

Foundations of Business Decision Making, Miami University, BUS 101 Case Book

4-6 Practical Approaches for Involving Traditionally Underserved Populations in Transportation Decisionmaking

Implementing the Approach

To implement the focus groups, SLPP and MnDOT drafted a master agreement to outline their collaboration. This step was important in establishing roles and responsibilities as a framework for partnership between two large bureaucracies.

A lead researcher was designated to run the focus groups and the overall study of which the focus groups were a part. A graduate student researcher with experience in community organizing was hired to help organize and conduct the focus groups. Using census data, researchers identified rural and urban communities with higher concentrations, or dramatically increasing populations, of Hispanics, Somalis, or Hmong. It was vital that participants be comfortable talking to the researchers, so SLPP decided to approach potential attendees through community centers and English language classes and to hold the meetings in places where these populations would be most comfortable. Invitations to the focus groups were drafted by SLPP in three languages and delivered to the target attendees both orally and in writing from the community center or language teacher. The community contact would explain that the researchers were interested in the community's travel habits and wanted to conduct a two-hour focus group. As part of this invitation they would establish firmly that the researchers were not representatives of the state or federal government. This last point was important because of cultural or community fears of government authority and immigration policy.

Working with the community groups, SLPP increased its access to information that helped them tailor its approach, ensuring the success of the focus groups. For the Minneapolis Somali focus groups, SLPP separated the men and women into two rooms based on the recommendation of a Somali social organization with whom they partnered and who advised that Somali women tended to defer to the opinion of males in group discussions.

SLPP conducted the focus groups with invited attendees including Hispanic, Somali, and Hmong populations in urban and rural Minnesota. Over the course of 5 months, SLPP held seven focus groups—four in the Twin Cities and three in rural areas. Focus groups were held with each ethnic population separately to allow for more consistent group discussion, to gather data based on specific communities, and to facilitate the conversation by conducting the meeting in each community's respective language. SLPP reserved and paid for meeting rooms, made arrangements for child care and translation, and supplied food at the focus groups from local Hispanic, Somali, and Hmong restaurants.

SLPP reserved a 2-hour time slot for each focus group, which typically had between 10 and 20 attendees. SLPP members collected names in the sign-up process to ensure attendance, but did not publish names in their final reports. Each focus group began with a statement of intent that assured participants that their personal information would be protected, establishing upfront that they were not required to answer questions that made them uncomfortable, and that the SLPP was using funding from MnDOT but was not representing a government agency.

Over the course of the various focus group sessions, SLPP learned how much time to set aside for each question: typically about 5 minutes for responses. If a group was particularly interested in an issue, or particularly responsive to being in a focus group, responses would last about 10 minutes. Because of time constraints, SLPP had to trim the number of questions that they wanted to ask and build greater flexibility into the facilitator's script. In addition to questions about trip-taking and mode preferences, the focus groups touched upon issues such as safety, personal technology use, and preferred methods for receiving information and communicating.

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