

## Focus Groups: A How-To Guide

### *What are they?*

A focus group is a way to engage your customers to enhance or improve certain products or services and help secure customer buy-in. Participants have a forum to share their opinion, which can lead to more support for your efforts.

Focus group sessions:

- Gather opinions, beliefs, attitudes and interest about changes you may wish to make to products or services
- Test your own assumptions about those changes
- Encourage discussion about those changes
- Build excitement about change

Focus groups are also great learning opportunities for participants. And this learning can contribute to excitement about change, which often leads to more peer-to-peer promotion.

### *How do I conduct one?*

- Clearly define the purpose and objectives of your focus group
  - For example, which healthy beverages would students and staff like most if put into the vending machine?
- Establish a timeline – it takes approximately 4-6 weeks of planning to host a focus group
- Identify participants – form a multi-disciplinary committee of students and staff. Ensure your committee includes:
  - Ethnic diversity
  - Economic diversity
  - Multiple grade levels or ages
  - Teachers or other school staff
- Select products for testing
- Invite participants – ensure you have appropriate permission from guardians and teachers
- Develop and refine your questions or evaluation tool for data collection
- Conduct your focus group. Keep in mind the following:
  - Facilitator – the facilitator should be student-friendly. They should be able to conduct an ice-breaker based on the audience's interest, as well as be knowledgeable about the project and purpose to help ensure useful information is collected from the group to help with the decision-making process.
  - Timeframe – the facilitator will welcome the group, introduce the purpose and explain expectations from participants. After that, ensure participants stay on task so the focus group ends on time.
  - Location – hold the focus group in a comfortable space that encourages conversation and does not bias the information gathered. The space should also be easily accessible for your participants.



- Be prepared! Ensure you have all necessary supplies to conduct your focus group, such as evaluation forms, pens or pencils, water for cleansing the palette between tasting and trash cans.
- Take notes during the meeting and summarize after to capture first impressions of participants.
- Analyze your results and write up the report – this report should be used to determine your next steps
  - Were the scores so high or so low you can make a decision immediately?
  - Do you need to conduct further testing to get a better picture?
- Share the results and your next steps with your vendor so they know if their product is still being considered or not

*Remember...*

Not all products are a fit for all schools or districts. Using activities such as focus groups and taste testing can help you determine which products will be successful in your school. Incorporating products your students like helps increase their acceptance, and purchasing, of healthier foods and beverages.