

**Request for Approval under the "Generic Clearance to Conduct
Cognitive and Psychological Research"
(OMB Control Number: 1545-1349)**

**Supporting Statement
Approval Requested to Conduct Cognitive and Customer Satisfaction
Research
(OMB # 1545-1349)
Focus Groups to Determine Ways to Improve Customer Satisfaction and
Business Results**

A. JUSTIFICATION

1. Circumstances Making the Collection of Information Necessary

The Taxpayer Advocate Service (TAS) is looking to identify ways to improve Customer Satisfaction and Business Results within IRS by working with taxpayers and tax practitioners to understand their experiences in working with the IRS and TAS. To this end, TAS wants to hold focus groups to obtain tax practitioners' thoughts, opinions, and experiences about the following areas:

- Effectiveness of the Automated Collection System;
- IRS Office Locations and Service Offerings
- IRS's Use of Automated Processing

2. Purpose and Use of the Information Collection

The Taxpayer Advocate Service will conduct focus groups at the IRS sponsored Tax Forums. The Tax Forums provide a unique opportunity to solicit the opinions of practitioners about these topics. The Tax Forums are continuing professional education events that will be held in several cities during the summer of 2012. The cities and dates include: Orlando, FL June 19-21, Atlanta, GA July 10-12, San Diego, CA July 17-19, Las Vegas, NV July 31 - August 2, Chicago, IL August 21-23, and New York, NY August 28- 30.

The focus groups findings will be shared with different areas of TAS to improve communication tools and will provide information on topics of interest for projects such as those included in the TAS Annual Report to Congress.

Automated Collection Service (ACS)

TAS has an interest in practitioner's thoughts and ideas on the Automated Collection Service (ACS) and its effectiveness. Specifically we want to know what they think of the quality of the service provided, how easy it is to speak to a manager, wait times and other experiences they have had in dealing with the assistors.

IRS Office Locations and Service Offerings

With changes in IRS operations and advances in technology it is likely that tax preparers' interactions with the IRS have changed over time. This group will discuss what services require face to face interaction and how the IRS's geographic locations affect preparers' ability to resolve issues. The group will also gather ideas to improve future interactions with IRS.

IRS's Use of Automated Processing

Advances in technology allow the IRS to modify the way it processes tax returns and associated tasks, as well as, how it interacts with taxpayers. This group will discuss the way IRS uses technology to improve efficiencies and will consider your thoughts for appropriate uses and how IRS's technology changes affect your practice.

3. Consideration Given to Information Technology

Focus groups are held in person at each of the Tax Forum locations. This allows us to interview a group of tax practitioners from a wide range of areas relatively inexpensively.

4. Duplication of Information

Our groups gather information on tax practitioner's current opinions about the ACS system, IRS's use of Automated Processing, and IRS Location and Service Offerings. This timely, qualitative research will help identify current issues of concern to tax professionals, and their impressions of taxpayers' perspectives. No similar data are currently gathered or maintained by the Agency.

5. Reducing the Burden on Small Entities

N/A – Small businesses are not included in this research.

6. Consequences of Not Conducting Collection

Without these types of feedback, TAS will not have timely perspectives and insights from the practitioners.

7. Special Circumstances

There are no special circumstances. The information collected will be voluntary and will not be used for statistical purposes.

8. Consultations with Persons Outside the Agency

N/A – TAS employees are trained in qualitative research techniques.

9. Payment or Gift

No stipend will be paid to focus group participants. We may provide participants with a small TAS marketing item as a thank you for participating in the focus group. Based upon other groups that have been conducted at past tax forums, we believe this will be sufficient to attract participants. The approximate cost for all small marketing items, if used, will be less than \$ 400.

10. Confidentiality

TAS will maximize privacy and security to participants to the extent allowed by law. Personal or sensitive information will not be disclosed. Only first names will be used in

both recruiting and groups (first initial of last name will be used if there are duplicate names). No individual taxpayer data will be used for this project. Only qualitative data derived from focus group discussions will be used in the internal summary report. We will limit and control the amount of information that we collect to those items that are necessary to accomplish the research objectives.

