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*Insider Insights*

**How to Get Focus Groups Talking: New Ideas That Will Stick**

Elizabeth R. Peterson  
University of Auckland  
Auckland, New Zealand

Kevin A. Barron  
Hewlett-Packard  
Auckland, New Zealand

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**Abstract**

In this article the authors outline an innovative way of using sticky notes, such as Post-its, within focus groups to help facilitators stimulate discussion, draw out reluctant participants, structure information, and help produce a group outcome that all members feel they own. They outline how sticky notes can be used to generate information, check for understanding, and group and sort ideas.

**Keywords:** Focus groups, encouraging participation, new approach

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**The focus group challenge**

Focus groups are a great way of finding out a group's shared understandings, perceptions, feelings, and common knowledge about a topic and exploring the degree of consensus (Gibbs, 1997). A well-run focus group will generate a rich exchange of ideas that are bounced around so that all participants have the opportunity to respond and comment. But how often do you find a problem in getting people to talk and discuss? One of the major challenges for the focus group facilitator is to encourage participants to become involved in an interactive, open discussion and avoid a session consisting of didactic questions and answers with only the more confident and vocal in the group. In these situations the facilitator needs to work especially hard to help all participants feel at ease and have the confidence to speak. We have found that this is particularly

the case with young adults, who are more likely to give one-word answers, more susceptible to peer pressure, and prone to socially acceptable responding.

In an ideal focus group, after the first few prompts an experienced facilitator can guide what is, he or she hopes, a snowballing discussion. In our study with secondary school students, however, this was not the case. Extracting comments from the students was, as one facilitator commented, “like extracting teeth.” We tried many ways to encourage the students to talk and discuss, for example by asking them to comment on another student’s comment, but it did not work. Many students simply looked blank or asked for the question to be repeated. The students did not naturally discuss the different ideas raised but instead offered their individual opinion, and some hardly spoke at all. This pattern continued for a further two student focus groups, and concern led us to reevaluate our approach. After discussing the problem with a professional workshop facilitator from the business world, the research team made the decision to try sticky notes to help promote dialogue in the remaining focus groups.

In this article we outline an innovative way of using sticky notes such as Post-its within a focus group to help facilitators stimulate discussion and draw out reluctant participants.

### **Introducing sticky notes**

For many years sticky notes have been used as bookmarks, reminders, and message carriers. Although most of us see stickies as things simply to write on, the business sector and companies such as Vodafone, British Airways, Hewlett-Packard, EDF Energy, AXA Insurance, and Deutsche Bahn have been using them as a serious problem-solving tool for some time, employing them to generate and group ideas and information, model processes, plan, and evaluate. There is even a book called *Rapid Problem Solving with Post-it™ Notes* (Starker, 1997).

In our research with teachers and students we found stickies to be a particularly useful addition to focus groups for generating information, checking understanding, and grouping and sorting ideas. It was also an effective way of actively engaging the more reticent participants in a discussion. We describe below some general ways in which stickies can be used in focus groups.

### **Variations on a sticky theme: the sticky toolbox**

#### **Things you need**

Apart from the sticky notes themselves, the only other tools required are some thick blue or black pens (so that text can be read across the room) and a base sheet of paper, such as brown wrapping paper, on which to place your sticky notes and which can also be rolled up and taken away as a record. Once work is complete, tape the stickies down or take a digital photograph of them in case they are dislodged when the paper is rolled up.

Use color and size of the sticky note meaningfully, for example to differentiate topic from content or fact from action item. If stuck onto a whiteboard, arrows or linking lines may be added and wiped off if the sticky needs to be moved to reflect the evolving discussion.

## **During the focus group**

### ***Generating sticky information***

When approaching most problems, the first step is to generate some initial information. There are several approaches to this.

The facilitator may hold the pad of stickies and, as the ideas are called out by the group, note each down and stick them on their board. The benefits of this approach are that the facilitator is able to control the pace of the session and use probing questions if the information provided is not clear enough. It also has a snowballing effect, with an idea from one person potentially stimulating further ideas in others.

An alternative approach is to give out a set of stickies to every person in the group and ask them to write down their ideas. This is particularly effective for groups where some members are shy of speaking out, and it is an effective way to increase the group's feeling of involvement.

### ***Checking sticky note understanding and elaboration***

Once information is out in the open and on the board, it might be necessary to check understanding of it and note any duplicates. The facilitator can ask participants to clarify what they mean by certain ideas, thereby checking for misunderstandings, which they can use as a basis for discussion and elaboration. This is more likely to be necessary if the group has written down their own ideas.

### ***Sorting, ordering, grouping, and planning sticky information***

The next step is to sort the information in some way. This is done particularly quickly and effectively if the group is allowed to move the sticky notes into groups themselves. Be prepared to intervene if there is too much discussion at this point as this might be better left until the sorting is complete. If there is disagreement about a certain grouping, a copy of the note in question can be made and stuck up too so that there is one in each group, marking it as a duplicate. This helps avoid disputes. The group can come to an understanding of why notes have been grouped in that way afterward as part of discussion, although often that becomes clear while they are being grouped.

