus group session it is crucial for the facilitator to reiterate what the group shared, and for the group to verify that the facilitator understands their responses. At the conclusion of each session, a debriefing between the facilitator and assistant should take place in order to highlight the key points addressed by the group. Upon completion of a written report, it is highly recommended to write up an executive summary that emphasizes key points discovered from the research as well recommendations to managers. Each focus group member should

receive a copy this abridged document.

Qualitative analysis of the data: Includes reading through the transcripts, generating major themes and categories of responses for questions, coding the responses into the major codes/categories sharing a common focus, examining comparisons between and among participants, generating conclusions, member checks with focus group participants, and an independent analysis of randomly selected portions of the data by two additional researchers. This is especially important in attaining inter-rater reliability. It is particularly vital to identify areas of agreement between focus group members, and differing opinions/perceptions about specific phenomenon, management actions, and program evaluation. As information from focus groups is being grouped into thematic areas, it is critical to select specific quotes from participants, which offer an improved understanding emphasizing an important point, and specific feelings, and/or attachments members may have about a specific area or experience.

Data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing: Using the Components of Data Analysis, Flow Model (Figure 1), allows for coding and analyzing data. Data reduction process allows categories and themes to emerge (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data reduction refers to the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the raw data that appear in written transcriptions (Henderson, 1991). The data reduction process is accomplished by writing summaries, coding, drawing out themes, making clusters, creating partitions, and writing memos. Further qualitative analysis emphasizes direct quotes from participants with the support from both frequency and Likert scale analysis for the purpose of triangulating results. Data display is an organized, compressed assembly of information allowing researchers and managers to begin making visual pictures of how the data are emerging from the study. In order to better organize and access information, matrices, graphs, and charts are often used. This enhances the visual display for drawing conclusions.

The final part of analysis activity is conclusion drawing, and verification. In conclusion drawing, researchers define what things mean. This includes noting regularities, patterns, explanations, possible

configurations, causal flows, and propositions. The verification process pulls together the fundamental aspects of the findings, and tests them for their plausibility, while attempting to confirm their validity (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Executive Summary Reports: Visitors have the potential to provide valuable information about facilities, parks, and wilderness areas to managers. Regardless of whether the recreation manager is newly hired, or a veteran in the same position, asking visitors to share their perspectives on the area, their opinions of management, and their vision for the future helps managers to better meet management goals and offer a continuum of quality experience opportunities. Using focus groups to assist recreation managers can be a very inexpensive and time effective method for understanding how visitors define their concerns, and their opinions of managers. Research indicates that the use of focus groups, together with surveys and interviews, is another useful tool in the effort to improve management of recreation areas.

Conclusion: Although the use of focus groups to address issues in recreation and park management, and assisting managers in developing management solutions, is in its infancy, research strongly supports the idea that the knowledge and attachment participants have of the outdoors can only make management efforts to enhance quality visitor experience both more effective and acceptable to the public. After conducting a focus group with eight long-time visitors, what was most surprising to this author was that individuals who spend much of their free time (25 to 56 years) visiting recreation areas shared nearly the same observations and concerns as managers, but were neither included nor tapped for their insights into potential management solutions. The detailed descriptions and concerns these eight visitors participating in a focus group shared about our natural resources provided 300 years of insight and wisdom, as well as important lessons about the past and present. More importantly, they will continue to provide guidance to the future of effective management. The key is that we take the time to ask them.

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