



Customer Focus Groups: A Whitepaper from an ARS Perspective

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Introduction

The expected end-result for research within ARS has changed over the past several years. There once was a time where scientists and even entire units could rest on the laurels of their good science. In those days, the important substance of research was the number of peer-reviewed journal articles each unit produced. This was perceived by many as “science for science’s sake” and was termed scientific output. The agency is not the same now as it was then. Though good science is still a necessary component of the research program, we are now responsible, and for good cause, to make sure this good science also has utility. Thus, we now must have output, but we must progress beyond that boundary and develop pre-defined outcomes for our research. In other words, we must develop products that have meaning and value to our myriad of customers. The best way, or perhaps the only way, to make sure that our research will meet the needs of at least some of our customers is to ask them to evaluate the direction of our research programs. We have worked hard at the Northern Great Plains Research Laboratory, and we continue to do so, to develop a Customer Focus Group to provide meaningful feedback to us as we design our programs. With these thoughts in mind, I would like to present the concept we have at our facility regarding Customer Focus Groups.

Definition

The first order of business must be to define what we mean by Customer Focus Groups. Several types of groups exist for providing feedback and information to organizations. These include such groups as Focus Groups, Advisory Groups, Advocacy Groups, Survey Groups, Issue Task Forces, and Social Interaction Gatherings. Each has its place and purpose. Advisory Groups are established to provide direction and support for an organization. The decisions they make tend to be binding on the organization. As such, they are not appropriate for use in ARS. Advocacy Groups provide public advocacy and mission support of management. They get actively involved in proposing, planning, securing funding and approvals, implementing, and evaluating success of projects. They tend to be issue oriented and have preplanned agendas. Again, this is not appropriate within the Federal Government. Survey Groups, single-issue Task Forces, and Social Interaction Gatherings are equally not relevant to the situation where immediate,

qualitative information is desired. However, Customer Focus Groups are relevant. In the context of ARS, *a Customer Focus Group (CFG) is group of non-ARS stakeholders meeting together with ARS staff in facilitated sessions designed to gather in-depth information concerning the timeliness and relevance of ARS research while offering stakeholders a forum for direct participation in defining future research needs and technology transfer.* These structured discussion groups provide facilitated feedback on guided but open-ended questions regarding issues relevant to the mission of an ARS research unit. The members of the CFG may also serve as champions of the unit within the community. Customer Focus Groups can provide a wide variety of information. They can:

1. Detail customer needs,
2. Stimulate new scientific ideas and creative practical concepts,
3. Provide earlier discovery of potential problems with a new program, service, or product,
4. Assist technical professionals develop common language with non-technical customers for reduced complications in technical transfer,
5. Demonstrate how respondents talk about their interests to help facilitate the design of decision support systems, survey instruments, and other research tools,
6. Generate early impressions of products, programs, services, institutions, etc.,
7. Suggest practical uses for potential research products,
8. Interpret previously obtained quantitative results, and
9. Provide a forum for stakeholders to present views and participate in the process.

Goals

The goals of a CFG are:

1. To provide feedback regarding future research projects, plans, and initiatives proposed by the research unit.
2. To provide information regarding current and future needs of the customer community.
3. To promote to the customer community and other interested parties, the research needs of and the tools and products developed by the research unit.

Function

The CFG must work closely with the administration of the research unit. This could be the Research Leader, Laboratory Director, or Center Director. Communication must be established between the unit and the CFG if the goals are to be met. Representatives of ARS must be prudent to determine the relevance and usefulness of the information provided by the CFG. Therefore, the unit has the responsibility to determine what feedback is relevant to the unit mission, to evaluate if the relevant information is researchable, and to subsequently determine if researchable issues suggested by the CFG warrant further investigation.

In our unit, the success of our Customer Focus Group was considered of the highest priority. In response, we developed, recruited, and hired a person to serve as our Technical Information Specialist (TIS). Our TIS was subsequently assigned the

responsibility to serve as Executive Secretary of the CFG. The TIS has the duties of assisting in the planning of meetings, keeping in contact with our CFG members, preparing pre-meeting mailing to our membership, and assisting in the facilitation of meetings. This probably is the single most important action we took to ensure that our CFG remains vital and active; that it provides us with the information we need to maintain a program that is relevant to the needs of the agricultural community we serve.

