Smithsonian Institution

Recommendations for Leading a Focus Group

The terrific people (whether FSOs, LESs or volunteers) who manage and run American Spaces and their programs can easily lose sight of the evolving needs and interests of their audiences. Amidst their demanding obligations, they also may not have time to consider how to reach new audiences. We have found that focus groups provide some of the most valuable insights into the thinking of American Space users, partners and alumni that not only inform the Smithsonian Institution design and program recommendations, but often bring fresh ideas and perspectives to the Embassy and American Space staff. We often find these sessions to be the most creative and productive during our site visits.

We've run various types of focus groups, organized by Post, composed of:

- American Space staff
- EducationUSA, FLEX, Fulbright, Access and other local partner staff
- Alumni of USG programs
- Existing/potential target audiences
- Existing or potential partners
- Program participants

Timing. 60 or 90 minutes depending on group size.

Size. Ideally sessions can be for about 10-14 people to maximize the opportunity for everyone to talk and interact. If translation is necessary, then fewer people are even better. If the group is going to be larger, it would make sense to split into two groups (one with alumni and professionals and another with just current patrons) if there is time.

Facilitation. We suggest one or two people maximum facilitate a focus group. We have found it is best not to have an Embassy or Space staff member lead the session. Though it sounds counter-intuitive, people may be more comfortable being open when someone they don't know asks them for their opinions/advice. More voices leading a group tend to be disruptive, and we try to promote that this is their time to share thoughts and opinions as valuable voices in this process. To that end, we also begin by explaining why we are there, what the project aims to achieve, and the importance of including their voices in our process. To ensure that people feel comfortable, we suggest sitting around a table or putting chairs in a circle arranged for a conversation. Don't set up the session in rows as in a classroom or lecture space. We also suggest that those not facilitating stay in the background and keep their questions and remarks to a minimum or hold them until the end of the session. With very small groups, 4 or 5 people, we have also asked members of the delegation to stay outside the room so that people don't become overwhelmed and self-conscious and then withdraw.

Getting Started. It is most inclusive to begin by asking each person to introduce herself/himself (name, affiliation, what they do). End the introductions with the facilitator, making his or her personal introduction and explaining the project and the purpose of the session. We always assure people that while we will be reporting on the session, we will not be attributing any specific remarks to any individual. It's best to have someone other than the facilitator taking notes.

Here are some general questions or prompts to consider when leading a focus group:

- **General Opener.** If members of the focus group are existing Space users or alumni of programs, you can ask them about their experiences – what do they like/dislike? What works for them? What doesn't?

- **Hopes**. What are their hopes and dreams for the Space? What would they want in the Space? Hours? Programs? Technology? Resources – digital, magazines, books?

- **Unique Features**. What would make the American Space special? Set it apart? Make it unique?

    o   For users, it could be that the space is American, is air-conditioned, provides access to Wi-Fi and/or technology (iPads, laptops, computers, etc.), can be used as a platform for open conversation and debate, provides access to native English speakers and Americans, English language instruction, information about the U.S., is clean and comfortable, has coffee/café, is a venue for speakers and programs.
    o   For those who run programs, the special features might be available space and facilities, access to technology, or staff who manage and operate the space.

- **Programs**. What are your favorite programs that the Space currently offers? What kinds of programs would you like to see the American Space offer? Lectures, conversation clubs, film nights, DVCs with other spaces or people from the U.S., English Language Instruction, soft skills programs?

- **Technology.** What technology exists (or is planned) for the Space? Is this the technology that you would hope to find in the Space and use? What other technologies or capabilities would you like to see in the Space?

- **Look and feel**. What would make the American Space attractive to you and your peers? What do you think about the look and feel of the Space? Colors (to use or to avoid)? Furniture? Do you have any design suggestions?

- **Competition.** Where do people go now to find these things or hang out? Who or what is the competition? Is there competition with nearby Universities, libraries, maker spaces, or internet cafes? How could we make the American Space more appealing to those who are going elsewhere?

- **What would be obstacles to use**? What would turn people off and make them stay away? Consider asking about factors of location, hours, programs, and security.

- **Security.** What about security in the Space? Consider asking how this corresponds to the local norm. Is there a bag check? Metal detector? Do you need to show ID? Photo ID? Is prior registration required?

- **Membership.** Would you be interested in a membership program? What benefits would make a membership program attractive?

- **Location and Transportation**. Is the location of the Space convenient? What about transportation? Parking? Signage?

- **What about the name of the Space?**

- **Outreach/Communication**. What about reaching out to people? How do you find out about events or class offerings? Through email/listserv? Do you learn about events or offerings at the space through social media and if so, which platforms specifically? Personal access to technology?

- **Anything else?** Anything that we neglected to ask or you would like to mention?

- **Most important?** You can always wrap up the conversation with "What's the most important thing that we should remember as we think about the space and programs?"