

Request for Approval under the “Generic Clearance for the Collection of Routine Customer Feedback” (OMB Control Number: 1545-1349)

TITLE OF INFORMATION COLLECTION:

Focus Group: “IRS Post-Filing: Processes and Taxpayer Representation”

PURPOSE:

In response to questions from a number of stakeholders, IRS Office of Research is developing an Individual Post-Filing Burden model in order to better understand the current level of this burden and its impact on tax administration. Based on the results of a pilot study, we have found that taxpayers are often unable to distinguish the different levels of examination and collection, which limits their ability to communicate their experiences with the post-filing process. Focus group sessions with tax professionals who are experienced in providing taxpayer representation services will allow us to:

- Reflect post-filing processes as they occur in actual practice,
- Understand how to quantify post-filing burden from the perspective of taxpayers and their representatives,
- Hear where post-filing processes are working well,
- Hear where post-filing processes can be improved,
- Better understand the role of the tax professional in the post-filing process, and
- Identify steps the IRS can take to help tax professionals better serve taxpayers in representation engagements.

The IRS Nationwide Tax Forums, held annually in six locations across the country, provide an opportunity for IRS Office of Research to conduct focus group sessions with practitioners who provide taxpayer representation services. The information obtained will allow the IRS to better understand the post filing process, how to improve the post-filing process to reduce taxpayer burden, and how the IRS can assist tax professionals in providing high-quality, value-add representation services.

The objectives of each focus group meeting would be to gain insight and feedback on the current level of post-filing burden and its impact on tax administration. IRS Office of Research plans to conduct these focus groups at three of the six IRS Nationwide Tax Forums, during the period August 9, 2011 – September 1, 2011.

DESCRIPTION OF RESPONDENTS:

Enrolled practitioners (EAs, CPAs, attorneys) who have at least three years experience providing taxpayer representation services.

TYPE OF COLLECTION: (Check one)

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Customer Comment Card/Complaint Form | <input type="checkbox"/> Customer Satisfaction Survey |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Usability Testing (e.g., Website or Software | <input type="checkbox"/> Small Discussion Group |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Focus Group | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |

If you are conducting a focus group, survey, or plan to employ statistical methods, please provide answers to the following questions:

The selection of your targeted respondents

1. Do you have a customer list or something similar that defines the universe of potential respondents and do you have a sampling plan for selecting from this universe?
[] Yes [X] No

If the answer is yes, please provide a description of both below (or attach the sampling plan)? **If the answer is no, please provide a description of how you plan to identify your potential group of respondents and how you will select them?**

Attendees at three IRS Tax Forums will be screened for participation in the focus group session to be conducted during the respective forum. In order to receive an invitation to participate in the focus group, the individual must be an enrolled practitioner (EA, CPA, or attorney) who has at least three years of experience providing taxpayer representation services.

Administration of the Instrument

1. How will you collect the information? (Check all that apply)
[] Web-based or other forms of Social Media
[] Telephone
[X] In-person
[] Mail
[] Other, Explain
2. Will interviewers or facilitators be used? [X] Yes [] No

ATTACHMENTS

[Appendix A](#) – Schedule of IRS Tax Forums where focus groups will be held.

[Appendix B](#) – Recruiter’s Guide for the “IRS Post-Filing: Processes and Taxpayer Representation” Focus Group. Each focus group will consist of 10-12 participants and be limited to 120 minutes in duration.

[Appendix C](#) – Moderator's Guide for the “IRS Post-Filing: Processes and Taxpayer Representation” Focus Group. One moderator will facilitate each group and one will take notes. The sessions will also be audio-taped to document notes for the report and then the tapes will be destroyed.

[Appendix D](#) – Section of Proposed Taxpayer Survey. The Moderator’s Guide includes high-level questions seeking feedback from respondents. Information received from respondents will be considered when developing the questions for the actual taxpayer survey to be conducted in FY2012.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Schedule for 2011 IRS Nationwide Tax Forums where “IRS Post-Filing: Processes and Taxpayer Representation” focus groups will be held

City	Dates
San Jose, CA	August 9 – 11, 2011
Las Vegas, NV	August 16 – 18, 2011
Washington, DC National Harbor	August 30 – September 1, 2011

Appendix B: Recruiter’s Guide for the “IRS Post-Filing: Processes and Taxpayer Representation” Focus Groups

One 120 minute focus group. Recruit 25 for approximately 10-12 to show up for each group.

