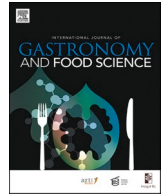


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# How to start a Focus Group: Using cartoons in adult focus groups to discuss consumers feedback expectations in food service settings

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## ABSTRACT

This article tests a novel method for starting focus groups quickly while ensuring that respondents understand the topic of interest for the study.

To kick start the focus groups, a cartoon style illustration was developed. The cartoons depicted various food service experience from start to finish. Respondents first task was to indicate when it was natural for them to give feedback on the food service experience.

The results show that the cartoons allowed respondents to quickly understand the topic, which in turn gave them confidence to contribute with relevant information from the start. In addition, respondents used the framework of the illustrations to keep the discussion focused on the topic throughout.

We generally find that it is getting harder to find people who are willing to commit to 2 h focus groups after work. For us to find participants who are willing to take part, we are having to be much more time conscious, this method allows for shorter groups without losing valuable information.

The method has a potential when it comes to testing food products as well as in the development of dishes for gastronomic experiences. It may also be a good tool to use in sensory focus groups.

The use of comics to start off the focus group worked well in the context of a non-sensitive topic, in this case food service experiences. Further research could explore using this method for more sensitive topics.

## 1. Introduction

Focus groups are a common method of collecting qualitative research data (Greenbaum, 1998; Morgan and Krueger, 1998). In addition to being able to provide an understanding of an individual's view on a topic, a focus group is an effective method for exploring and attaining a deeper understanding of views in a collective, taking account of the fact that attitudes are not developed in isolation (Morse and Field, 1996). A successful focus group is highly dependent on the group dynamic to achieve a free-flowing topic focused discussion. An important factor to running effective focus groups is getting the group and the discussion off to a good start.

Although much has been written about focus groups regarding factors such as their composition, size and environmental setting, there is little research (if any) focusing on effective ways to begin focus groups in order to be successful and yield the most useful results in the amount of time allotted. A focus group is generally seen as successful if everyone in the group is willing to share and build on each other's views and opinions. To achieve this a good, shared understanding of the topic to be

discussed is vital. However, general advice tends to suggest that a focus group should start with an introduction by each participant followed by an 'opener' exercise. This approach, which sees each participant taking time to introduce themselves and then give further information about themselves is time consuming and there is no evidence to suggest that this method of opening makes it easier for participants to discuss a completely unrelated topic afterwards.

Building on the CurroCus® group method developed by Hansen and Kraggerud (2011) this paper explores how these types of speed focus groups can be made even more effective by starting to collect valuable information from the start of the group session while also ensuring that respondents are made familiar with the topic that is the focus of the group.

An alternative start to focus groups was tested among adults discussing a range of scenarios where they may want to give feedback on a food service experience. The primary role of the focus groups was to collect data on the topic of food service feedback routes, current and future. However, the focus of this article is on the role that printed visual aids such as cartoon strips can play as a tool for kickstarting focus

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groups, getting participants into the right frame of mind, and ensuring a focused discussion throughout the groups.

## 2. Theoretical background

Many aspects of the traditional focus group have been tested and guidelines developed (Morgan and Krueger, 1998; Krueger and Casey, 2000; Rabiee, 2004; Morgan, 1996). For instance, it is common to use a written moderator/discussion guide to make sure that the moderator remembers to ask the participants in the focus group the planned questions and that they stick to the topic (Morgan and Krueger, 1998). Furthermore, research suggests that smaller groups of participants, 6–8 (Krueger and Casey, 2000) are easier to lead, and that focus groups made up of complete strangers required more work by the moderator to achieve a good outcome (Sherriff et al., 2014; Mclafferty, 2004). It is encouraged to have a good dialogue between the participants and managing both active and passive participants in the group to ensure an even contribution of all participants (Sim, 1998).

Although many important topics relating to focus groups have been explored and evaluated none of the research seems to address how to best start off a focus group in order to achieve a well-run group. Nor have we been able to identify any research that explores different approaches to introducing participants to the topic of interest.

