

SB/SE Reporting Compliance Focus Groups

Recruiting email - CCE/AUR

From: IRSresearch@icfi.com

Subject: Seeking paid volunteers for a telephone focus group

Greetings,

ICF International, a research and consulting firm in the Washington, DC area, conducts customer satisfaction research and focus groups for the IRS. The purpose of the focus groups is to hear from taxpayers like you about ways to improve the customer experience when interacting with the IRS.

Our records indicate that during the past year you took part in one of the many customer satisfaction surveys we conduct for the IRS. Near the end of that survey, you provided your name, phone number and email address and said you would be interested in taking part in future research on other IRS-related issues.

Based on your interest, we are pleased to tell you about an opportunity to participate in an upcoming focus group, if you are qualified.

We are seeking qualified taxpayers to take part in a telephone focus group we will be conducting on (DAY/DATE/TIME). The focus group will take no more than one hour.

If you are interested and available to take part in this focus group, please respond to this email by (DAY/DATE) with the following information:

- Your Name
- Telephone Number
- The best time to reach you (please include your time zone)

We will call you within a few days to ask you a couple of brief questions to see if you qualify for the focus group. We will also answer any questions you may have about the groups.

If you do qualify and are selected, you will receive a \$40 stipend for your participation.

On behalf of the IRS, we look forward to hearing from you.

Traci Creller
ICF International
<http://icfi.com>

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SB/SE Focus Group - EMAIL INVITATION FOLLOW-UP & SCREENER

Background

Screeener for recruiting SB/SE taxpayers for focus groups to get more in-depth information on topics of interest to the IRS resulting from the Reporting Compliance Customer Satisfaction Surveys.

Target Group: Taxpayers who participated in one of the 2013 SB/SE Reporting Compliance mail customer satisfaction surveys (AUR, CCE).

- Each of these taxpayers indicated their willingness to participate in future research at the end of the survey and voluntarily provided their phone number and/or email address to be contacted.
- Each one replied to an email invitation of *(date)* to participate in the upcoming focus groups for Reporting Compliance.

Scope: Two focus groups – each limited to customers from either the AUR or the CCE functions. Each focus group will be limited to 8 customers and will be scheduled for 60 minutes.

- AUR – Day/Date/Time
- CCE – Day/Date/Time

SCRIPT

Hello, my name is _____ from ICF International calling on behalf of the Internal Revenue Service. I'm calling to thank you for your interest in participating in an upcoming focus group to hear about your experiences with the IRS. You indicated in your email reply to our invitation that you would be interested and available to take part in the telephone focus group which is scheduled for:

Day/Date: _____

Time: _____

Note to recruiter:

- If respondent asks where we got their contact info from tell them: "At the end of the IRS Customer Satisfaction survey that you took, you were given the option to provide your contact information if you were interested in participating in future research. You provided your email address and/or your phone number."
- If they ask about ICF: "ICF is a market research firm working with the IRS to help them improve the service they provide to taxpayers and taxpayers like you. As part of this effort, ICF conducts regular customer satisfaction surveys with taxpayers."

I need to ask you a few short questions to see if you qualify for this event. If you qualify and participate in the group, you will receive an incentive for \$40 for your participation.



1. Are you still interested in taking part in the research focus group?
 - A. Yes - Continue with Q2
 - B. No - Thank and Terminate
 - C. Maybe- (Asks for more information)
Response: I'll be happy to share that with you in just a minute. But so as not to take your time, let me first ask a couple of more questions.

