

How to Moderate an Online Focus Group



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The shift is on to get qualitative customer insights from online focus groups vs in-person events. The Covid pandemic has accelerated this shift, but companies that want to increase the number and depth of focus groups while minimizing costs (travel, facilities, moderators, snacks, etc.) started shifting to online insight platforms like Discuss.io years ago.

Executing successful online focus groups is more than just having the right, purpose-built video platform (recruiting tools, scheduling, automatic transcription, multiple roles, real-time language translation, etc.), it is also having the right approach to being a good moderator.

Discuss.io asked professional moderators to share the tools and techniques that they use when moderating. The following is a resource that will help anyone conducting research. We've included best practices and simple tips for you to get the most out of sessions conducted on Discuss.io's video conferencing platform.



Crafting an Engaging Discussion Guide

Enter the conversation confident that you know the right questions to ask by preparing a carefully crafted discussion guide beforehand. This is a document that outlines the statements you will make and the questions you will ask of your participants.

According to [FocusGroupTips.com](https://www.focusgrouptips.com), a complete discussion guide should contain the following:

- Research objectives – Why are you engaging in this discussion and what you hope to accomplish.
- The participant’s profile – Describes who you will be talking to.
- An introduction
- Topics - For a typical session you will want to cover 3 to 5 topics, which you will derive from your research objective. Topics are generally prioritized and thought of as follows:
 - Awareness,
 - product use,
 - buying behavior, and
 - switching
- Questions - Not only is it important to pay attention to the **order** of your topics, it is also important to pay attention to how you are ordering your questions within each topic area. Use the following guidelines to ensure each question builds upon the last and inspires thoughtful answers from your participants:
 - General before specific
 - Behavioral before attitude
 - Positive before negative
 - Unaided before aided
 - Participant categories before moderator categories
 - Activities

Effective Moderation

To be able to derive quality insights from your conversations with consumers, effective moderation is crucial. Moderation is a skill that takes years to develop and perfect, but by adhering to a few basic principles and remembering a few more helpful tips and best practices, you will quickly notice a marked improvement in the depth of insights that you are able to derive from your consumer-connects. Before moderating, familiarize yourself with the discussion guide and have an understand the priority of each question in meeting the overall research objectives. Follow the discussion guide, but adapt as needed. Unless otherwise stated, discussion guides serve as guidelines, not scripts.

PRINCIPLES OF MODERATION

1. Don't judge
2. Be interested
3. Be welcoming
4. Show empathy
5. Actively listen

OPEN STRONG

The beginning of the session is your chance to start the discussion off on the right foot. Put your participants at ease by performing the following steps:

- Introduce yourself, state that you are conducting research for a major brand
- Share the general purpose of the interview
- Reassure your participants that there are no right or wrong answers
- Let them know that the session will be recorded
- Let participants know what they will be doing; call out and explain any activities
- State how much time it will take

THINGS TO REMEMBER

As you conduct your session, keep in mind that people will be comfortable having a conversation than getting grilled with questions. So, do the following.

- Use open questions, in your own words
- Comment on their words, use their language
- Listen to what they are saying AND what they are not saying
- It's all about them
- React naturally to what the participants say
- Avoid commenting, judging, giving your own opinion
- Remain neutral, but be warm and natural
- Be prepared to be wrong
- Show empathy to their thoughts
- Build relationships
- Be wary of 'why questions'
- Explore their answers in more depth than what they initially gave you. Follow up.



CLOSE STRONG

Although all of your questions and activities are important, make sure to ask these final two questions at the end of the interview, as they often yield the most fruitful insights:

1. “Is there anything we missed that you would like to talk about?”
2. “What is the most important point that we discussed?”

Laddering and Storytelling

Storytelling is a technique often used by researchers to elicit thoughtful responses from consumers. By creating a scenario and asking for the participant’s feedback, the moderator can get to the heart of what the participant is thinking without posing a direct question. This method has been shown to be more effective at garnering deep insights by preventing the participant from feeling put on the spot.

EXAMPLES:

- *Pretend that I am an alien and that I know nothing about your world. Describe how you feel when you eat ice cream?*
- *If Brand “X” what type of animal would it be? Why to do say that?*
- *If you were to describe product “X” as if it were a person, what would they be like? How would they dress? Where would they hang out? Would you be friends with them?*

The laddering technique allows the researcher to **uncover what higher benefits** the consumers attribute to a specific feature or component. Results gathered by using laddering can be especially useful for **advertising** and **positioning**. You can also use it for product development and preliminary segmentation.