Hello, my name is _____ and I am an employee of the Internal Revenue Service. The IRS is hosting a series of focus groups across the U.S. to learn more about the current post-filing environment, such as IRS examinations, appeals, and collections. I am recruiting approximately 12 tax preparers to participate in one of these focus group discussions. The focus group will gather ideas and opinions from you.

Note: If the respondents are concerned about participating, tell them that the IRS specifically prohibits you from revealing any information about them to the IRS or anyone else.

First, may I ask you some qualifying questions?

Question #1: Are you Circular 230 practitioner licensed to represent taxpayers in matters before the IRS?

If the answer is “yes, Circular 230 practitioner” ask question #2.

If the answer is no, do not invite the person.

Question #2: (If Circular 230 practitioner) Do you have at least three years of experience providing taxpayer representation services?

If the answer is yes, invite the participant.

If the answer is no, do not invite the person.

Invitation

We would like to invite you to participate in the focus group titled ‘IRS Post-Filing: Processes and Taxpayer Representation with about 11 other people. Again, we want to hear your opinions, views and ideas. The session should take about 2 hours and will be held on __ (day) __ at __ (time) __ in Room _____.

Note: Read the Paperwork Reduction Act

The Paperwork Reduction Act requires that the IRS display an OMB (Office of Management and Budget) control number on all public information requests. The OMB Control Number for this focus group is 1545-1349. Also, if you like, I can give you a name and address where you can send comments and questions regarding this process or suggestions for making it simpler.

Note: Read only if Person asks for address to send comments to:

*Internal Revenue Service
Tax Products Coordinating Committee
SE:W:CAR:MP:T:T:SP
1111 Constitution Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20224*

Thank you and have a nice day. We look forward to meeting with you on (DATE) at (TIME)

Appendix C: Moderator's Guide for the “IRS Post-Filing: Processes and Taxpayer Representation”

**POST-FILING: PROCESSES AND TAXPAYER REPRESENTATION
Focus Group Moderator’s Guide**

Focus Group Dynamics: Up to 15 Circular 230 Tax Practitioners (EAs, CPAs, attorneys) who have at least three years of experience providing taxpayer representation services. Participants may either be employees of a tax preparation firm or self-employed. Representation services may or may not be the only tax service provided by the tax professional.

Length: Two hours

A. Introduction 10 minutes

My name is _____. I work in the IRS Research community and I’m the moderator for this session. This is my co-moderator _____.

The IRS Office of Research is currently developing a survey as part of an effort to gather more information about the burden faced by individual taxpayers during post-filing processes. For the purposes of our study, we are defining “post-filing” events as any taxpayer interaction with the IRS regarding a previously filed tax return – for example, exams, appeals and collections.

The purpose of this discussion is to talk about your experiences assisting taxpayers through post-filing processes. Your experience providing taxpayer representation services places you in the unique position of being able to understand what a taxpayer faces when dealing with the IRS, as well as being familiar with post-filing processes. Your participation today will help us improve the questions on the survey and help us gain insight into what we are doing right, how we can improve post-filing processes, and how we can assist you, the tax professional, in providing high-quality, value-added representation services. The discussion will last approximately two hours.

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWING AND MODERATING

Before we start, let me ask how many of you have participated in a focus group before?

[IF SOME PEOPLE ARE NEW TO FOCUS GROUPS] For those of you who have not, let me explain. Focus groups are a type of group interview, and they are designed to promote interaction among participants for the purpose of eliciting a diversity of views, ideas, and opinions about the topic under discussion.

We have some ground rules that I would like to go over:

- Please talk one at a time and in a voice at least as loud as mine and avoid side conversations. Please turn off any cell phones or beepers.

- My co-moderator and other observers in the room will be taking notes as well as recording this session. The recording will only be used to assist with documenting this focus group session, and then they will be destroyed.
- During this discussion, please use first names only.
- Because we want you to be frank and open with your responses, I want to assure you that all comments in this room are strictly private— **NO NAMES WILL BE USED IN OUR REPORT.**
- There will be no formal break; however, if you need to stretch, go to the restroom, or walk around a little, please feel free to do so but please rejoin the group as quickly as possible. Your comments are very important to us.
- Most importantly, we're here to get as many different opinions and experiences as possible. So, not every person has to answer every question, but we do want to make sure everyone gets heard today. Remember, there are no wrong answers. The goal of our focus group today is not so much that the group reach an agreement, although it's okay if that happens, but that you each say what's true for you – that's why we've invited [NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS] of you here today instead of just one. So if you have a different experience or opinion, please let us know exactly how you feel. And if you change your mind, that's okay, too. Just let us know about it.