Frequency of Meetings

Customer Focus Group meetings should not meet too frequently within any one ARS unit. We use two focus groups at our location. Each meets about twice per year. One group is intimately involved in providing focus to a particular project. The other group, which does contain some members from the first group, investigates questions covering the breadth of the research unit. This arrangement provides us input across all facets of our research program

Keys to a Successful Customer Focus Group

The following keys to success represent our attempt to describe what makes our Customer Focus Group work. This list is not intended to be “all inclusive,” but should provide an idea of what we deem important.

Seek Active Leadership

People are what a Customer Focus Group is all about. Select the wrong people and you are guaranteed failure. Selecting people that are proven leaders will almost force the CFG to be successful. Leadership requires four essential components. First, a leader needs control. A group will respond to a leader who has the ability to get objectives accomplished. Second, a leader needs position. Position within a team is earned. The natural leader is the person respected by the team for accomplishing objectives through cooperation and inclusiveness. Third, a leader needs authority, i.e., the power to decide. Decision-making involves inner-strength in the leader based on his or her core values. In successful group leadership, authority must be empowered by the group to make decisions on its behalf. Finally, a leader must have influence. This means a leader must have the ability to command a following. A leader without a following has very little to lead. Often, designated leaders have several of these components, but not all. For successful, dynamic leadership, all four of these components should be part of the leader's arsenal and balanced. In such a case, we see an emergence of coalesced leadership. This is the target. Leadership of this quality is leadership that can move an organization forward. Seek individuals with these skills to provide positional leadership to the CFG. Then, let the leader provide functional leadership to the group, i.e. provide them freedom to lead.

Recruit the Right Mix of People

Do not make the mistake of stacking a CFG with members of a single customer reference group. Yes, you may desire strong industry support for your group, but if all the members represent industry, you will have a group that may not value other viewpoints not represented. An even worse case would be to fill the CFG with scientists! Rather,

distribute membership equally between disparate customer reference groups. In our unit, we strive for representation from production (farmers and ranchers), agencies (NRCS, Extension Service, and University), commodity group leadership, and scientists. We also have found wisdom for including one or two business representatives who have defined ties to agriculture. These include professionals such as Agricultural lenders, Agricultural sales, or media professionals. Customer Focus Groups work best with 12-15 people. Only about half of those invited can attend any particular meeting, we maintain a roll of about 30 people who have shown interest in participating. We invite those 30 people and anticipate about 15 will attend the meeting (for example, see Appendix A for a sample invitation letter). The composition of a focus group is usually homogeneous, i.e. those with common interests. Sometimes a homogeneous mix cannot be attained because of broad interests within a unit. In such cases, either the unit can form multiple focus groups or they can meet together as a larger group and use breakouts to investigate specific topics of interest.

Build a Committed Team

Once the individuals are assembled, the real work begins. The bringing together of this mix of leaders does not guarantee success. They must develop into a team. Some type of team building exercise should be conducted at each meeting. A trained facilitator will have many ideas on how to accomplish this. Sometimes, the mix of people comprising a CFG does not and cannot work because of the personalities within the group. In this case, the difficult job of restructuring the group must be conducted.

Organize Well Conceived Meetings

An agenda should be developed at least two weeks before each meeting of the CFG. The agenda should be cooperatively developed by the ARS staff (including the Executive Secretary if one exists) and leadership of the Customer Focus Group. The agenda should be thorough and include the important aspects of the meeting and expected outcomes. Meeting plans should consider past meetings and future goals. If special guests will be part of the meeting, they must be given the necessary time to develop the topics to which they will speak. Questions to be presented to the group during the meeting should be developed along with the meeting agenda. Questions should be open-ended to allow for many possible answers. Short-answer questions, such as those easily answered with a “yes” or “no” response should always be avoided. Leading questions, i.e. questions that suggest the facilitator’s opinion or the desired answer, should also be avoided. Thus, questions should be:

- Clearly formulated and easily understood,
- Neutral so that the formulation does not influence the answer,
- Carefully sequenced with easier, general questions preceding more difficult ones, and
- Ordered so topics that are more comfortable precede the more contentious questions.

Resolve to Listen

Focus groups are not polls but in-depth, qualitative interviews with a small number of carefully selected people. The purpose of the CFG is to provide specialized information

concerning opinions and attitudes toward research being done in a particular unit of ARS. Scientists within the unit need to participate in the meetings, but must refrain from dominating the conversation and outcome. This must not be allowed to happen. The concept behind using Customer Focus Groups in ARS is to provide a forum for ARS scientists to hear and consider what customers of our science really want, need, or think. For this reason, scientists must enter these meetings resolved to listen to what the members of the CFG have to say. (For example, see Appendix B, Sample 1. In this meeting, we allowed scientists to present their research and then asked for feedback from the CFG.) Successful scientists often find listening to their customers is very difficult when it involves their personal research. Questions should be structured, as mentioned in the preceding section, to protect the research, the scientist, and the focus group members.

