

FOCUS GROUP HOW-TO

Large marketing companies use focus groups to test their products on potential customers. For example, Kelloggs might pull a group of children together to see if they like one new cereal taste over another. We can apply this strategy to yearbook by pulling a sample of our customers together and seeking their opinions. This builds community by building a sense of buy-in and belonging.

Step one: Make your lists

Pull buyer and non-buyer lists from last year's eBusiness files, grab last year's book and print a list of your student body. Recruit a handful of staffers to make lists of 10 to 12 students who have the following profiles. Although you may invite a dozen students, a focus group of six to eight is ideal.

1. Non-buyer, not covered
2. Non-buyer, covered
3. Buyer, not-covered
4. Buyer, covered

If your staffers know their peers well, it's appropriate to choose students who are likely to voice their opinions, however they should steer clear of their friend groups to eliminate bias where possible.

Step two: Prep and plan

Find a good place for a group discussion, where you won't be disrupted. Maybe get permission to use a conference room. Decide if there are times during the school day that would work, or if you need to hold your focus group after school — this may eliminate a lot of participants. Offer food or snacks.

Pro tip: Offer to buy pizza and hold the focus group during lunch. Exchange doughnuts for ideas with students who get to school early. Raid study halls (with permission).

Sharpen those interview skills. Hold a mock focus group with your yearbook staff and have them practice taking constructive criticism with grace. Practice steering away from the price of the book and toward the content. Make sure to bring visual aids. Bring your last four or five yearbooks and some samples from other schools.

Step three: Hold the focus groups

As the adviser, try to stay in the background. Begin with a brief introduction, make sure your attendees know you want their unvarnished opinion, and then step back and let your students do their thing.

Grade staffers on their work and product. Editors and returners can get credit for planning and executing the plan and for moderating the group discussion. Newer staffers can get credit for well-written, open-ended questions and staying cool during the chats. They can practice taking a line of discussion and extending it. Have all participants write about their experiences and capture the most important bits of inspiration from the focus groups. (Also, check out the Focus Group Rubric on LearnYBK.com under Teams and Leaders.)

Sample questions: Looking through previous years' books and/or sample books:

1. What do you see that appeals to you?
2. What do you see that doesn't appeal to you?
3. How would you make the book better?
4. Do you have ideas for stories or coverage that we should include in this year's book?