My job as your moderator is to:

- Help guide the flow of conversation,
- Make sure everyone's comments are heard, and
- Ensure that questions about various aspects of the topic are covered.

Also, please note that in the interest of time, there may be occasions where I may have to interrupt the conversation in order to move on to another topic or set of questions.

We are required by law to report to you the OMB control # for this public information request. That number is _____.

Does anyone have any questions before we begin?

B. Warm Up 5 minutes

Let's begin by getting to know each other a little better. Please introduce yourself to the group and tell us:

Note: Go around the table.

- Your first name,
- Whether you are an EA, CPA, or attorney,
- How long you've been providing representation services
- And are your representation services primarily for correspondence exams, office exams, field exams, or collections.

C. Discussion Topics 100 minutes

Topic I: Post-filing Process in General (40 minutes)

1. First, I want to ask some general questions about clients.

Probes:

- a) At what stage in the process do your clients typically first seek your services for post-filing issues? When they get the first letter? After they have tried to resolve the issue themselves? When a case is at the Appeals level?
- b) Are most of your representation clients new to your office, or are they your tax return clients?
- c) What are the primary reasons why taxpayers seek assistance with IRS post-filing issues?

2. Now let's talk about what happens during an IRS examination or audit. How do you interact with clients and the IRS during an examination?

Probes:

- a) What do you ask your client to do to prepare for an audit (gather materials, meetings, etc.)?
- b) How many times do you typically meet or communicate with your client (in person, through email, or on the phone)?
- c) How many times do you typically meet or communicate with the IRS (in person, through correspondence, or on the phone)?
- d) [OPTIONAL:] Do you prepare written responses to letter audits? If so, do you sign these letters as the taxpayer's representative or does the taxpayer typically sign them?

3. Now let's talk about what happens during an Appeal. How do you interact with clients and the IRS during an Appeal?

Probes:

- a) What do you ask your clients to do (gather materials, meetings, etc.) when a case is at the Appeals level?
- b) How many times do you typically meet or communicate with your client (in person, through email, or on the phone)?
- c) How many times do you typically meet or communicate with the IRS (in person, through correspondence, or on the phone)?

4. Now let's talk about Collections cases. How do you interact with clients and the IRS during collections cases?

Probes:

- a) What do you ask your clients to do (gather materials, meetings, etc.)?
- b) How many times do you typically meet or communicate with your client (in person, through email, or on the phone)?
- c) How many times do you typically meet or communicate with the IRS (in person, through correspondence, or on the phone)?

Topic II: The Tax Professional's Role (10 minutes)

5. Now thinking about post-filing cases in general, how easy is it to interact with the IRS?

Probes:

- What information, in addition to the information provided in the IRS notice, must be obtained *from the IRS* in order to properly respond to a notice?
 - [OPTIONAL:] How easy is it to obtain this information?
- What could the IRS do to better assist you in representing your clients?
- [OPTIONAL:] Have you developed any special practices or “workarounds” that help you deal with IRS personnel or to facilitate the post-filing process?

Topic III: Time Burden (10 minutes)

6. On average, how much direct time does it take you and your clients to resolve a case? (By direct, we mean time you or your client spent actually working on a case, as opposed to wait- time).

Probes:

- a) How much of this is your time? How much is your client’s time?
- b) [OPTIONAL:] Which activities do you think taxpayers spend the most time on when dealing with an audit? What about appeals? What about collections?
- c) [OPTIONAL:] Which activities do you spend the most time on when dealing with an audit? What about appeals? What about collections?

Topic IV: Cost Burden (10 minutes)

7. How do you typically charge for representation services?

Probes:

- Does your tax practice include audit services in the tax preparation fee?
- Are your fees for representation services based on a flat rate, an hourly rate, or a combination of the two?
- Do you have different fee schedules for tax clients vs. nonclients?

Topic V: Taxpayer Burden Survey (30 minutes)

Now we would like to show you a draft of a questionnaire that we plan to send to individual taxpayers, asking them about the time and out-of-pocket costs that they spend on dealing with post-filing issues. [SAY THE FOLLOWING WHILE YOU ARE HANDING OUT THE SURVEY] This survey will be mailed to taxpayers and they will have the option to complete a hard copy and return it by mail, answer the questions on the web, or over the telephone. The recipients will be specifically instructed **not** to ask a tax professional for assistance in completing the survey.

