

Local Business Interview Guide

Assessing the Needs of Your Business Community

A Resilient Communities Project—Metropolitan Council Guide



Resilient Communities Project

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Building community-university partnerships for sustainability

The project on which this report is based was completed in collaboration with the Metropolitan Council and City of Minnetonka as part of a 2020–2021 Resilient Communities Project (RCP) partnership. RCP is a program at the University of Minnesota’s Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA) that connects University faculty and students with Minnesota communities to address strategic projects that advance local resilience, equity, and sustainability. Funding for this report was provided by the Metropolitan Council.

The contents of this report represent the views of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect those of RCP, CURA, the Regents of the University of Minnesota, the Metropolitan Council, or the City of Minnetonka.



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Building Community-University Partnerships for Resilience



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FOREWORD

This resource is adapted from a student project and report originally created for the City of Minnetonka, Minnesota, as part of a year-long partnership with the University of Minnesota’s Resilient Communities Project (RCP) in 2020 and 2021, with financial support and technical assistance from the Metropolitan Council.

The purpose of the project—which took place in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic—was to help City of Minnetonka community development staff connect with local business owners during the pandemic to understand the challenges businesses faced navigating the crisis, and how, if at all, the City could offer assistance.

Although this resource was developed specifically for use during the COVID-19 pandemic, the questions could easily be adapted for use during other types of crises—for example, a natural disaster such as a tornado or flood, or a major economic downturn such as the Great Recession of 2007–2008. This resource contains materials that could be used either for one-on-one interviews or a focus group with local business owners. Included are an interview guide, a sample recruitment script, a consent form for participants who agree to take part in a focus group or interview, and resources for conducting focus groups.

This resource was developed by University of Minnesota Humphrey School of Public Affairs graduate students Lindsey Krause, Dimitri Kaasan Stull, Njoya Chomilo, and Bhavin Pradhan in fall of 2020, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the course, “Qualitative Methods for Policy Analysts.” The project was completed under the supervision of course instructor Dipali Mukhopadhyay, in collaboration with Drew Ingvalson, planner for the City of Minnetonka.

The original student project report is archived in the University of Minnesota’s Digital Conservancy at <https://conservancy.umn.edu/handle/11299/218993>.



INTERVIEW GUIDE

This interview guide was originally created as part of a qualitative research study to inform the City of Minnetonka's outreach to local business owners during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021. The purpose of the interviews was to understand the needs and challenges facing local businesses during the pandemic.

This resource is intended only as a general guide. It is not possible to ask all of these questions in a one-hour interview or two-hour focus group. Questions are divided into several sections by topic to aid in selecting those that are of relevance to your community. After each primary question, additional probe questions may be provided. These are intended as *optional* follow-up questions, either to elicit more information from a hesitant interviewee or to dig deeper on an issue.

In addition to the general recruiting methods outlined on page 11, several methods can be used to ensure that your focus groups or interviews include a broad and diverse sample of local businesses:

1. Make intentional efforts to reach businesses that are located in larger retail complexes (such as malls), commercial corridors, mixed-use developments, and those that are spatially isolated, as well as businesses owned by people of color.
2. Focus on reaching small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Large retailers and businesses are likely to have different needs than SMEs, as well as more resources to respond and adapt to a crisis such as COVID-19.
3. Work with local business organizations. They may be able to help identify additional businesses to reach out to, and themselves may be a valuable resource for reporting what they are hearing from their member businesses about their current challenges and needs.
4. Use a variety of outreach methods. Many business email accounts are checked infrequently, and this may be especially true during a health crisis such as COVID-19. Phone calls, personal visits to a business establishment, hard-copy flyers or circulars, and invitations sent through U.S. Mail may be more successful.



INTRODUCTION AND ICE-BREAKER QUESTIONS

1. What is the name of your business?
2. How would you describe your business?
3. Please tell me about how your business was founded. *(For example, did you establish the business yourself? Purchase a franchise? Take over an existing business from someone else?)*
4. How long has your business been operating in [CITY NAME]?
5. What if anything makes your business different from other similar types of businesses in [CITY NAME]?

PROBES: *For example, is there anything different about the size or location of your business?*

Is there anything unique or different about your clientele?

Does your business provide any specialty or niche services that similar businesses do not?

6. Why did you decide to open (or purchase) a business in [CITY NAME]?

CURRENT STATUS OF BUSINESS

7. How has your revenue (or customer volume) changed since the pandemic began?
8. Since the beginning of the pandemic, how has the number of employees in your business changed?
9. Can you give me an example of a significant change your company had to make in response to COVID-19?

PROBES: *What were the factors that fed into that decision?*

What have the consequences of that decision been so far?

