

FOCUS GROUPS

101

NEON

INTRODUCTION

Most of the time, working in comms means rapidly responding to the news. This often includes sending out press releases, pitching spokespeople or writing comment pieces. This work is mostly based on our previous experience and knowledge of a campaign or issue, and what we presume will be the most powerful and persuasive arguments.

However, sometimes it can be very useful to look deeper into a topic and find out more about what the general public thinks. This is not with the intention of watering down our own positions or policies but to better understand the minds of the people we are hoping to persuade and bring on board.

One way to understand public opinion, and the people we want to back our campaign, is to use focus groups. NEON offers support and guidance on getting the most from this kind of research.

WHAT ARE FOCUS GROUPS?

Focus groups are traditionally face-to-face, facilitated conversations with a group of 6-10 people. They are often done with a specific and targeted sample of people. It is a qualitative approach to public perception research, meaning you don't get results that you can

count, but text or recordings that allow you to get a richer level of detail from participants.

Focus groups remain a useful and important tool to find out in more detail than a survey or poll how people react to ideas, how they understand the world around them and to explore the underlying values and beliefs they hold.

This methodology is useful when you are working on a long-running campaign or framing project and you want to get a better understanding of how a target audience is thinking about a specific issue. If polling helps us find out *what* people think, focus groups are used to find out *how* and *why* people think in a certain way. This methodology is not as useful for rapid response work or short-term projects, as they can take a while to set up and analyse.

Focus groups are not cheap. To run a series of groups with a research agency it will cost at least £3,000, but it could be a lot more depending on the number of groups and the demographic you want to reach. However, there are lots of ways to keep costs low and run focus groups on a shoestring budget. You can find more details on how in this excellent [Testing Guide from PIRC](#).

5 THINGS FOCUS GROUPS ARE USEFUL FOR

1. Getting a deeper understanding of how people think, not just what they think - they are especially useful for understanding people outside of your 'bubble'.
2. Finding out how *particular* groups of people think - this could be people in specific geographical areas, people of a particular political allegiance, or of certain identities.
3. Testing frame components, messengers and messages.
4. Planning your communications strategy - focus groups can help you decide, hone or develop ideas.
5. Identifying key narrative opportunities and challenges - by surfacing the helpful and unhelpful beliefs people already have about an issue.

FEATURES OF A FOCUS GROUP

- Usually face-to-face with a moderator leading the discussion and a note taker to help out, though at the moment a lot of them take place online.
- The group size is anything between 2 and 20+ participants but most groups consist of around 4 to 8 people.
- It is not representative of the population, so participants are targeted and selected using a questionnaire, which could screen on factors such as:
 - ◆ Demographics (age, class, race, gender, etc.)

- ◆ Past behaviour, e.g. voting, actions taken
 - ◆ Attitudes/values/beliefs
 - ◆ Conflicted/persuadable middle
- After the focus group, you will be given recordings and/or transcripts to analyse. You want to identify themes and patterns in how people talk about an issue: spotting the language/words they use that are helpful and unhelpful, and how they react to the messaging you are testing. The research agency can provide analysis, but it is always valuable to observe focus groups and go back through the transcripts, if possible.
- Participants are compensated for their time. This is usually covered in the research company's fee.
- As you are working with people and asking them questions, there are ethical considerations, like getting permission for their input to be quoted in the work you do and letting them know how they can hear more about the project the research is part of.

FACE-TO-FACE VS ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS

Positives	
Face to Face	Online
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Location-based, you get a sense of the place people are from• In person interactions builds rapport with moderator and participants• In a group setting lots of activities and creative exercises can take place• Visual and non-verbal cues• Reassuring for less tech able	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Familiar, comfortable at home• More anonymized/candid• Less group bias/hierarchy• Lots of online tools/options available• Easy for clients to interact with moderator throughout• Participants can be anywhere

Negatives	
Face to Face	Online
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Need a good facilitator• Group bias and hierarchies can emerge and be an issue, needs good facilitation• Costly if in a range of locations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Less nuanced language• Not everyone is online• Less scope for breakout sessions/creative exercises• You miss a sense of place• Zoom and tech can be tricky

WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO WITH YOUR RESULTS?

CASE STUDY Tax Justice UK

Focus groups can sit within your wider comms strategy and be used to get informed on who your target audience is and what frames you can use to communicate with them.

SEPTEMBER 2020

TAXJUSTICE.UK

Talking tax: How to win support for taxing wealth

AIM: To understand people's attitudes towards tax, austerity, state of public services, wealth and specific policy changes related to tax

RESEARCH METHOD: Focus group alongside polling

DEMOGRAPHIC: 'Red Wall' seats like Blyth and Wrexham, as well as other areas in London, Reading and Hastings.

LEARNINGS & OUTCOMES:

- **People know less than you think:** In this case, Tax Justice wasn't able to get that much out of people on policy changes, which was one of their objectives.
- **Expect the unexpected:** Without being prompted to, focus group participants talked about tax evasion in every session. This was an unplanned discussion that became one of the key findings.
- **How people make sense of the world:** Tax Justice got a good insight on how people make sense of the world and what common sense beliefs they hold, for example, 'the economy is a container' model was prevalent. This highlighted a framing challenge for Tax Justice.
- **Choose your media moment:** The research happened alongside the labour leadership election, so with their first round of focus groups, Tax Justice launched **an interim report** with topline. They also sent out **a press release** saying that they have spoken to people across the UK and they are resoundingly against tax evasion.
- **Get journalists on board:** Tax Justice also invited a Guardian journalist to the focus groups who made a **podcast** and wrote an article on the conversations.
- **Movement generosity:** They shared findings with the movement by holding seminars and producing a full report.

