8 Reminders for Good Questions

Richard Kruegar and Mary Anne Casey propose 8 reminders for “Good Questions” in focus groups. (Kruegar, Casey 2000 p. 40-43) Good questions, they say:

- Sound conversational
- Use words participants would use
- Are easy to understand
- Are short
- Are open-ended (“Open-ended questions are a hallmark of group interviews” (ibid, p. 41)
- Are one-dimensional (the question asks one thing only and it doesn’t group things that may be perceived as different. For example asking if something is “useful and practical” might be confusing as some people interpret these things as different.) (ibid).
- Include good directions (Are you asking them to rank something, write something down, answer verbally, etc).

Questions should be clear, honest, stimulating and appropriate. Avoid questions that will tend to just frustrate the group or that serve to embarrass people. In general it is best to put questions to the group rather than put individuals on the spot. The first question should be easy to answer for everyone (ibid, p. 42) and some argue that positive questions should be asked before negative questions (ibid, 62).

The design should not contain too many questions in order to give time to probe, plan for between 5 and 20 minutes per question (depending on the question) (ibid. p.64). You can use the final question as the “insurance question” and do a summary of the questions asked and then ask something to the effect of “Is there anything we missed?” (ibid, p. 46)

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TYPES OF QUESTIONS*
Questions can serve different purposes, getting more information, clarifying points, comparing points and more.

Open ended questions
“What was your experience doing X”
“How do you feel about Y?”
“What are some ways that X is different than Y?”
“What do you like about X?”
“What don’t you like about X?”
“What are the needs of this neighborhood?”

Closed questions
“Is it fair to say X is true?”
“Do you think Y is accurate?”
“When did you move to Toronto?”
“How much do you support this statement on a scale of 1-5?”

Questions to get more information
“What else can you say about that?”, “Can you give me an example?”
“Is there anything else you can add?”
“Can someone build on that?”
“On a scale of 1-5 how important is this?”
“Why?” “Is there anything else you would like to add?”
“Can you tell me more about how you felt about X?”
“Why do you think you feel this way?”

Questions to clarify a point:
“I want to make sure I understand, can you explain more?”
“Can you give me an example?”
“What is the best way to summarize your point for the notes?”
“What do you mean when you say X is [‘no good’]?”
“What does X word mean to you?

Questions to compare perspectives:
“How do others feel about that point?”
“Who has a different perspective on that?”
“Can someone build on that?”

*Adapted in part by from Cooperman, S.J. “Module 4 “Structuring and Interview” http://www.roguecom.com/interview/module4.html
| **DO’S** | & | **DON’TS** |
| --- | & | --- |
| Ask “why”? | Ask many “yes” or “no” questions. |
| Follow up if you are unclear—”will you tell me more about that?” | Ask more than one question at a time. |
| Ask for specifics if you get a very general response to a question | Ask leading questions (“Isn’t this true that YYY is important?”) |
| Ask others in the group what their views are when you only have heard one person’s opinion | “correct people” or tell them they are wrong about something |
| Seek out input from all participants | Be afraid of asking for clarification |
| Ask if the process is clear | Pressure someone to speak |