A focus group is generally seen as successful if everyone in the group is willing to share and build on each other's views and opinions, but how can we as moderators contribute to make this happen?

General advice tends to suggest that a focus group should begin with an introduction of each participant followed by an icebreaker exercise such as “tell us about your last holiday/favorite hobby” or similar. However, this is time consuming and there is no evidence to suggest that sharing information of one's private life makes it easier for participants to discuss a completely unrelated topic afterwards. Potentially one is even highlighting differences between the participants such as social class that may not have become apparent otherwise.

What can moderators do to ensure that respondents feel comfortable sharing and expressing themselves during the focus groups, while at the same time being conscious of the fact that time is valuable? One important aspect is ensuring that the participants are introduced to the topic that will be discussed in a clear and easily understandable manner. Ensuring that everyone in the group has a good understanding of the theme of the discussion. This is likely to give them confidence to contribute.

In CurroCus® group interviews (Hansen and Kraggerud, 2011), which have much in common with traditional focus groups, participants are exposed to written questions at the beginning of the focus group to immerse the participant into the topic, collect additional empirical data, and quickly get started. This form has been used in a number of scientific articles as well as product development in different companies (Hansen, 2015, 2020; Hansen et al., 2018; Vabø et al., 2017), however, is still relatively time consuming.

The use of illustrations to convey information is widely used in educational literature, instruction manuals and even road signs, as it is generally understood that illustrations can aid understanding (Kirsh, 2002). Looking at anything from IKEA assembly instructions to corona hand washing instructions to back-of-pack cooking instructions, pictorial representations are used to aid quick and easy comprehension of information.

There are examples of illustrations used in research to simplify information transfer, but by and large these have been mainly aimed at children. For example, Grootens-Wiegers et al. (2015a,b) used comic strips to explain essential medical research to children.

Comics have also been used to explore how non-verbal images are interpreted by people from different countries (Pitkäsalo (2019)). Findings suggest that non-verbal images can be interpreted differently depending on cultural background, signifying that visual communication will also need to be tested in the correct cultural setting to avoid any

contradictions between visual content and intended content. A study by Houts et al. (2006) concluded that pictures have significant advantages over words; among others, avoiding misunderstandings by increasing attention, comprehension, recall and adherence. This indicates that if the illustrations are in line with intention, they can have a significant positive impact on important aspects of comprehension.

Pictures have also been found to be a more effective way of learning and understanding information compared to words (Stebner et al., 2017). As early as 1982 a review of 55 articles concluded that illustrations helped learning by clarifying examples (Levie and Lentz, 1982). Further studies in the medical domain have also explored the role of pictures and cartoons in information sharing and found that visual aids significantly improve information transfer (Grootens-Wiegers et al., 2015a,b; Hanson et al., 2017; King, 2017).

However, when academics, at least in the social sciences, talk to and communicate with subjects in focus groups and depth interviews, information is mainly shared in writing and/or orally.

The primary purpose of the focus groups run as part of this study was to collect data on the topic of food service feedback opportunities, current and future. Building on the CurroCus® group method (Hansen and Kraggerud, 2011) this paper explores how these types of speed focus groups can be made even more effective by the introduction of visual aids to start off the group discussion.

We designed comics without text that were used at the beginning of the focus groups. The comics illustrated the various steps in a hotel breakfast, take away and canteen experience. Based on the theoretical role of pictures the hypothesis was that these illustrations would help respondents quickly get a common understanding of the core theme of the focus group as well as a frame for the boundaries of the discussion.

## 3. Method

The development of the cartoons was an iterative process to ensure clarity and avoiding pictures which could be misleading, misinterpreted or be perceived to have several potential interpretations. The development of the various cartoons was improved, adjusted and tested over time until we were satisfied that they were all single minded and clear. Industry experts and academics were used to review and revise the cartoons. See Fig. 1 below for step-by-step changes and the final set of cartoons used. Words were kept to a minimum.