Please take a few minutes to look over this survey, and then we will discuss your reactions to it.

1. What are your overall impressions of this survey?
2. During the survey, we ask the respondent to think about their post-filing experiences for a specific tax year. Do you think the average person understands the phrase “tax year” and can answer questions about their experiences related to a specific tax year?

3. In question 6 we ask the respondent to report the number of times they did certain activities.
 - a) Do you think the numerical scale we used (1-2, 3-5, 6-10, 11 or more) is appropriate?
 - b) Do you think the average person would be able to remember the number of times they did the listed activities?
 - c) Do you think the list of activities is appropriate?
4. Can you give us any suggestions on how to improve these questions or make them easier to answer?
5. [OPTIONAL:] In your opinion, is this a survey that someone like your typical client would be able to complete?
 - a) [OPTIONAL] Which parts of the survey do you think will be the most difficult for the average person to answer?

D. Closing 5 minutes

Are there any more comments or issues on the topics we've covered today that you'd like to discuss?

Thank you for all your help. Your ideas and opinions are very important to us. Your participation here today is valuable and greatly appreciated.

[Appendix D:](#)

Individual Post-Filing Burden Survey Questions

Description of the Event

1. Which of the following IRS notices did you receive for tax year XXXX? [check all that apply]

A notice telling you that:

 - You owed the IRS money
 - You would be receiving a refund
 - You needed to file a tax return
 - You must send in additional information or documents to the IRS
 - A Federal Tax Lien had been filed against you
 - The IRS was about to seize some of your property
 - The IRS made changes to your tax return, but did NOT require any action from you
 - None of these. SKIP to Question 4
2. How many notices did you receive from the IRS for tax year XXXX?
 - 1 – 2
 - 3 – 5
 - 6 – 10
 - 11 or more

- I did not receive any notices from the IRS for tax year XXXX
3. Which of the reasons below, if any, describe why you received one or more IRS notices? [check all that apply]
- I needed to provide additional information
 - My return was incomplete
 - I made a mistake on my return
 - I owed the IRS money
 - My return was selected to be audited
 - The IRS made a mistake
 - I don't know
 - Other _____
4. Which of the following IRS actions did you experience for tax year XXXX? [check all that apply]
- An audit by an IRS representative at an IRS office or at your home or business
 - A lien
 - A levy
 - None of these
5. While resolving your post-filing issue or issues, did you do any of the following actions [check all that apply]
- Send one or more documents to the IRS
 - File an amended return
 - Appeal an IRS decision
 - Pay additional tax
 - Request an IRS Installment Agreement
 - Submit an Offer in Compromise
 - Request a release of Federal Tax Lien
 - Go to Tax Court
 - I did not take any of these actions

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Process/Activities

6. How many times did you do any of the following with regard to your post-filing issue or issues for tax year XXXX?

	None	1 - 2	3 - 5	6 - 10	11 or more
IRS					
Read IRS notices or correspondence					
Visit the IRS website					
Obtain and/or read IRS publications					
Talk with the IRS on the phone					
Talk with the IRS in person					
Write letters to the IRS					
Third-party					
Get advice or help from friends and family					
Send a letter (or email) to a financial institution					
Send a letter (or email) to a tax professional					
Talk to financial institutions on the phone					
Talk to a tax professional on the phone					
Meet with a tax professional					
Other					
Filling out additional forms					
Review prior year's return/documents					
Review submitted return					
Perform calculations					
Look for and gather receipts, pay stubs, or other income and expense-related documents					
Obtain birth certificates, SSNs or other official records					
Submit documents (mail, email or fax)					
Visit non-IRS websites					
Other					
If other, please specify:					

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Time

- 7. How much total time have you (and/or your spouse, relatives, or friends on your behalf) spent resolving the matter?
 - a. ____Hours ____Minutes or ____None

 - b. How much of the time noted above was spent working with a tax professional, if any?
 - i. ____Hours ____ Minutes ____None ____ Not applicable

Money

- 8. How much out-of-pocket money in total have you spent to resolve the matter? (Do NOT include any taxes paid, penalties, and interest).
 - a. \$_____.00
 - b. None

 - 9. How much of the money you reported in Question 8, if any, was paid to a tax professional?
 - a. \$_____.00
 - b. None
 - c. I did not use a tax professional
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