

In combining focus groups with surveys, group members not only can help provide topics for surveys but importance rankings and survey question distribution. If you want to assess your members' needs beyond simple questions and answers here's how focus groups can help.

Focus groups are typically composed of four to five pre-screened members who meet criteria you specify. They are assembled in one room to discuss and react to specific topics relevant to your golf course business.

Consider this: You are planning your next year's annual budget and would like to learn what your members think about conditioning on the golf course before bring the plan to the board for approval. You could hire a company to conduct a survey beginning with a series of focus groups and a survey to follow but that can be very expensive. So how can you get this information more affordably? You can attempt to do it yourself.

Clearly, any research you do yourself will have limitations when compared to studies conducted by professionals, but if you are seeking some general guidance about important topics of interest, you can get good information for a nominal cost.

The goal is to explore the general attitudes of the participants to the topics selected for inclusion in the session and ultimately to aid in the construction of survey questions. Focus groups are intended to generate macro information, whereas quantitative survey research seeks to provide micro information. Use the focus group to help formulate your survey questions.

There is no rule as to the number of focus groups to be conducted on a specific topic but two or three groups of different age, handicap and gender usually will work fine. This raises one of the most important issues relative to the implementation of focus groups: the definition of the participants. In any focus group session it's vital that the composition of the group is as homogeneous as possible in terms of key demographic characteristics. For example, if course conditioning is the topic there would be major differences in attitudes between high and low handicappers, social and full golfing members, men and woman and participants who are under 35 compared to those over 65. Not only will the participants have different views on a topic, but getting participants to share their attitudes will be much easier if they are not placed in an environment where some might be intimidated by others due to age, skill of the game or gender. Therefore, it's important to conduct at least one group with each constituent group of the same gender and of different abilities.

Before the focus group's meeting, develop a very clear and precise written statement of the objectives for conducting the research. It's essential to have a well-thought-out target for the study, which will form the strategic basis for the project. It could be titled, "The Importance of Conditioning as It Relates to Annual Budget Preparation at Pleasant Fairways Golf Club." A brief explanation of the plan should accompany each written statement. Be sure to give these statements to each participant in advance of the meeting.

Create a discussion guide outline that contains all the topics you hope to cover in a focus group. The discussion guide is the most important tool in focus groups and is as vital to the novice as to the experienced moderator. The guide is intended to provide a logical flow to the discussion, so that all topics are covered and there is consistency across all the groups in a series

relative to the information discussed. Golf course superintendents know the steps involved in different types of course conditioning, member golfers do not. Explanations of the differences in course conditioning and budget preparation are helpful in the discussion. To this end, it's helpful to provide a time estimate for each of the topics as a guide for the moderator and to ensure that everything gets covered, but also for those interested in the output of the research.

Ensure the group does not go off on tangents, wasting valuable time. It is the responsibility of the moderator to direct discussions so that all topics are covered.

View the group discussion as a way to obtain interaction among the participants. It should not be a series of questions directed at each individual. One of the key benefits of the focus group methodology is to have participants react to each other as ideas are presented, so it is possible to determine the differences in attitudes among participants.

Finally, use write-down exercises to initially lock participants into a position about a particular topic, so they are not swayed by the effects of group dynamics in which a dominant personality can influence the flow of the discussion. Essentially, a write-down exercise is a vehicle whereby the moderator raises a topic (e.g. reaction to increase in green speeds) and each person in the group is asked to write their point of view in 30 words or fewer on a piece of paper prior to discussing the topic. If this is done, the participants will be more honest about their responses than if they were asked to respond to the question without having written down their views first.

Focus groups are helpful because the participants can be probed for the reasoning behind their opinions, and conversations can be generated around a particular topic, giving you what's known as "rich data" as opposed to, for example,

the finite answers you get from survey questions alone.

As the name implies, these are focus groups, keep the subject matter narrow to the immediate task at hand. For example, if you want the focus groups to guide you to areas on the course that need attention, in their opinion, ask the group a specific question and give them specific choices.

"In your opinion, what single maintenance item needs to be accomplished to help our club compete with other clubs in our region?"

- 1) Improve green speeds
- 2) Replace bunker sand
- 3) Add more cart paths
- 4) Renovate rest rooms on course
- 5) Level tees

Then, discuss these items and take copious notes. From the feedback you'll discover the "hot button" items that should be uncovered from the focus groups passion about the subject as well as the solutions these members might have. Remember, *bite your tongue*; this is not the forum to rebut criticisms and comments!

Equal weight should be given to each group; so often the low handicappers are the driving force for change on the course. The women, juniors, seniors and weekend-playing high handicappers must be involved in the process or the questions placed in the survey will not be appropriate or statically valid for the good of the membership as a whole. **GCI**



## USING FOCUS GROUPS

By Mike Vogt, CGCS