- **Confidence:** The big win here was Tax Justice’s ability to talk about what people think knowing that they have the facts to back it up. In **media interviews** they were able to state how strongly against tax evasion people are.

CASE STUDY Framing Climate Justice

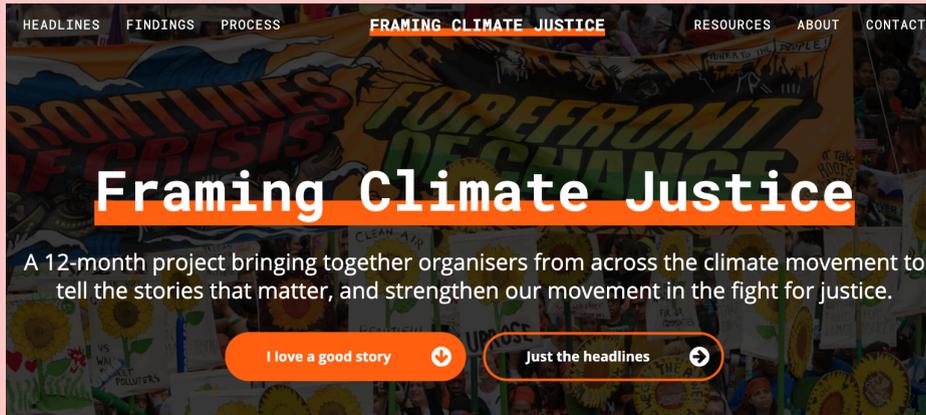
Focus groups can be part of a range of research methods used at different stages of a framing project. Projects like these examine what the public thinks in-depth, and then compares it against what campaigners want to, or already, say. The aim is to look at commonalities and friction in what both groups think about the issue and make strategic decisions about how best to communicate with an audience or audiences.

For the Framing Climate Justice project, focus groups were used at the beginning of the project. A review of existing public opinion research showed that there is very little research into how people think about the intersection of climate and justice issues. This audience insight work allowed us to get a snapshot of how the British public thought about colonialism, race, capitalism and the climate crisis, as well as who they thought was feeling the greatest impacts of climate change and who they held responsible for intersecting crises.

AIM: To learn the best way to centre climate justice in how we talk about the climate crisis

RESEARCH METHOD: Focus groups

DEMOGRAPHIC: Cross-section of British population. Groups were held in Aberystwyth, Aberdeen, London



These focus groups helped us understand where the public were at on these key questions...

- How did we get here?
- Who's responsible for the problem?
- Does climate relate to oppression?
- Whose leadership do we need?
- What solutions do we propose?
- How do we feel about the future?

We then used this information to map out the common ground and divergences between the climate justice movement and the public. From this we worked out our comms objectives: the key

things we wanted to communicate. Finally, we developed frames to build on the common ground and bridge gaps in beliefs.

For example: We found that the public were focused on local impacts of the climate crisis. Whereas for us, centring the global impacts, especially its disproportionality on countries in the Global South, was essential. So, a framing recommendation we came up with is to start with the local before you talk about the global.

Talk about how flooding is affecting people in Hull and then how it affects people in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN RUNNING OR COMMISSIONING A FOCUS GROUP

- The brief.** Develop a proper brief to cover all the topics you want to explore. Be clear about what is most important and what the measures of success will be.
- The stimulus material.** Think about what material you need to stimulate and engage the group. The more effort you put into creating this the more worthwhile the group will be, e.g. this could be a newspaper headline, a message or an audio or video recording.
- Theory of change.** Think carefully about who is most useful for you to reach. Who are your base, your persuadable middle and opposition. This should be decided in your strategy.
- Ethics.** Permissions need to be given at all stages. Will the research be publicly shared? Know what permissions you will need from participants both up front and during the research.
- Analysis.** How will the analysis and reporting be done? Will you do this yourself or will you require the research agency partner to do it? If you are doing it yourself, do you have the time, resources and independence?
- Budget.** What budget do you have? What are your priorities if the budget is tight? Do you have a budget for validating the findings in polling or other research?
- Follow-up.** All too often communications research doesn't get used as well as it could. How are you going to integrate the

findings? Who do you need to engage in this work? What follow-up will make the most of the research and the resources that have been put into it?

5 THINGS FOCUS GROUPS ARE NOT FOR

1. Getting a quick snapshot of where the public is at on something.
2. Creating a hook for a pitch or an article, you can use polling for this (read guide here).
3. Finding out what the cross-section of the public think, your target audience should be a curated sample.
4. Reporting statistics, such as what percentage of the UK public support a specific policy.
5. Easily comparing what two specific demographics of the public think about a specific policy or campaign, e.g. 18-30 year olds vs 60+ year olds.

RESOURCE LIST

- [PIRC testing guide](#)
- [Focus Groups - UCL](#)
- [How to Conduct a Successful Focus Group Discussion](#)
- [List of focus group companies and what they offer](#)

Special thanks to Jane Carn from Survation for giving a presentation on focus groups (get in touch for the recording) and Paul Hebden from Tax Justice UK for sharing thoughts on their project Talking Tax.