Initially 4 different comic strips were prepared. All describing potential feedback scenarios in a; hotel breakfast, take-away, home delivery, and canteen setting. A pre-test of the interview guide and the comic strips revealed that take-away and home delivery in the context of customer feedback had many overlapping areas and was therefore treated as one in the subsequent groups.

Respondents in the groups were adults who were regular users of the setting to which they had been recruited. The focus groups were scheduled as 40-min group discussions. All 6 sessions lasted between 30 and 40 min 10 participants were invited to each focus group with on average 6 respondents taking part. In total 6 groups of 6 respondents took part in testing cartoons as a focus group starter. Two groups dedicated to each focus area; hotel breakfast, take-away/home delivery and office canteen.

After a brief introduction by the moderator, respondents were asked to turn over a piece of paper, which was placed in front of them and depicted the cartoon specific for the group. Respondents were asked to answer a question related to the study in question by choosing one of the pictures in the strip presented to them.

The group discussion then started with each respondent explaining their reason for their answer. The cartoon style illustration of the scenarios was left in-front of the respondent for the remainder of the group discussion.

The development of the comic strip with emphasis on of some of the major changes that were made as part of the optimisation process is shown below in Fig. 1.

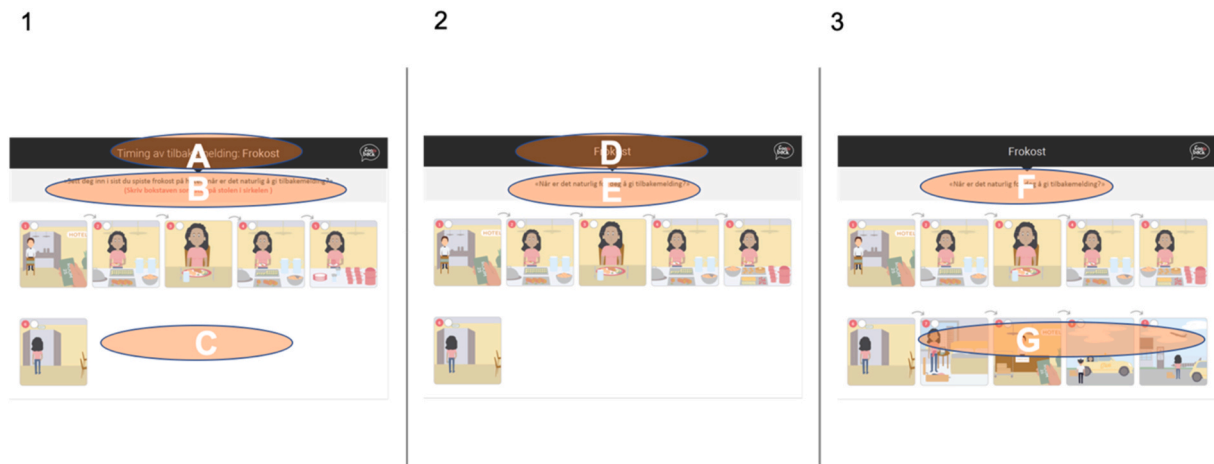


Fig. 1. An example of the development of the cartoons. The changes that were made are highlighted.

The three stages of development are numbered from 1 to 3.  
Draft 1.

- A. First draft headline.
- B. Complementary text for the respondent
- C. There was a cartoon on 6 cartoon routes

Draft 2 – After first draft.

- D. Headline reduced to a minimum
- E. Explanatory text also reduced to a minimum

Draft 3 – Final draft.

- F. Explanatory text kept as in Draft 2
- G. The comic is expanded with 4 more cartoon routes for clarification and to create a complete understanding

#### 4. Results & discussion

With speed and information gathering being an important factor in these non-sensitive topic focus groups we identified three key benefits that proved valuable with this way of introducing respondents to the theme.