2. Have you called one of the IRS toll-free lines at any time within the past year to ask a question or get information concerning your tax return or other tax matter?
 - A. Yes - Continue with Q3
 - B. No - Thank and Terminate
 - C. Not Sure/Don't Remember - Thank and Terminate

3. Do you feel that you can recall this experience well enough to answer a few questions on your experiences with the IRS throughout the process?
 - A. Yes - Continue with Q4
 - B. No - Thank and Terminate
 - C. Not Sure/Don't Remember - Thank and Terminate

4. Great! This research will ask for your opinions on a few topics raised in a Customer Satisfaction survey instrument which you completed in the past. The focus group will last for one hour. As I mentioned, it is scheduled for (Time) on (Day and Date). Will that be convenient for you?
 - A. Yes - Continue with Q5
 - B. No - Thank and Terminate

NOTE: If the customer is willing to participate but cannot at the scheduled time, ask: "I'm sorry to hear that the focus group will not fit into your schedule. Would you like us to keep your name and contact information to get in touch with you if another research project should be scheduled?"

(Record name.)

5. Let me give you some more information about the focus group. It will take about 60 minutes to complete. There will be up to eight customers of the IRS including you on the call. We will provide a special toll-free telephone number and password for you to call to connect with the group. Your identity will not be shared with the IRS or any other government agencies. Your participation is voluntary. As an incentive, we will send a check for \$40 to each participant who completes the session. Your help on this project will be very much appreciated.

We'll need your mailing address to send you your incentive. Can you give that to me now?

[RECORD ADDRESS]

Thanks. In the next few days, we will send you an email with the instructions for calling in to the focus group. The email will also include a document detailing our promise to maintain the

privacy of your responses. We ask that you please review it before our call. We will also send a courtesy reminder email a day before the focus group.

Thank you. We look forward to speaking with you on (DAY/DATE) at (TIME).

Should you need to reach us ahead of that, please email us at the email address from which you received our first invitation. I'll repeat it now, if you like. (Give email address as necessary.) Or, you can call me, (Name), at ICF International at (Phone Number).

Have a good day.

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SB/SE Focus Group - CONFIRMATION EMAIL

Dear (Name),

We thank you on behalf of the IRS for volunteering to participate in an upcoming telephone focus group. The focus group will be led by ICF International, an independent market research firm which conducts regular customer satisfaction surveys with taxpayers. The purpose of the focus group is to gather feedback on ways the IRS can improve the service they provide to taxpayers like you.

The focus group will be held on (DAY & DATE) from (TIME). The group will last no more than one hour and will have no more than eight taxpayers.

To join the group that day, please call the following toll-free number.

1-877-423-6338

When asked for your passcode, enter this number, followed by the # sign.

615519#

As an incentive, we will send a check for \$40 to each participant who completes the session. This incentive will be mailed to you within four weeks following the focus group.

Please review the following Informed Consent information. Your ICF focus group facilitator will review it at the beginning of the group and ask for your verbal agreement.

INFORMED CONSENT

ICF International is conducting focus groups with taxpayers on behalf of the IRS to gain feedback on improving customer satisfaction. The discussion will last about one hour. The IRS will use the findings from these interviews to make changes to the service provided customers.

Before you agree to join in this discussion, please review and consider the conditions below:

- Participation in this discussion is completely voluntary.
- Any questions you have about the study will be answered before the discussion begins.
- The information you give will be private to the extent allowed by law and your name will not be associated with your answers.
- Your name will not be used in any reports about this group and no quotes will be attributed to you.
- You may choose not to answer questions that you do not want to answer.
- You may choose to leave the discussion at any time for any reason.
- The discussion is being audio-recorded to assist with analysis of data.
- You will receive a monetary stipend of \$40 to compensate you for your time.

Your verbal agreement indicates that you understand the conditions stated above and agree to participate in this discussion group.

Finally, it is possible that there may be one or more observers from the IRS who will be listening to our discussion. We will announce that at the beginning of the focus group. Each observer will have signed an observer **privacy** form stating that they will not discuss the identity of participants or what was said by individual participants with others who are not listening to our discussion. They will know only your first names.

Thank you. We look forward to speaking with you on (DATE) at (TIME). We will also send a courtesy reminder email a day before the focus group.