No vendor is being used in the recruitment process. We are partnering with Tax Forum sites to use their facilities for the focus group interviews. We will protect the privacy of the focus group participants to the extent allowed by law by not using names in our report. We will also control official access to the information and will not allow public access to the information. The screener's guides will be destroyed when we have completed the project and there is no further need for the data. Recordings of focus group discussions will immediately be erased or destroyed after information is transcribed.

We will apply fair information and record-keeping practices to ensure protection of all participants. 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 information as well as its release to authorized recipients.

11. Sensitive Nature

No questions will be asked that are of a personal or sensitive nature.

12. Burden of Information Collection

As people are walking past the booth our recruiters ask if they are interested in participating in a focus group - probably about 1,800 people (for all 3 groups at all 6 forums). Only 360 of these people express interest in one of our groups and go through a screener and are signed up as participants. Of the group on the list, only 180 (of the 360 signed up) participate.

The estimated time to complete the participant screening is two minutes and the estimated time for each focus group attendee is 1 hour. We assume 50% percent of screened participants will actually participate in the groups.

Based upon experiences, we have found the response rate is equal to ten percent of the attendees who visit the focus group booth at the Tax Forums. About 50 percent of those recruited actually participate in the groups. With regard to the low response rate, TAS assumes that all data collected from this effort is qualitative, and no critical decisions will be made by TAS solely from the analysis of data from these groups. The results from these focus groups are simply one piece of a larger set of information needed to assess practitioner / taxpayer needs related to services provided by the IRS.

| Screening Burden | |
|--|------------|
| Total number of potential participants screened: (participants screened for each group and 3 groups held per location = 20 screenings per focus group X 3 focus groups X 6 Forums= 360 participants). Screening burden is only calculation for those individuals who indicate an interest in participating in one of the focus groups. | 360 People |

| | | |
|---|------------|--------------|
| Estimated time to complete screening | 2 | Minutes |
| Estimated participant screening burden (360 X 2 minutes = 720 minutes / 60 = 12 hours) | 12 | Hours |
| Focus Group Participation Burden | | |
| Estimated number of participants: 30 participants per tax forum (n=10 for each focus group). There will be 6 focus group locations. We will conduct three focus group sessions at each location (18 groups) for a total of 180 participants. | 180 | People |
| Time to conduct the focus group (1 hours) | 1 | Hours |
| Estimated focus group participant burden (180 X 1 = 180) | 180 | Hours |
| Total burden (screening and focus group participation (screening burden of 12 hours + focus group burden of 180 hours = 192) | 192 | Hours |

13. Costs to Respondents

None

14. Costs to Federal Government

**The estimated costs for the travel to the six focus groups for 2 moderators and one note taker are: 2 moderators who will also recruit (\$1,500 x 6 X 2) \$18,000
1 note taker (\$1,000 X 6 X 1) \$6,000 (the note taker may be local in some instances)**

Costs for conducting the focus groups will consist of travel costs, approximately \$24,000 for the employees directly responsible for recruiting, moderating, and scribing. Although the travel costs have been approximated for the focus groups for purposes of this report, recruiters, moderators, and scribe will be utilized for numerous other purposes throughout the forum week.

15. Reason for Change

Not applicable. This is a new request for a generic ICR.

16. Tabulation of Results, Schedule, Analysis Plans

The following information will be provided within 60 days after the close of the focus group data collection operations:

1. Findings: a brief summary of significant (important) findings that were evidenced in the results.
2. Actions taken or lessons learned: a brief summary of actions taken or lessons learned as a result of the findings.
3. Number of participants screened.
4. Number of focus group participants.
5. Date the data collection began
6. Date the data collection ended.