Firstly, the cartoons introduced all participants to the topic to be discussed quickly. The fact that the comics were free of words allowed participants to understand the situations described without further explanations from the moderator. Respondents quickly had a frame of reference which they all could relate to.

This contributed to the second benefit we saw using this tool. Respondents felt comfortable and confident to talk from the start, as the objective and intention of the study was clearly understood by all.

As soon as respondents had spent 1–2 min reviewing the comic, they were ready to start sharing relevant views on the topic.

Ref: FG Canteen group - 2.

Moderator (M): "If everyone is done, please tell me where you marked the sheet (the cartoon). I put it on 4A, 8B, 9C, 8D, 8E and 4F (the comic strip panels had all been given a number, the letters refer to the respondent)

M: Now you can turn the sheet over and we'll get back to it.

M: What is the reason why you chose that particular panel? If you do not remember the panel, just turn the sheet over.

Respondent A: Because I think it was a natural place to give feedback. At this point I have been through the canteen, I have eaten and left the waste and if you should have any feedback, that there is some mess or something then it is at this point. That's what I think.

Respondent 9: I considered the one (picture) with PC and thought that because at that point it is fresh in the memory when you walk out so I chose that one.

Ref: FG Hotel group - 2.

M: Then you can turn the sheets over and then we can discuss why you chose that particular panel? If we take it around the table.

R: So if I am satisfied, I would like to tell someone who works in the room. I think I will let them know while I am still in the breakfast room.

The two sequences clearly show, how immediately after starting to share their views, relevant information for the study was obtained. Due to the illustrations, it was easy for the respondents to explain where in the customer journey it would be appropriate for them to give feedback on their experience. They then immediately continued to elaborate on why to them this felt like an appropriate time, and what type of issues that were important to give feedback on. Which, from the objective of the original study was where the interesting findings were emerging. The cartoon gave the respondents a clear and common frame to work within.

The third benefit we identified was the groups' ability to stay focused on the task and on the topic of interest. As the discussion moved ahead respondents would refer back to the cartoon to explain and elaborate their views.

Respondent: That's a good idea, I want to move to panel 8. 9 is more email. It was the first thought I had before I made up my mind.

Importantly though, respondents where not constrained by the order in which the panels occurred and would suggest changes in order for the illustration to more closely represent their customer experience.

Respondent: I would also like to swap the pictures, so that picture 4 becomes picture 3.

M: Yes, that's good feedback. Yes, then you think that you have paid before you received the food. Do you then pay by Vipps (mobile payment method)?

Respondent: We pay for the food before we get it.

Results suggest that introducing a catalyst, such as a cartoon strip, into the focus group has a positive effect on start-up time, with less time needed to be spent on introducing the topic. The discussions got off to a good start quickly with very limited guidance from the moderator. Our findings seem to be in line with findings from Houts et al. (2006), who in their review also highlight that oral information sharing can be improved using pictures, by increasing both attention and understanding. In addition, we see that the use of cartoons as a relevant starter activity also has a role in putting the group at ease as the context and subject being discussed in very clear to all from the start, giving respondents confidence to take an active role in the group discussion.

Not spending time on icebreakers and introductions of the participants and replacing this with relevant cartoons allowed for collection of

topic relevant information from the start. In our study there was nothing to suggest that the lack of more traditional icebreakers negatively influenced the discussion.

In previous studies using CurroCus® groups, starter questions have been used to start the session. Respondents have then answered questions individually in writing before starting the group discussion. However, this takes time, and it is then up to the researcher to interpret the responses at a later stage, with no possibility to ask follow up questions or checking that the interpretation made is correct.

Since time is an important factor in these speed focus groups and a key reason for developing the CurroCus® method, introducing tools which allow for the same amount of learning in a shorter time is key. Not spending time on icebreakers and introductions of the participants allows for collection of topic relevant information from the start. There was nothing to suggest that the lack of such icebreakers negatively influenced the discussion.

