



Assessing Community Needs with Group Sessions

Objectives:

- ✓ Explain the "Rules of Engagement" for conducting group sessions
- ✓ Plan a public meeting to get input from local residents on community needs
- ✓ Interpret the results from the group sessions to use in planning and prioritizing Extension programs

Advance Preparation:

- ✓ On the World Wide Web, access and print the document "Focus Group Approach" from the Iowa State University Extension Web site at <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/communities/tools/assess/focus.html>

Materials Needed:

- ✓ One copy of Handout "[Focus Group Approach](#)" for each participant

Time Needed: 1 hour

BACKGROUND

Public meetings offer many avenues for information. They are relatively quick means of accessing a community "pulse" on an issue providing that you gather a representative pool of the population at the meeting. There are two basic types of public meetings: community forums and focus groups.

Community forums are meetings that are open to the public whereby any community resident (or anyone for that matter) can raise issues. This "open door" policy can be a good thing for public relations as it shows that you would like to include input from a wide range of residents in your Extension programs and services. However, these type meetings are not without risk. While there may be others, there are at least three types of risk associated with open, public forums:

- The people that choose to attend can have ulterior motives or agendas that are not representative of the entire community population. While this may be a good thing, there is a risk that this potential minority can dominate the meeting and make others reluctant to speak out.
- The public may use it for a gripe session which has an unplanned negative public relations twist.
- Finally, the public meeting may heighten expectations beyond what is reasonable. With limited resources, Extension must prioritize their programming and service efforts. These meetings may set up an expectation that Extension personnel are unable to deliver upon.

Focus Group Interviews are a more structured way to solicit detailed information from a representative sample of the population. Like the mail or phone survey, participants are selected to represent the population and are asked a series of questions. Unlike the mail or phone survey, you are in a setting where you can ask for more detailed information on their opinions, attitudes, and feelings. Additionally, you can get in-depth answers to questions that are highly specific to Extension programming.

INTEREST APPROACH

- Ask someone to relieve a public meeting that went "astray". Was there Negativity? Tension? Disrespect? Anxiety? Violence?
- While there are some examples out there of bad scenarios that stemmed from public meetings, we want to keep our professional image alive. Public group sessions offer such a valuable avenue for assessing the community "pulse" about issues and trends relative to Extension programming. So do we just not do it? Or is there a way to do it with dignity?

LESSON

- Distribute the handout "Focus Group Approach" and review the steps for planning a focus group interview with the advisory members.
- Involve the group in laying the framework for the upcoming focus group session. Explain that during the previous lessons we have addressed some of the preliminary planning needs of a focus group session:
 - Use information from the surveys and interviews to make a list of issues that need further exploration. This information can quickly translate into your purpose for meeting as well as your interview questions.
 - Identify participants - check back on your list of population categories from previous lessons. Look for a representative group of people who were not

interviewed or surveyed on previous occasions. They will likely be good candidates for this exercise. Invite them to attend once the details are in place.

- Find a good candidate for the facilitator as they are key. Ask for nominations from within or outside the advisory council to serve in this crucial role.

APPLICATION

- Ask the advisory members to help organize and attend the focus group interview so that they too can gain insight into the community attitudes and trends. While the facilitator is key to the discussion, other members may offer questions that stimulate and guide the interviews for a well-rounded discussion.
- Role play the focus group session with the advisory members to "iron out" the flow and look for problem areas or omissions.
- Finally, conduct the real focus group session with community representatives and summarize the findings or discussions for use at the next advisory council meeting.

REFERENCES

Iowa State University Extension. Needs assessment strategies. Retrieved June 27, 2002, from the Iowa State University Web site:
<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/communities/tools/assess/focus.html>
