

OMB Clearance Package Focus Group Testing of IRS Schedule C, Profit or Loss from Business and Schedule E, Supplemental Income and Loss

Introduction

The Tax Forms and Publications (TF&P) Office of the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), Wage and Investment division, creates tax forms, instructions, and related publications to enable taxpayers to understand and fulfill their filing and reporting obligations under the tax laws of the United States. Many of the provisions of the tax laws are complex. The forms, instructions, and publications developed by TF&P necessarily reflect this complexity and may be lengthy, complex, and difficult for taxpayers to understand.

Background

TF&P has used focus groups, laboratory testing, and other methods in the past to determine the usability by taxpayers of various forms, instructions, and publications. These focus groups have resulted in the adoption of various specific suggestions for improvement to specific products. TF&P requires the continued use of such tools to improve the materials it produces.

Objectives of Research

The objective of these focus groups is to gather input from taxpayers about the Schedule C, Profit or Loss from Business and Schedule E, Supplemental Income and Loss to determine how taxpayers react to these revised forms. The specific business questions to be explored by this project are to determine:

- Participants' overall perception of, revised Schedules C and E and their accompanying instructions
- Common errors participants make when completing Schedule C and E and when reporting third party or merchant payments for goods or rents on these schedules
- Parts of the instructions and schedule that participants find most helpful
- Specific suggestions participants have for improving Schedule C and E and their instructions

This information will assist the division in developing clear tax products that assist taxpayers in voluntarily meeting their tax obligations and reporting their business income accurately. To achieve these objectives, the division plans to conduct a total of 8 focus groups, (2 per city) in 4 separate cities. Each focus group will consist of at least 8 participants, with 10 being the ideal number of participants. Upon arrival, participants will be re-screened to confirm their eligibility.

TF&P also expects to gain knowledge of participants' reactions to the revised forms to discover what parts of the documents lead to error or misunderstanding. Upon completion of this project ICF Macro will submit a report of findings to TF&P to determine improvements that could be made. The feedback received will not institute new policy, yet enable the Service to effectively meet taxpayer needs.

Methodology

Sample design

The population for this study consists of taxpayers Are we getting preparers? .

Taxpayers meet the following criteria:

- self prepared, using paper or software
- filed a Form 1040 in 2010 (Long Form) with either a Schedule C and/or a Schedule E
- 1040 Schedule C filers who receive customers' payments for their goods or services by credit or debit card or by PayPal® or other third-party payment services
- 1040 Schedule E filers who receive renters' payments for rent by credit or debit card or PayPal® or other third-party payment services

All participants must be fluent in reading, writing, and speaking English. The maximum number of participants per focus group will be 10. We will select an even number of credit, debit, and PayPal users/takers. A screener guide has been prepared for professional recruiters to use to recruit participants for each of the focus groups (see Attachment 1).

The focus groups will be held in geographically dispersed cities in the country, with two groups in each city. The focus groups will be conducted in the following cities; Boston, MA, Chicago, IL, Dallas, TX and San Jose, CA.

Data collection date

Data will be collected in July 2011 and August 2011.

Data to be collected

Data gathered will be taxpayers' reactions to the Schedules C and E and their instructions. Data will be gathered on the following:

- Ease of use

- Readability
- Overall content
- Usefulness
- Clarity of language
- Layout and organization
- Type size and font
- Order of presentation
- Ease of locating information and reporting it on the schedules.

How the data will be used

The goal of a focus group is to solicit general opinions about a topic. An important aspect of focus groups is that they give rise to insights and solutions that may not be derived from other methods. Focus group interviews are qualitative research, meaning no statistical difference between groups can be determined. Specifically, they are a directed discussion with small groups of 8 to 12 people on a specific topic.

Experienced moderators from ICF Macro will conduct the focus groups using a moderator guide that has been developed (see Attachment 2).

Audiotapes and scribes' notes will be used to assist with feedback documentation during the focus groups.

Who is conducting the research?

ICF Macro staff will conduct the research for TF&P.

Location—region/city and facilities

The ICF Macro staff will conduct 8 focus groups (two per city) in the following cities:

- Boston, MA
- Chicago, IL
- Dallas, TX; and
- San Jose, CA

Facilities to conduct the focus groups will be provided by the vendor.

Stipend

The purpose of the stipend is to encourage participation, and to thank participants for sharing their time and contributions to the discussion. The amount of the stipend varies by location of the focus group and target audience(s). Participants will each receive \$75 for a 2-hour session.