#### 4.1. Limitations and future research

To the knowledge of the authors this is the first time a paper has specially focused on how to start a focus group, and particularly exploring the role that theme specific cartoons can play in kicking off and running a successful focus group.

However, this method requires further testing using different contexts to better understand the role and limitations of pictures and in particular cartoons have as a focus group catalyst.

In our case the scope of the research had very clear constraints and it was important that the respondents remained on topic. The “limits” set by the cartoon strip therefore functioned well. There may be cases where the subject allows for a wider discussion among the participants and where this artificial frame set by the cartoon may feel restrictive.

Similarly, it is likely this more direct way of starting a focus group is particularly suited to research focused on non-sensitive topics. Whether it would be equally successful for more sensitive groups is unclear. It would therefore be interesting for future research to explore if the more traditional icebreakers are necessary when the topic is a more sensitive nature.

However, future research should explore the role cartoons can play when dealing with broader research topics such as sustainable food to more narrow context specific research like serving time for future elderly people in nursing homes to get a clearer understanding of the limitations of such a tool.

#### 4.2. Implications

Using cartoons at the start of focus groups to introduce respondents to the theme of the discussion as a replacement to more traditional icebreakers proved effective. This methodology has the potential to reduce the time needed to run focus groups without losing important information or jeopardizing the flow of the group.

This method has potential when testing food products as well as when developing new dishes, both of which tend to be settings where the limitations are quite clear. It may also be an interesting tool to use in sensory focus groups.

### 5. Conclusion

We generally find that it is getting harder to find people who are willing to commit to 2-h focus groups after work. To find participants who are willing to take part in research, we are having to be much more time conscious and keep groups short and focused.

Using pictures rather than relying on an explanation from a moderator reduced the time needed for the introduction section by several minutes. Leaving more time for the group discussion. The cartoon functioned as a useful tool to refer to for both the moderator and the respondents during the discussion. The use of a catalysts, in this case a

cartoon strip, proved to be a good technique to immerse the group members quickly and effectively into the topic.

Based on the learnings from this study we would suggest that there are three key benefits to use cartoons to start a focus group.

Firstly, the cartoons introduced all participants to the topic to be discussed quickly. The fact that the comics were free of words allowed participants to understand the situations described without further explanations from the moderator. Respondents quickly had a frame of reference which they all could relate to.

This contributed to the second benefit we saw using this tool. Respondents felt comfortable and confident to talk from the start, as the objective and intention of the study was clearly understood by all.

The third benefit we identified was the groups' ability to stay focused on the task and on the topic of interest. As the discussion moved ahead respondents would refer back to the cartoon to explain and elaborate their views. We found that respondents used the cartoon throughout the research groups to stay on task.

Much research has been done to understand how pictures can help children specifically to understand complex information. However, as can be seen from the many uses in commercial consumer setting (i.e., IKEA assembling guide) pictorial information is assumed to ease and speed up information transition for all age groups. Our initial exploratory study using cartoons to introduce participants to the topic of discussion proved to be very effective. Importantly it was also positively received by the respondents.

#### Statement

Statement by the authors that all data from respondents in this article had signed consent that was approved by the Norwegian Center for Research Data.

#### Authorship Statement

Conceptualization, K.V.M.H.; Formal analysis, H.V.S.; Investigation, K.V.M.H.; Methodology, H.V.S.; Project administration, K.V.M.H.; Validation, H.V.S.; Writing – original draft, K.V.M.H.; Writing – review & editing, H.V.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

#### Implications for gastronomy

This study provides new methodological tools to improve the food service experience. For the first time the use of cartoons to start of a focus group looking at improving feedback mechanisms in the food service industry has been tested. This method proved to reduce the startup time of focus groups, increased respondents focus on the task and eliminated the need for unrelated ice-breaker activities. The methodology used in this present work could be applied in any gastronomic exploration and development project and could be the starting point for future research aimed at developing new and better communication with consumers.

#### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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