Laddering tends to work the best during in-depth interviews. Interviewing one person provides the needed focus, depth, and privacy during laddering. You will want to interview people who use the product or service category. You can develop laddering chains at the category, brand, or product level.

When laddering, the researcher asks a question about something very specific, and then, basing each question on the previous answer, begins to uncover what higher meanings the consumer associates with that feature.

1

First, you ask about a feature:

- “Which feature do you like best?”

2

Second, you listen to their answer, and then you ask about the feature’s functional benefit.

- “What does the feature do?”

3

Third, you listen to their answer, and ask about the higher benefit of the functional benefit.

- “What does the functional benefit do for you?”

4

Fourth, you listen to their answer again, and ask about the emotional benefit of the higher benefit.

- “What does the benefit do for you?”

***Note:** Don’t use the word why. It puts people on the defensive. Ask why in different ways.

EXAMPLE OF LADDERING:



During the Interview

Make sure your technology is ready for success. Nothing kills a conversation like not being able to hear or see.



WE LOVE HEADSETS

Looking pretty is important, but we want you to have the best experience using our platform. Please use headsets or earbuds.



QUIET IS BETTER

You don't want background noise from your end muddling up the audio on the call. We love dogs, but we don't need to hear them barking!



CHECK YOUR VOLUME

Make sure the proper device is enabled and selected, and that the volume is properly setup for both the mic & speakers.



VIDEO ISSUES

Check that you have allowed webcam use in your browser and that the proper device is enabled and selected.



CHECK YOUR LIGHTING

Ensure you are not lit too little, too harshly, or are in silhouette. Consider indirect light, by shining a lamp against a wall.

Important Features



You can control A/V settings. Look for it on the bottom right of the screen.



Microphone control (turns the audio on/off). Red means muted.



Dial in information. In case the interview audio needs to be moved to a phone line



Group chat. There are 2 options shown as tabs. Public and Backroom. The **Public** chat can be viewed by the respondents. The **Backroom** chat can only be viewed by moderators, technical support, translators and observers.



You can control panelists/ audio and video feeds and refresh their page.



Upload media button. Used to upload stimulus or start screen sharing



Webcam control (turns on/off the video).

Additional Tips, Training and Guidance

Storytelling is a technique often used by researchers to elicit thoughtful responses from consumers. By creating a scenario and asking for the participant's feedback, the moderator can get to the heart of what the participant is thinking without posing a direct question. This method has been shown to be more effective at garnering deep insights by preventing the participant from feeling put on the spot.



BE READY!

Remember that **once participants are in the room, they will be able to hear anything you say and read anything you write** in the Public chat room. Any internal/private conversation should be confined to Backroom chat, otherwise participants will be able to read it.



GET TRAINED!

You can always check out our **training videos, interview best practices**, and support articles to find the answers to most frequently asked questions. If you would like, you may also sign up for a **personalized training** of the platform.



GET HELP!

Discuss.io Support is always available to you throughout your project. At any point you can email Support at **help@discuss.io**, call **+1 (888) 814-4742**, or reach us through a 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. For the do-it-yourselfer, our **Complete Technical Troubleshooting Guide** is a great resource as well.

For a full tutorial on using our platform, check out the **instructional videos** on Discuss.io.

KEY TAKE AWAYS

Prepare your discussion guide - this is critical:

- Craft strong, well rehearsed openings and closings
- Prioritize your topics. Usually the order is awareness, product use, buying behavior, switching.
- Order your topics correctly to inspire thoughtful answers. E.g. - Behavioral before attitude, unaided before aided, etc.

Effective moderation involves appropriate reactions. Know when and how to be neutral, natural, nurturing. It should be a good conversation.

Question laddering techniques elicit the most useful responses that lead to useful insights. Keep digging in to get to the "why".

But, don't use the word "why". It makes people defensive. Ask why in different, more effective ways. The laddering technique is ideal for this.

Make sure your technology platform is capable, ready and you are familiar/comfortable with it. Headphones, microphone, lighting, internet connection and backgrounds are all key to a good interview experience.

