

Your Personal Focus Group



Have you ever wished you could have voters from your district in a room for a focus group and hear what they actually think about issues?

You actually can, but not in the way you might be thinking.

The modern focus group grew out of World War II-era “focused interviews” used to test reactions to persuasion (or often propaganda) radio and military films.

They proved useful, and by the 1950s markets started to use them. Over the next two decades, they were adopted by campaigns, Hollywood, and businesses big and small.

But the focus group itself isn’t magic. It is just a tool used because you can’t talk to everyone. But in a focus group you can talk to a handful of people and, with the right questions, uncover the unexpected and the word they use to describe issues.

When you knock doors, you do essentially the same thing hundreds of times a week. Instead of a group, you’re hearing from voters one on one. The more doors you knock, the more you are getting a sample of what voters in the district think.

But the challenge is how do you take hundreds of conversations and transform them into the sort of insights you’d get from a focus group? **The key is to look for two things: Surprises and Phrase Patterns.**

Surprises

Listen for when a voter says something that surprises you. Maybe it’s how a voter feels about an issue that’s different from what you’d expect based on their party.

Or maybe it’s someone you think would support your opponent, but is actually supporting you. Listen for what they say and how they describe it.

If you ask a follow-up question, don’t lead with “why.” Start with “what” or “when.” These questions keep the conversation going and often get the voter to tell you a story.

Examples of Better Responses

“Interesting. What makes you say that?”

“Interesting. Was there something that changed your mind?”

“Huh. When did you start thinking that?”

“Huh. What else have you noticed?”

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! Helpful Hint!

A “why” question can make people feel like they have to defend themselves. But here’s the trick. If there’s an important “why” behind their thinking, they’ll usually tell you when they answer a “what” or “when” question. Most surprises are one-offs. But sometimes they can signal new information or that something is changing.

Phrase Patterns

Sometimes you begin to notice multiple voters using the same words or phrases to describe something. Maybe when you’re talking about crime in the area, you hear several voters say:

“I used to never lock my car, but now if you don’t, someone will rummage through it.”

“I left my car unlocked for one night and someone rummaged through it.”

These sorts of phrases are gold because they show how people experience and talk about the problem. That word “rummage” is the phrase pattern. It creates a picture and connects in a way “reduce crime” never will.

*In your mail and ads, you can mirror that language. **Instead of simply saying you want to reduce crime, say:***

Your car should be safe in your own driveway.

You shouldn’t have to worry about someone rummaging through it.



Or use it in a stump speech by telling the story of a voter who said, “I used to never lock my car....” If you hear three or four voters separately saying the same phrase, they’re probably not the only ones thinking it. The key is to keep your ears open for these surprises and phrase patterns. Each day, as you’re heading home after knocking doors, ask yourself two questions:

1 What surprised me today?

2 What phrases did I hear more than once?

Write them down or record a quick voice memo on your phone. At the end of each week, review your list. Over time, you’ll build a picture of the district that no focus group could give you.

The Bottom Line

When you go door-to-door, watch for surprises and follow them with a “what” or “when” question. Listen for phrases you hear more than once and write them down.