Should you have any further questions, or if something comes up which will prevent you from joining us that day, please contact us by email or phone as far in advance as possible.

Reply to us at the email address above (email...)

OR, call (Name), ICF International at (Phone Number).

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Moderator's Guide - SB/SE Focus Groups

A. Welcome and Introductions:

Hello, my name is _____. First, I would like to thank all of you for calling in today. I work for ICF International, a research firm located in the Washington, DC area. We've been selected by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) to conduct a series of focus groups with customers, including this one. I will be moderating our discussion today.

You were all invited to participate in this focus group because you have each interacted with the IRS in the past year or so to resolve an issue regarding your tax return. Following that, you each responded to a Customer Satisfaction Survey about your experience with the IRS during this process. At the end of the survey, you volunteered your name and contact information and indicated you would be willing to take part in additional research on tax-related issues. Today's focus group is part of that additional research.

Our goal in today's focus group is to get a better understanding of your experiences as a customer of the IRS, especially as it concerns the description you were given of the process you would be going through. The IRS hopes to make improvements to its processes and procedures based on what we learn from you today.

B. Informed Consent

We emailed each of you an Informed Consent that we asked you to read before the group today. I want to go over some of the key points on the consent form before we start to make sure all are in agreement. (*Review consent form, emphasizing audio taping, privacy, and use of first names only.*)

- Your participation in the group is completely voluntary.
- You may choose not to answer questions that you do not want to answer.
- You may choose to leave the discussion at any time for any reason.
- (*Include only if an incentive is offered.*) As thanks for your participation, we will send you a check for \$40, mailed to the address you provided when you registered for this focus group. It should arrive within four weeks; if you have not received it by (date), please let us know via email and we will follow up.
- The information you give will be private to the extent permitted by law. That means we have not and we will not share your identity with the IRS. We will use only



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first names during this group today. Your name will not appear in the report we write.

- We will prepare a report to the IRS about the findings of our focus group today. To aid in that, (Name), a colleague of mine at ICF, is listening in to take notes on the discussion. We are also recording the meeting to make sure we have captured everything correctly in our report.
- *(Include only if IRS observers are on the call.)* We also have some observers from the IRS who are listening to our discussion. They have each signed an observer privacy form stating that they will not discuss the identity of participants or what was said by individual participants with others who are not listening to our discussion. They will know only your first names and the state you live in. They want to hear what you have to say about the topics we’ll discuss, but we don’t want you to feel constrained by their presence. Is that OK?

Your verbal agreement indicates that you understand the conditions stated above and agree to participate in this discussion group. Is there anyone who does not agree with the conditions for this focus group?

C. Ground Rules

There are just a few more things to mention before we begin.

- Our discussion will take about an hour. Please be as open and frank with me as you can. Your comments and suggestions are very important to us.
- I’m not an IRS employee nor am I an expert on tax matters, so I won’t be able to answer any tax-related questions you might have. My job as a moderator is to:
 - Help guide the flow of conversation
 - Make sure everyone’s comments are heard
 - Ensure that questions about various aspects of the topic are covered
- I’d like to hear from everyone in the group but you don’t have to respond to every question. If I haven’t heard from you in a while, I may ask if anyone else has something to offer.
- To help make sure this discussion goes smoothly, I’d ask that you try and speak one at a time. Also, I would appreciate if you would say your first name, before offering your comment.

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- This isn’t an evaluation. There are no right and wrong answers. We expect differences in how people see things, and we need to know about these differences.
- Feel free to disagree or question each other. The purpose of a group session is for us to learn things in group interchanges that we don’t get out of one-on-one discussions. If someone says something you disagree with, please let us know.
- If you have a cell phone, please turn it off or on vibrate.
- The Office of Management and Budget requires that we get their approval for any study that involves the public. The IRS has been granted approval. Their approval number for this project is 1545-1349.
- If you have any comments regarding the time estimates associated with this study or suggestions on making this process simpler, you can write a letter to the IRS. Would anyone like the address to use?
 - (If yes, to the address question.) We will send you the address (Internal Revenue Service, Tax Products Coordinating Committee, SE:W:CAR:MP:T:T:SP, 1111 Constitution Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20224) via email right after this group is over.
- Are there any more unanswered questions?