Recruitment efforts

Using the screener guide, a vendor in each city will recruit participants for the focus groups (see Attachment 1).

Efforts to not duplicate research

Direct interaction with taxpayers through focus groups has been a research design used by the IRS for a number of years. Revisions are planned for Scheduled C and E have not been previously tested in this format and therefore there is no duplication of research.

Test structure/design

After some general introductory questions, participants will look at the revised Schedule C and its instructions. Participants will be asked questions specific to content, layout, and appearance. Following this portion of the session, participants will be presented with a scenario and asked to fill out the form using the information contained in the scenario. Participants will be asked a series of questions how useful the new form was in completing the scenario. This process will be repeated with the Schedule E.

Sampling Plan

Each focus group will have 8 to 10 participants. Research has demonstrated that this number of participants helps create the best group dynamics; the groups are sufficiently large to stimulate relatively spontaneous interaction, but small enough to give everyone sufficient opportunity to speak.

The screener guide will be used to qualify and select focus group participants. ICF Macro will gather qualitative data only, which will not be, nor presented to be, representative of the population.

Participants Criteria

To participate in the study, individual participants must have the following characteristics:

- self prepared, using paper or software
- filed a Form 1040 in 2010
- at least 18 years old
- receive customers' payments for their goods or services by credit or debit card or by PayPal® or other third-party payment services and/or;
- receive renters' payments for rent by credit or debit card or PayPal® or other third-party payment services

Privacy, Security, and Disclosure

The data returned to IRS TF&P will have no identifying information relating specific records to individual taxpayers. Nonetheless, TF&P will ensure that privacy and security of the aggregated results will receive the utmost attention. Public and official access to the information will be tightly controlled. The computer files containing this tabulated information will remain password protected at all times. Data security approaching level C-2 will be accomplished using the Windows XP operating system.

Audiotapes used to record testing sessions will be destroyed when the project is completed and there is no further need for the data.

We will apply fair information and record-keeping practices to ensure protection of all taxpayers. The criterion for disclosure laid out in the Privacy Act, the Freedom of Information Act, and section 6103 of the Internal Revenue Code, provides for the protection of taxpayer information as well as its release to authorized recipients.

Estimated Burden Hours

The estimated time to complete the participant screening is 5 minutes. The estimated time for each reminder call is 1 minute, with each testing session lasting 2 hours. We estimate that 10 percent of the taxpayers contacted for the study will qualify and be willing to participate. Using this percentage, a total of 900 individuals will need to be screened to recruit the needed 12 participants (10 study participants and 2 back-up participants) for each focus group. We estimate that 8 people will be sent home because we will only need 72 to stay for the focus groups. Of those being sent home, we estimate 30 minutes of travel time.

Total number of potential participants screened	900
Estimated time to complete screening	5 minutes
Reminder phone calls (96 x 1 minute/call)	80 minutes

Estimated participant screening burden **77 hours (900 x 5 +**
96 minutes)

Number of participants (80)	80
Time to conduct study (including 30 minutes for travel)	2.5 hours
Travel Time (16 participants sent home) x.5 hours)	8 hours

**Estimated study burden
(80 x 2.5 + 8)**

208 hours

Estimated total project burden hours

285 hours

Focus Group Arrangements

ICF Macro will manage every aspect of recruitment. They will use professional recruitment firms in Boston, MA, Chicago, IL, Dallas, TX and San Jose, CA. Focus groups will be held in the respective facilities in each city. Using the screener guide, each firm will recruit 10 participants for each focus group with a goal of having 10 participants for each group.

ICF Macro will ensure that:

- Each participant receives directions to the focus group room.
- Each participant is re-screened upon arrival at the facility to confirm eligibility.
- All materials are ready for use in the focus group session, including tables and chairs, newsprint, colored markers, note pads, calculators, pencils, and audiotapes.
- Complimentary refreshments appropriate to the time of day are available for the focus group participants.
- Audio equipment is operating properly.
- Honoraria to participants are distributed upon the completion of the session.
- Last names or other identifying information are NOT available to IRS personnel.

Estimated Costs

The total estimated cost associated with this study is \$91,508.00

Special Tallies and Other Information

Within 60 days after the completion of the focus groups, ICF Macro will provide the following information:

- Actions taken or lessons learned
- Number of requests or attempts for taxpayer participation
- Number of focus group participants
- Cost
- Transcripts and audiotapes.
- Final focus group report

Attachments

Attachment 1 Screener Guide, Confirmation Letter, and Reminder Phone Script

Attachment 2 Moderator's Guide