

Guidelines for Observing and Interpreting Forum Results

I. In Preparation

1. Understand the framework

Unless you thoroughly understand the issue framework used in the forum, you may misread what people say or overlook key points they make. And so, before attending a forum, make sure you have read the issue book and thoroughly understand the issue, especially the issue summary. You should also:

- Watch the starter video
- Fill out the pre- and post-forum questionnaires yourself to thoroughly familiarize yourself with them

2. Keep in mind the formation of public opinion

- Learn how public opinion evolves from top-of-the-head opinion to a considered public judgment in seven stages, as described by Dan Yankelovich so that you can gauge where people are on the issue

3. Plan to use “the impact of deliberation” as your frame of reference

- NIF forums are unique because people have a chance to *think* about an issue, learn more, hear other points of view, and deliberate with others
- And so, you should keep in mind your overarching research question, which will be: “How does deliberation affect people’s *thinking* about the issue?”

4. Know what claims you can and cannot make

- Understand the differences between NIF forums and a poll or a focus group
- Understand what we can and cannot claim about people’s thinking
- Our strongest claim is that forums reveal people’s thinking about an issue as they deliberate about it at some length. Instead of a “snapshot” of public opinion at a point in time (which is what a poll yields), an analysis of forum results can yield a more in-depth, textured view of people’s thinking as they approach an issue and then work through

5. Cast a wide net

Even people with a lot of experience analyzing forums find it difficult to authoritatively interpret the results of a single forum. Ideally, before interpreting forum results, you should:

- Moderate one forum yourself
- Observe one or two other forums at which you take extensive notes, and then interview one or two participants afterward
- Interview one or two moderators who conducted additional forums you did not attend to inform and confirm what you've heard
- If you are writing a report about a community or state, the forums you draw on should be geographically and demographically diverse and representative

II. Guidelines for Observing and Interpreting Forums

6. Observe without analyzing

- Listen to what people say without trying to analyze
- Take thorough notes, but keep an open mind
- Do not jump to conclusions

7. Assess people's "starting point"

- An interpretative report on NIF forums should compare how people initially attached to or engaged with the issue to what they said as they learned more, heard from others, etc.
- Listen carefully to what people say in response to the icebreaker and about their initial connection to the issue

8. Assess what people say about each choice, one choice at a time

- Compare what people say initially to what they say as they deliberate about each choice
- Listen to what people are struggling with or are passionate about
- Identify where the tensions are
- Listen to how they feel about the trade offs, the costs and consequences of each choice
- Listen to what is *not* said – key issues or arguments that do not surface or resonate

9. Learn *why* people feel as they do

- Try to ascertain and understand people's reasoning
- Try to understand how people's thinking fits together

10. Identify the values people draw on

- Consider what are the underlying values that drive people's thinking
- Identify what it is that people hold valuable and why

11. Listen for and capture the sentiments of the *group*, not an individual

- Listen for the voice of the group, not the views of any individual, no matter how articulate, charismatic or well informed that person may be
- As a rule, use quotes that capture the sentiments of the group
- Do not use a quote just because it is pithy or clever

12. Listen for "a public voice"

- Forums encourage people to think of the issue "publicly" as opposed to the more narrow considerations most of us first think of when we consider an issue.
- Instead of complaints about a late Social Security check, listen for what they people say about what we, all of us together should do about Social Security/retirement issues.

13. Identify common ground for action or what unites the group

- Rather than consensus, try to identify what people say they can "live with"

14. Listen for other voices

- The group may not agree. If it doesn't, listen for the main strands of people's thinking. (e.g., if the group's thinking divides into two main camps, identify them.)
- Understand and identify the different views and the basis for them

15. Fill in any gaps in your understanding by conducting post-forum interviews

- Interview two participants and the moderator
- Compare your sense of what happened to their interpretation

16. Incorporate the results of the pre- and post-forum questionnaires

- In compiling your analysis, examine and incorporate into your interpretation the results of the pre- and post-forum questionnaires.
- The questionnaire results should support your overall interpretation
- Keep in mind the limitations of the questionnaires (not a random or probability sample, not poll results, etc.).

Some Common Mistakes to Avoid

1. Drawing firm conclusions from a single forum

- It is hard to authoritatively analyze the results of a solitary forum
- Try to observe (or use moderator interviews to learn about) as many forums as you can

2. Summarizing the results instead of analyzing them

- Your report should be an *analysis* of people's thinking, not a *summary* of what they said

3. Letting your biases/preferences influence your analysis

- A rule of thumb: When people's opinions start to align with your own views and preferences, it's time to recheck your analysis

4. Paying too much attention to the loudest or most articulate voices

- Your analysis should reflect the public voice of the group as a whole

5. Giving too much weight to the wittiest or most cleverly expressed views

- Make sure the quotes you use represent the *group's* feelings

6. Putting too much (or not enough) emphasis on counting responses

- Counting responses in a forum is very tricky
- A hand count is useful information, but it is not necessarily authoritative

7. Rushing to judgment

- Don't draw conclusions too quickly
- Keep an open mind and let yourself be surprised

8. Having too much (or not enough) confidence in the results

- Make sure you know what claims you can and cannot make