D. Introduction of Participants

There are (correct number) of us on this call today. I’d like each of you to introduce yourself to the group by first name only and what state you are calling from. I’ll start – my name is (____) and I’m calling from (State). *(Wait for each participant to respond.)*

E. Focus Group Discussion

1. Thanks. Let’s begin. We’ll start by asking about your experiences with the IRS. This survey is for feedback on your AUR/Exam IRS experience. For statistical data that is all that will be captured in this focus group discussion. Any other statements in concern with the IRS will be captured and shared with the appropriate parties. Although your experiences will be different, depending on the nature of your issue, there should be some common features. Without divulging any specifics about your case, please answer as best you can the

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questions I will ask about the communications between you and the IRS as you resolved your particular issue.

Again, please say your first name before offering your comments.

(The purpose of the next few questions is to establish in their minds the key steps of their experience.)

- How were you notified by the IRS about your issue?
- What did you do when you received the letter?
- How soon afterwards did you first call the IRS AUR/EXAM toll-free number?
- Did the IRS representative provide you with clear and precise information on what was needed to resolve your issue?
- What were you told by the IRS representative about how your issue could be resolved? (this may be a confusing question for the participants to recall the conversation)
- Did you call the toll-free number again?

- Were your second and any subsequent calls helpful in resolving your case more quickly, or more easily?
- How so?

Additional Probing questions:

- What came first?
- What happened next?
- After that?
- Was there anything else?

(Moderator summarizes the common steps in the group’s individual experiences, and points out the outliers – the steps which were experienced by just a few or only one participant.)

2. I now have a couple of questions from the survey you completed following your interactions with the IRS. The survey asked, “How much do you agree with the following statements?” You were then asked to rate each statement from “Strongly Agree” to Strongly Disagree”.

The first statement was “I received an adequate description of the process to resolve my possible discrepancy.”

Did you receive up front any description of the process you would be going through with the IRS to resolve your possible discrepancy?

Possible answers:

- Yes*
- Yes, but not complete and/or not accurate*
- No*
- I don’t know*

(Wait for the answers from all participants.)

Follow-up: “For those of you who said “Yes”, do you recall how you received the description of the process to resolve (your) possible discrepancy?”

Possible answers:

- From a letter from the IRS I received in the mail.*
- From an IRS representative on the toll-free number.*
- From some other source (identify the source)*
- I don’t recall.*

3. Thank you. Let’s consider the second statement. “My experience reflected the described process”.

Again, the survey asked, “How much do you agree with the following statements?” You were then asked to rate each statement from “Strongly Agree” to Strongly Disagree”.

We’ve reviewed the experiences each of you had. We’ve also talked about the communications from the IRS which described the process you could expect to go through. Comparing your experience to the IRS’s description of what to expect during the process...

- Did the description of what should happen match your experience of what actually did happen?
- If not, was the IRS’s description...

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- a. Incomplete? (Things happened that you were not aware would happen)
What was missing from the description?
- b. Inaccurate? (Things happened that were different than what you had been told would happen/not happen)

4. Calling the Toll-Free number

- For those of you who found that the description did not match your experiences, did this lead you at any time during the process to call the Toll-Free number?
 - If Yes, did your call result in a more complete or more accurate understanding of:
 - a. The process the IRS would be following to resolve the issue?
 - b. What else, if anything, you needed to do to resolve the issue?
- When you call the IRS toll-free number, how long do you expect to wait on hold before you are connected to a representative? (Alternate wording: How quickly do you expect to be connected to a live representative?)
- Would providing a projected wait time for your call to be answered improve your experience?
- Follow-up question - How would providing a projected wait time be helpful?