7. Cost: reproduction costs, travel, overtime payments, and any other costs incurred as direct result of the focus groups.
8. Burden hours.

17. Display of OMB Approval Date

We are requesting no exemption.

18. Exceptions to Certification for Paperwork Reduction Act Submissions

These activities comply with the requirements in 5 CFR 1320.9.

BEGINNING AND ENDING DATES OF COLLECTION

June 19 – August 30.

B. STATISTICAL METHODS

Data collection methods and procedures will vary; however, the primary purpose of these collections will be for internal management purposes; there are no plans to externally publish the results or otherwise release this information. Occasionally, employees will use a statement or summary from the groups in a report that is distributed publically. All focus group information is qualitative and is always identified as such.

1. Universe and Respondent Selection

To accomplish the objectives of this project we will conduct focus groups in conjunction with IRS sponsored tax forums in six metropolitan areas across the United States. One focus group will be conducted on each topic per city for a total of six focus groups for each topic (one session in each area; Issues with Automated Collection System (ACS), IRS Office Locations and Service Offerings, and IRS's Use of Automated Processing.

Focus group interviews are a directed discussion on a specific topic with a small group of eight to ten people. As a type of group interview, focus groups use group interaction to stimulate relatively spontaneous responses to the supplied topics. The goal is to explore the feelings, opinions and beliefs people hold, and to learn how these feelings shape overt behavior. Focus groups provide insight and direction rather than quantitatively precise or absolute measures. They are useful for gathering information in a given field and generating hypotheses based on participants' opinions. The main advantage focus groups offer is the opportunity to observe considerable interaction on a topic in a limited period of time. An important aspect of focus groups is that they give rise synergistically to insights and solutions that may not come about without them.

The market segment for this project consists of tax practitioners and taxpayers' representatives. TAS executives and managers will use the data gathered during the focus group interviews to better serve taxpayers by better understanding problems with the IRS Automated Collection System (ACS, IRS Office Locations and Service Offerings, and IRS's Use of Automated Processing.

2. Procedures for Collecting Information

Our step by step approach follows:

- 1 – We met with our customer to determine the objectives for this project. After clarifying objectives for the focus groups, and, if necessary, we developed a screener’s guide (see Appendix) to recruit participants and a moderator’s guide (see Appendix) to be used during the focus groups.
- 2 – So that we obtain a diverse group of focus groups participants, we prepared a demographic sheet (see Appendix) to be used by the screener. TAS employees will use the demographic sheet and the screener’s guide to solicit and select focus group participants.
- 3 – Experienced moderators from TAS will conduct the focus groups and share moderating and scribing duties. Debriefing notes will be prepared by the note taker/scribe and the moderator after each session. Sessions may also be recorded to assist in preparation of the final report.
- 4 – Because a focus group analysis is strictly qualitative, we will report the feedback and behaviors received during the focus groups. A brief description of the focus group participants will be provided. Unlike quantitative studies, the sample is neither randomly selected nor representative of a target population so the results cannot be generalized or treated statistically. We will report our findings to the customer in the form of a summary report.

3. Methods to Maximize Response

TAS does several things to try to improve the response rates. One, TAS recruits early in the Tax Forum to try to fit into the schedules of participants as they align their interests. Two, we encourage participants to come and share their opinion with the IRS. Finally, we try to conduct the focus groups during the midday (lunch) break, as this helps us avoid competing with the other seminars, presentations, etc.

4. Testing of Procedures

Focus groups are a form of qualitative research. Each focus group will have approximately eight to ten participants. Each participant will be encouraged to share his or her thoughts and opinions. The conversation is free flowing. The moderator will ensure each participant is comfortable sharing their experiences.

5. Contacts for Statistical Aspects and Data Collection

TAS Research Operations Research Analysts designed, developed, or consulted on these focus groups. TAS Research will be available throughout the study period to answer any questions or advise as needed. Please contact Carol Hatch at 501 396-5954 with questions regarding this submission.