10. Has your company received federal or state support through the CARES Act?
(Notes CARES stands for Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security)



PROBES: For example, did your company benefit from Payroll Protection Program forgivable loans?

Could you describe the types of funding received and how that has helped your business?

11. Some businesses are more vulnerable to the impacts of COVID-19 than others. In other words, the effects of the pandemic often involve questions of equity. What does the word equity mean to you? What does equity look like?

PROBES: As a business owner, can you offer any examples of how equity—or the lack of equity—has been an issue during the pandemic? This can be something you’ve witnessed personally, or just read or heard about.

Does local government have a role in addressing any of the inequities you’ve mentioned? If so, what can they do?

IMPACT OF CITY REGULATIONS

12. Are there specific city regulations or requirements that have hindered your company’s ability to adapt in the face of the COVID pandemic?

PROBES: For example, parking regulations, limits on outdoor business activity, or exterior lighting restrictions

13. Has your business asked the city to change or suspend enforcement of any local regulations to help accommodate your needs during the pandemic?

PROBES: For example, have you had to request exemptions for on-street or off-street parking because your needs have changed during the pandemic?

Have you had to ask for approval to move any of your business activity outside during the pandemic?

14. Has the City proactively eased any local regulations that have helped your business adapt to the pandemic?

ROLE OF CITY ADMINISTRATION

15. Can you briefly describe the role [CITY NAME] plays in fostering businesses and economic development in the community?



16. In what ways does your business typically interact with the City of [CITY NAME]?

PROBES: Can you offer any examples of recent interactions you've had with the City?

For example,

. . .through regulatory encounters, such as permit applications, code enforcement inspections, or licensing?

. . .through local business associations or chambers of commerce?

. . .through public meetings and hearings with the city council or planning commission?

17. How do City regulations directly impact your business (beyond those we have already discussed)?

18. Did you know that the City recently adopted a new 2040 land-use plan for the community? Are you aware of the plan?

PROBES: What do you like or dislike about the plan?

What changes would you like to see to the plan given the economic uncertainty caused by COVID-19?

19. Do you think collaboration between businesses can help them be more resilient to economic stresses like those we are seeing during the COVID-19 pandemic?

PROBES: How can businesses collaborate with one another to build relationships?

How can businesses aid one another in times of need, such as during health crises, natural disasters, or economic downturns?

What is the role of the City of [CITY NAME] in facilitating collaboration between local businesses, if any?

CONCLUSION

20. Is there anything we haven't talked about that you'd like to share regarding your experience as a business owner during the COVID-19 pandemic, or as a business owner in [CITY NAME]?



RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

This sample recruitment script can be used to recruit participants for one-on-one interviews or focus groups. The message can be sent via email, U.S. mail, or text if you have contact information for specific business owners whom you would like to recruit to participate. It can also be adapted for use on a recruitment flyer or poster if you wish to recruit participants more broadly (note that this will likely also attract non-business owners who want to participate).

Dear _____,

I am writing to invite your participation in a research project to understand the needs of local businesses during the pandemic. The project is being conducted on behalf of the City of [CITY NAME] in an effort to support the economic stability of the city's business community. The research will help inform City efforts to provide business assistance during the pandemic and any future economic downturn or crisis.

As a business owner or operator, we are inviting you to participate in this process by taking part in an interview [or focus group] to provide your perspective on how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted local businesses, what the City of [CITY NAME] can do to reduce economic stressors on the business community, and what else the City can do to improve the business environment in [CITY NAME].

Any information you provide will be confidential and any identifying information about you or your business will be omitted from our findings. We would be happy to share these findings with you at the conclusion of the research project.

We understand your time is valuable, but would greatly appreciate your insight on how the City can better serve the business community. If you are interested and able to participate in a one-hour interview [or focus group], please reply to this message by email to [email contact] or phone [daytime phone] so we can schedule your participation at a time convenient to you.

Sincerely,

Name
Title/position



PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Background and Purpose of the Study

This study is being undertaken by [CITY NAME]. We are interested in speaking with local business owners about their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic—specifically, how the pandemic has impacted their businesses and what if anything the City of [CITY NAME] can do to help local businesses through the pandemic.

Procedures

Interviews will last no longer than an hour, and will ask about your experiences as a business owner in [CITY NAME]. We will ask about your personal experiences and your knowledge of other local businesses and owners. You are free not to answer any questions you do not wish to answer.

Interviews will be anonymous; while we will keep records for the purpose of analyzing the information we hear, your responses will be stripped of any personally identifiable information, including your name, the names of any city staff you discuss, and the name of your business.

When the study is complete, results will be used by [CITY NAME] for the purpose of informing business outreach and assistance programs and initiatives.