5. Courtesy Disconnect

I’m going to ask you for your feedback on the use of a Courtesy Disconnect. A “Courtesy Disconnect” is a message you might hear if you called the IRS toll-free number at a time of very heavy call volume. The message would say something to the effect of...

- o (For the AUR group): "Due to very heavy call volume, the current wait time is likely to be greater than one hour. To save you from this excessive wait time, this call will now be disconnected. We suggest you call back when there is lighter call volume and shorter expected wait times. Some suggested times are (Days/times)."
- o (For the CCE group): "Due to very heavy call volume, the current wait time is likely to be greater than one hour. We cannot accept your call at this time. Please call back later. Generally, our wait times are the longest

on Mondays, Fridays, and the next business day following a federal holiday.”

- If, when you call, the expected wait time is excessive – over an hour – would you appreciate a “courtesy disconnect”?
- How would this be helpful?

For the CCE group:

- How many times did you call the toll-free number to resolve your issue?
- Were you calling to check on the status of your audit or were you advised to call back multiple times?

6. Understanding Requirements

- *(For the AUR group):* “During the process of resolving a discrepancy on your tax return, if asked for documents, did you understand exactly what was required?”
- Follow-up question: What was confusing?

- *(For the CCE group):* During the audit process, if asked for documents, did you understand exactly what was required?”
- Follow-up question: What was confusing?

7. Alternative Channels of Communication

Now let’s talk about some other possible ways - Alternative Channels of Communication - beyond calling the IRS that you might be able to use to receive information about the process you went through.

- If there was a different way for you to check the status of your case other than calling a toll-free number, what would you suggest?

(Record suggestions. Probe for understanding of any suggestions, including:

- *What would motivate you to use it?*
- *What concerns/barriers would you have about using it?*
- *Security concerns?*
- *Accuracy?*

(If they mention something that sounds like the Portal and/or email, follow up with those suggestions right away. If they don’t mention one or both of these alternative channels, bring them up in the ensuing discussion.)

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a) Online Portal

- Suppose the IRS had an online portal that could provide you with specific account information about the status of your case, including:
 - o Acknowledgement of receipt of your documentation
 - o A description of exactly what additional information the IRS needs
 - o Whether your case is in review
 - o When you can anticipate a response
 - o An estimated time frame for how much longer it will take to resolve your case

- If such a portal was available and easy to use, would you consider using this to get information before you called the IRS?
- Would this likely keep you from having to call the IRS?
- What would motivate you to use it?
- What concerns/barriers would you have about using it?
 - o Security concerns?
 - o Accuracy?

b) Email

- If Email was broadly available, would you consider using this to get information before you called the IRS?
- What would motivate you to use it?
- What concerns/barriers would you have about using it?
 - o Security concerns?
 - o Accuracy?

c) The IRS website—www.irs.gov—currently offers several resources for taxpayers to gather information about their return. One of these is “Where’s My Refund?”

- Has anyone used this channel to get information about the status of their return?
- If so, what made it attractive to use?
- What drawbacks, if any, did you experience?

F. False Close

(Only if there are IRS observers on the call) At the beginning of the session I mentioned that we have some people from the IRS listening to our discussion. If this was an in-person focus group I'd step out of the room and check with them to see if they have any additional questions. Since I can't do that, I'm going to put you on mute for a minute and check my email to see if anyone has sent me a follow up question. I'll be right back.

G. Closing

Thinking about our discussion today, is there anything else you would like to share regarding the IRS's procedures or about the customer satisfaction survey?

H. Thank you...

On behalf of the IRS, I want to thank you very much for sharing your feedback with us. We really appreciate your time.

(Include only if an incentive is offered.) Within the next 4 weeks, you should receive a check for \$40 in the mail from ICF. If you don't receive it, please contact us at ICF by email and we will follow up.