## **Applications**

There are many reasons to group stickies, and the reason chosen would depend on the topic of the focus group. There could be a similar theme or category, priority, owner, value, relevance, importance, or time period. The choices are as many as the subjects being grouped. An extension of grouping is planning: placing sticky notes in a time or dependency order; grouping them under weeks, months, semesters, or periods of history; and so on (see Figure 1 for more sticky ideas).

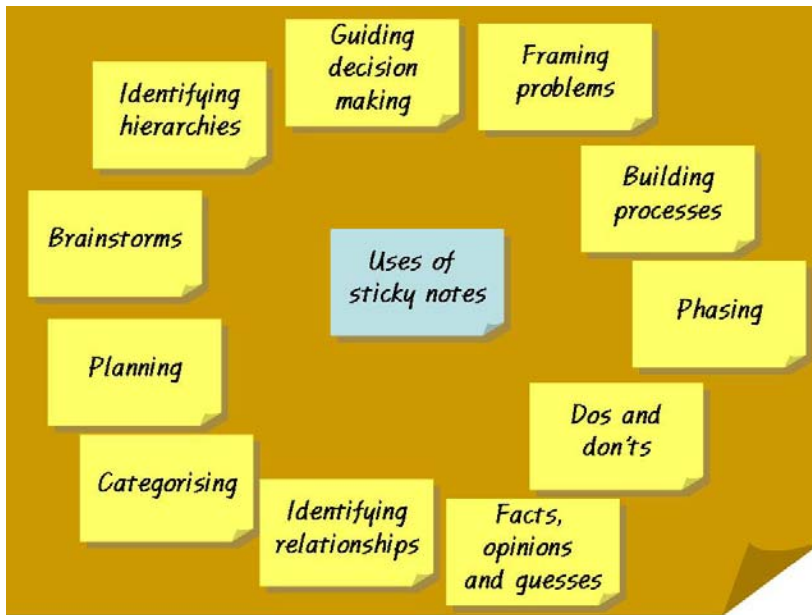


Figure 1. A range of uses for sticky notes.

In Figure 2 we have summarized some of the benefits of using stickies. Overall, work can become more fun and more interactive, and the fact that participants can pick up aspects of the problem or topic in their hands and move them around is an advantage. In this sense, it is as if participants are among the problem, imposing a physical order on what has been merely floating around in their minds. At the end of the session there is a clear deliverable that the group has created together. It is visual evidence of a shared achievement that clearly shows that different ideas have been acknowledged. Sometimes that resulting motivational effect alone can make the work before it worthwhile.

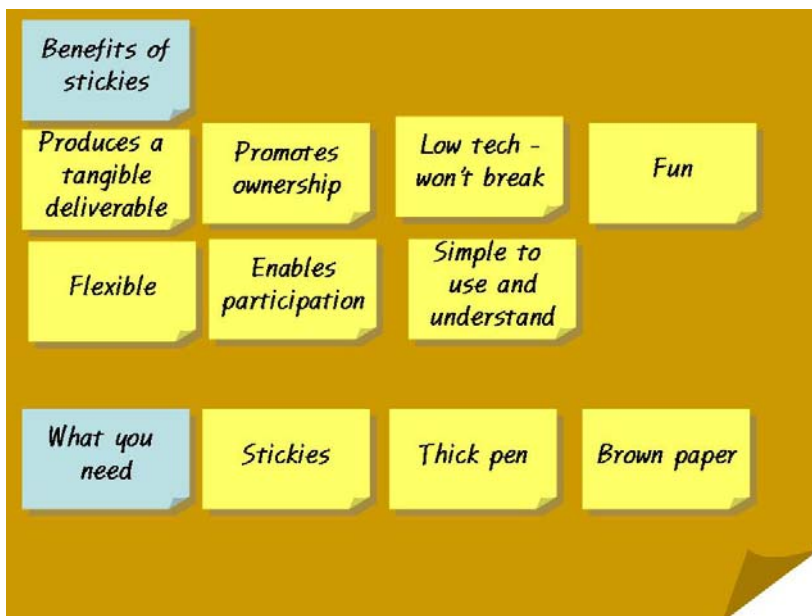


Figure 2. Advantages of sticky notes and what you need to use them.

Our experience suggests that stickies should be added to the qualitative researcher's toolbox. They are an effective way of eliciting honest opinions from reluctant group members, enhancing engagement and involvement, identifying misconceptions, improving understanding of different perceptions, gaining an understanding of how participants view and structure the information, and also generating a shared outcome that everybody owns. Interested readers might like to read how Peterson and Irving (in press) used this method in student focus groups to gain insight into secondary students' conceptions of the purpose of assessment and feedback.

Evidence that stickies work is perhaps best reflected in the fact that after our initial work, members of the wider project team have become attached to the technique and now uses it as a powerful teaching and research tool. We recommend that you give it a try. It might just stick.

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