Confidentiality

The interview process is confidential. That means that we will not reveal to anyone your identity or the subject of the interview. We will record the interview for analysis purposes only. This audio recording and any transcription or notes will be stripped of your name and any other information that would let someone identify you from our notes. Your responses will be kept completely confidential. Any notes or recordings will be destroyed at the end of the study.

Risk and Benefits of Participation

The risks of participation in this study are minimal. You may, at some point, feel uncomfortable talking about specific issues related to your experience as a business owner in [CITY NAME]. Our questions are open-ended, and you are welcome to share as much or as little information as you wish. We will likely ask you some follow-up questions to gain better understanding; however, you are in no way obligated to answer any particular question. We understand and respect the voluntary nature of



your participation.

There are no direct benefits or financial compensation provided to you for your participation in this study, but we hope to make it an enjoyable experience.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

You are free to stop the interview at any time. You may also choose not to answer any questions, or can change your mind and decide not to participate at any time. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary.

Questions

If you have any questions or concerns about the study or the research team, please ask them before signing this document.

Who to Contact about the Study

We welcome questions now and throughout the interview. If you have any questions or comments after the interview is complete, please contact us:

*[add contact information for study primary investigator,
ideally an email address and a telephone number]*

Statement of Consent

By signing below, I certify that I am at least 18 years of age, and acknowledge that I have read and understand this document, and hereby consent to participate in an interview, under the terms and conditions outlined above.

Print Name

Signature

Date

Daytime phone



FOCUS GROUP RESOURCES

Conducting Focus Groups

Focus group can be designed and conducted in several ways, based on the resources available. Although a city staff person could organize and facilitate the focus groups, the city may want to consider contracting with external facilitators, who may be viewed as more neutral and ensure that participants are comfortable talking about their personal experiences.

Focus groups can be conducted in person or virtually (using Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or a similar platform). There are potential drawbacks and advantages to both formats in terms of accessibility, effectiveness, quality of relationship building, and quality of data captured.

Recruiting Participants

Identifying and recruiting participants for your focus group will likely constitute a large portion of the time and effort needed to conduct a focus group using in-house staff and resources. Depending on your objectives, you may want to identify and invite specific participants, rather than widely publicizing the event and asking for participants to self-select. This process can demand a great deal of time and effort, but is also an excellent way to build long-term relationships with local business owners and leaders.

Avenues for Identifying Participants to Recruit

- **Existing Relationships:** Who in the community do you already have relationships with?
- **Nominations from Partners:** Reaching out to local business associations or chambers of commerce to explain what you're hoping to accomplish and ask for recommendations for participants can be an effective way to find participants.
- **Snowball Subject Recruitment:** Ask business owners whom you have successfully recruited who else you should talk to.
- **On-Site Recruiting (Convenience Sampling):** Go to places (local businesses, business association meetings, etc.) where your target audience is already spending time to find people who might want to participate in your focus group.



Resource: "[*Participants in a Focus Group*](#)" (Sage Publishing)



Recording Input

Depending on the topic of the focus group, your approach to recording input may vary. Regardless of how you do so, be up-front and transparent with participants about how their comments will be recorded, whether or not their input will be anonymous, and how the input will subsequently be used, especially if it will be publicly available.

Recording methods to consider:

- Audio/Video recording
 - *Pros:* Very good data for analysis—a word-for-word record of input, including nonverbal cues such as tone of voice and (with video) body language. Easy and cheap to do with an iPhone or iPad.
 - *Cons:* may discourage open and honest communication, especially where there is a lack of trust between business owners and the city. There are also privacy implications.

- Note taker
 - *Pros:* less intimidating than audio/video recording. May be easier to use for in-person meetings, depending on the setting.
 - *Cons:* Less data is captured as it is harder to capture statements fully and take note of nonverbal cues. It has the potential to bias results if the note taker interprets the input while recording it, or does not record every point. To avoid this, note takers should be instructed to record statements as close to word-for-word as possible. Where possible, using multiple note takers can also protect against interpretation bias. The note-taker should be someone other than the facilitator of the focus group.

Data Analysis

Depending on the nature and structure of the questions posed, there may be both qualitative and quantitative data to analyze, but most likely the data will be heavily qualitative. Notes from the focus group should be independently coded for key themes by more than one person to reduce the risk of interpretation bias.



Resource: "[Analyzing Focus Group Data](#)" (Sage Publishing)



Other Resources for Conducting Focus Groups



Dr. Richard Krueger, "[Moderating Focus Groups](#)" (video)



Dr. Richard Krueger, "[Focus Group Interviewing](#)" (website with many resources)





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