**Focus Groups Quick Guide**

Surveys assume that people know how they feel. But sometimes they really don’t. Sometimes it takes listening to the opinions of others in a small and safe group setting before they form thoughts and opinions. Focus groups are well suited for those situations.

Focus groups can reveal a wealth of detailed information and deep insight. When well executed, a focus group creates an accepting environment that puts participants at ease allowing then to thoughtfully answer questions in their own words and add meaning to their answers. Surveys are good for collecting information about people’s attributes and attitudes but if you need to understand things at a deeper level then use a focus group.

* **How big?** Ideally a small group of six to ten people led in an open discussion by a moderator. The group needs to be large enough to generate rich discussion but not so large that some participants are left out.
* **How long?** The ideal amount of time for a focus group is anywhere from 45 to 90 minutes. You want the group to get comfortable with each other and make sure everyone has a chance to speak, but not so long that it is a major imposition.
* **Who is invited?** A homogeneous group of strangers is your goal. Homogeneity (like a group just for local business owners) means that they will more likely spark ideas in the group rather than simply explaining what they do. Also, not being closely connected (when possible) levels the playing field and reduces inhibitions among people. You can use personal connections but try to get a diverse group when possible.
* **How many questions?** Focus groups are structured around a set of carefully predetermined questions – usually no more than 10 – but the discussion is free-flowing. Ideally, participant comments will stimulate and influence the thinking and sharing of others. Some people even find themselves changing their thoughts and opinions during the group.
* **Staffing?** One person should serve as moderator and facilitate the discussion, one or two others should take notes (and perhaps record the session).

**Questions**

* Word questions in a way that they cannot be answered with a simple “yes” or “no” answer (use “why” and “how” instead).
* After some sort of fun warm-up questions and explanation of the purpose of the group, you may ask the no more than 10 prepared questions, but be prepared to ask for examples or explanations for answers.
* Sample questions for local businesses:
  + If you wanted to grow your business, what would prevent you from doing so?
  + If there was one thing that you could access to help with this challenge, what would that be? Why is this the most important?
  + If you wanted to explore new products or even open a different type of business, what might prevent you from doing so?
  + What one or two resources would help you overcome these challenges? Why these?
  + If a new business owner wanted to move to Bristol and asked your advice, why would you recommend that they move/not move into town?
  + What are the invisible barriers to your success that you feel most people don’t understand?
  + If you were in charge of dispensing ARPA funds, what top two things would you spend on and why would these be the most important things?
  + What investments might catalyze even more growth or be more sustainable (more than the sum of its parts)?
  + Is there anything that we haven’t discussed that you would like to share with the ARPA committee?
  + Is there anyone not present today who you think might also give good feedback?