Develop a Clear Understanding of ARS Needs

Most individuals serving on a Customer Focus Group do not really understand research or the mission of ARS. We spend considerable time educating those on our CFG to help them understand that not all issues related to improving the agricultural situation fall within the mission of the facility or ARS. We do this by having dignitaries from ARS address the group. In the past, we have had other research scientists, National Program Staff, and Area Directors. The purpose of this process is to ensure group members understand that ARS is focused on research leading to significant outcomes. The issues ARS will investigate are problems that are researchable and of such importance to expend national resources to discover the answer. (For example, see Appendix B, Sample 2. This meeting coincided with our field tour allowing us to use our guests in multiple ways.)

Allow Group Autonomy

Though leadership at our facility is closely involved and supportive of the CFG, this group should be allowed to be self-governing. The ARS component of the CFG must be able to allow the group the freedom to develop organizational identity. This is hard for some in ARS. We must view the CFG as an “idea generator” and openly receive information from them. The CFG should, as much as possible, take care of establishing and executing their agenda, deciding how organized the group will be, and coming up with potential action items for which they will be responsible. Certainly, the RL/LD/CD should work with the group leadership to develop the agenda, especially the focused questions which need answers from the CFG. Ultimately, the Group should be responsible for making each meeting successful. In our situation, our CFG decided to remain loosely organized and have only a President. Other groups may choose to be more formal.

Write Clear Mission and Vision Statements

Any group desiring accomplishment of some goal must understand that goal and have a clear vision of what must take place for success. That means clearly conceived, written and understood mission and vision statements must be developed. The mission and vision statements should be continuously in front of the Customer Focus Group. Vision and mission statements are different. A Mission Statement is a simple statement of purpose known by every member of the team. It

- Provides a "reason for existence,"
- Provides clarity and focus and makes choices,
- Is clear and concise, and
- Is agreed by the wider organization.

The Mission Statement should address questions such as 'What am I going to do about my vision?' The Vision Statement is more general than specific. The Vision Statement says, "If I am successful, what do I look like?" for the group. The Mission Statement must inspire the ARS leadership, staff, and the CFG to focus on high-quality productivity. The Vision Statement must provide direction for the group. It is not a map, just a compass heading. Much information exists concerning the writing of good vision and mission statements. A good starting exercise once the group has been assembled is to have a session or two on developing strong directional statements (For example, see the site www.planware.org/strategicplanner). A long-standing CFG that begins to dissipate can refocus on their Statements and be reborn.

Long-Term Strategic Objectives/Short-Term Tactical Plans

After the Customer Focus Group has determined their structure, understand who they are, and where they are going, they may wish to set some long-term objectives for their group or for the facility. These goals can now be Mission Statement oriented and will help drive future meetings. The successful CFG (with long-term objectives) will also develop short-term implementation "tactical" plans identifying steps necessary to achieve their stated objectives. At each meeting, the Customer Focus Group should review their objectives and plans to consider if they are making progress toward achieving them. Assignments to individuals or committees may be made by CFG leadership to accomplish their tactical plans. A CFG that feels successful is invigorated to continue. When individuals do not perceive their time contribution to be of value, they do not return to future meetings and if this happens frequently then the group will fail.

Maintain Consistent Expectations

No implicit or explicit expectations of favoritism can be perceived by the CFG from ARS leadership. Customer Focus Group members must understand that the CFG is created only to provide insight into specific issues so that research designed by ARS can be focused as appropriate. Involvement in the CFG is a service to the research unit and not a platform for perpetuating personal projects, programs, or products.

Concluding Remarks

Generally, the dynamic questions that make Customer Focus Groups valuable for ARS locations are conducted by facilitators trained in maintaining good group dynamics. Depending on the purpose of the focus group, the moderator may also be an expert in a given topic area. The facilitator's basic job is to keep the group focused. The facilitator must thoroughly understand the objectives of the meeting. We have determined to facilitate the investigative component of our Customer Focus Group meetings ourselves, thereby allowing the President of our Customer Focus Group to take care of the groups

business at the start and end of their meetings, and leaving the difficult issues of examining specific research topics to the research unit.

Some general components should be included in each focus group meeting. Remember, the same people may not be present at each group meeting. The facilitator or Customer Focus Group Leader should begin with an introduction that includes:

- Explaining the purposes of the Customer Focus Group, including refocusing on the Mission and Vision Statements as appropriate.
- Laying down some basic ground rules that encourages everyone to participate in the discussion.
- Reassuring the participants about the voluntary and confidential nature of their participation.
- Introducing the facilitator and any co-facilitators and explaining how and why these group members were invited to participate.
- Stating the purpose of note taking and recording.

Successful CFG facilitated question/response sessions should be scheduled to last no more than two hours, including prioritization. Once all the questions have been asked, the moderator may conclude by giving a summary of the major points in the discussion and asking the group for feedback. Another way to conclude the meeting is to ask participants if any questions concerning a particular topic were omitted.

In summary, Customer Focus Groups are valuable for:

- Gathering a wide range of information in a relatively short time span.
- Exploring related but unanticipated topics as they arise in the discussion.
- Gathering this information without the use of complex sampling techniques.

Yet, there is also a set of accompanying disadvantages:

- The sample is neither randomly selected nor representative of a target population, so the results cannot be generalized or treated statistically.
- The quality of the data is influenced by the skills and motivation of the facilitator.
- Focus groups lend themselves to a different kind of analysis than would be carried out with survey results. In surveys, the emphasis is on counting and measuring versus coding/classifying/sorting, in a focus group.

Analysis of the information collected during a CFG meeting is truly qualitative. Care should be used to maintain the actual words and behaviors of the participants to answer your questions, rather than counting response options. Ultimately, the ARS staff must sift through the results of the CFG facilitated question/responses to determine which ideas deserve consideration for investigation and which do not. The CFG deserves feedback on the outcomes from their input session. This must be provided to them as soon after the meeting as possible. Failure to do so could jeopardize the success of future meetings and the continuation of the CFG.

Appendix A: Sample Letter of Invitation

Mr. A.B. Customer
Somewhere, USA

Dear Mr. Customer,

We would like you to participate in a Customer Focus Group meeting scheduled for 9:30 - 11:30 AM (CDT) on Thursday, June 27, 2002. All is going well at the Northern Great Plains Research Laboratory, Mandan, ND, but we need to continue planning research that provides relevant answers to important agricultural questions. The meeting will be held in our Annex Conference room.

The USDA-ARS/Area IV-SCD 'Friends and Neighbors Day' and Annual Field Tour will follow our Focus Group meeting. From 1:00 - 7:00 PM, we will be hosting an Open House along with tours and other topics of interest. Tour registration will be from 3:15 - 3:45 PM. This will be followed by our research field tour from 3:45 - 7:00 PM. A barbecue will begin at 7:00 PM.

Involvement in this meeting will provide you an opportunity to provide information regarding areas of needed research. This information will help us set our research so we can serve you better. Help us make this a successful Customer Focus Group meeting and then join us for our informative summer field tour and barbeque. Though lunch is on your own, the barbeque is provided by the Area IV-SCD. For more information, please look at our web page: www.mandan.ars.usda.gov. I hope to see you soon.

Sincerely,

Appendix B: Sample Meeting Agenda

Sample 1: Research Relevance

1. Introduction
2. Laboratory Updates
 - a. Retirement
 - b. Future expansion
 - c. Research Direction
 - d. Summer field tour
3. Research Reports
 - a. Carbon Sequestration
 - b. Integrated Systems
 - c. Crop Sequence Calculator
4. Break-out Groups
 - a. Three groups
 - b. Each group led by co-facilitator
 - c. Same predetermined questions asked in each group
 - d. Recording done on flip charts
5. Group Reports
6. Wrap-up

Sample 2: Research in ARS

1. Introductions
2. Laboratory Updates
 - a. Technology Information Specialist
 - i. Position Filled
 - ii. Expectations
 - b. Future Expansion
 - i. Soil Microbiologist
 - ii. New Money in Current Budget (Climate Change)
 - c. Research Direction
 - d. Summer Field Tour
3. Special Guests (Emphasis of our location in the National scheme)
 - a. C. Wayne Honeycut: ARS, Orono, MA (Research Leader)
 - b. Steven Shafer, ARS, NPS, Beltsville, MD (NPL, Global change)
 - c. Samuel McLaughlin, University of Tennessee (Biofuels research)
4. Research Reports
 - a. Mark Liebig, Soil Quality
 - b. Scott Kronberg, Animal Nutrition
 - c. John Hendrickson, Range Ecology
5. Officers and Organization
6. Wrap-up