

Using Online Qualitative Research Methods to Your Advantage

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There's no stopping it. The amount of market research conducted on the Internet is huge and still growing. Inside Research estimates that worldwide spending for research via the Internet reached \$3.5 billion in 2007, up 23% from the previous year. The growth of research via the web outpaced total worldwide market research growth by a factor of six. The vast majority of this web-enabled research is quantitative, whether conducted by professional firms or through do-it-yourself survey applications like SurveyMonkey or Zoomerang.

Despite initial, and ongoing concerns regarding sample bias and inattentive respondents (see our paper "Can you trust the data you collect from an online survey?" by Wally Balden), online quantitative research has become accepted and widely prevalent throughout North America. On the other hand, online qualitative research is still emerging. The vast majority of marketers and researchers are still unfamiliar with the possibilities that online qualitative research offers. At Maritz, we have conducted research and evaluated many online qualitative research techniques and platforms to ensure our clients enjoy the benefits available while avoiding the pitfalls which will prevent them from achieving their goals.

Online qualitative research has several advantages over traditional research when used for the right types of studies. The two most commonly mentioned are the ability to connect with low-incidence respondents spread over a large geographic area at one time, and the decreased need for clients and the moderator to travel.

Less obvious advantages are the ability to deal with confidential topics which respondents may feel uncomfortable discussing in an in-person setting, a decrease in "groupthink" because of the lowered social pressure to agree, and the

ability for shyer respondents to contribute fully, without being interrupted or intimidated by more vocal participants.

A moderator experienced in leading online discussions is key to getting the most from your online qualitative research. Many accomplished in-person moderators have difficulty translating their skillset into the online environment. An experienced online moderator will help articulate objectives, a critical area because the moderator's guide is much more structured than for an in-person discussion. Wordsmithing the guide to maximize clarity will enable participants to be more articulate. Care must be taken throughout the entire research process to keep the participants engaged. It is easier for a participant to simply log out and not return than it is for them to walk out of a focus group.

The limitations of online qualitative work is fairly obvious, particularly to those familiar and comfortable with the traditional qualitative process. These techniques and platforms are not effective when you need participants to taste something, handle a physical product, or if you want to observe behavior. Some techniques are difficult to support from a technical perspective. An online group, like any web-based survey, isn't appropriate if you are handling very confidential concepts.

Somewhat less obviously, online qualitative methods tend to have less interaction than is seen in traditional face-to-face focus groups.



They also do not allow for the degree of probing possible face-to-face, and tend not to be suited for highly conceptual concept generation unless particular care is taken in the recruitment.

Online “Chat” Groups

In many ways, an online “chat” focus group is the most similar to a traditional focus group of all the online platforms. A chat is a synchronous discussion in which all respondents participate at the same time. The primary difference is that respondents participate from their individual computer instead of at a central location.

Because of the synchronous format, the amount that can be covered in an online chat group is highly dependent on the speed of the participants’ typing, and the number of participants taking part in the discussion. This platform is very effective when you are looking for very concrete answers to your questions, but the format does not provide a lot of time for brainstorming concept development or in-depth probing.

Bulletin Boards

If you are targeting hard to reach sample groups (e.g. busy executives), a bulletin board format is often best. A bulletin board is an asynchronous, threaded discussion typically involving 25-30 participants over extended periods of time (typically 1 to 5 days). The participants log into the discussion with a user name and a password to answer questions that are posted and monitored by a moderator, who can also probe respondents for clarification. In most cases, participants are also able to interact with each other - though the moderator may prefer to limit this in order to keep the discussion productive and on track.

Bulletin boards groups work well with business professionals as this format is more accommodating to their schedules. They are more conducive to concept development projects as you can build on the concept(s) over multiple days, with the research user reviewing the previous day’s results before committing to the next set of questions and concepts

to be presented. Because of the format, you can gather more detailed information, lending this approach to more technical research subjects like information technology or telecommunications.

In addition to being more convenient for the respondents, an asynchronous format means that each person is proceeding through the discussion at their own pace - meaning that you receive the full value of that respondent’s time. They are not forced to wait for their turn to speak.

Hybrid Qual-Quant Platforms: DynamicInsights

Maritz has spent significant time and effort working with organizations to develop and deploy research methods that take advantage of the digital Internet environment. We partner with a company called Invoke Solutions to offer a hybrid qualitative and quantitative research platform. DynamicInsights is a web-based tool that allows for quantitative and qualitative questioning and real-time probing. Participants (up to 300 depending on the mix of qualitative and quantitative questions) are invited to a session (up to 90 minutes) to complete an online survey at the same time. Decision makers view the results in real time and have the ability to add custom questions to probe and clarify issues.

A hybrid qualitative-quantitative online approach, like DynamicInsights, is very effective in product concept testing, communications and advertising testing. The platform is excellent at gathering feedback on any kind of digital stimuli, like video, images or audio, so it can be very effective on branding or campaign program developments. A hybrid approach gives you a greater level of representation so you can test for reactions from specific segments of an audience, and compare and contrast with the core of a market. This kind of an approach can really ramp up a product introduction or development timeline, because the qualitative components of concept evaluation and quantitative needs of market acceptance testing can be combined. Maritz recently worked with a communications

firm to help them develop a branded content magazine. Pat Ogura of Redwood Communications comments: "You don't have to attend six groups in three cities that take weeks to complete. The creative team gets the output immediately and even sits in on the live session with over a hundred participants. They are off and running the very next day."

For Redwood Communications, we conducted a session in which a series of concepts for the magazine were introduced and both general reaction and specific content feedback questions probed the target market on the impact and impression of the concepts. With many different components of the magazine to test (the cover, photos, article topics, features etc), the DynamicInsights hybrid platform helped speed the development versus a traditional focus group because it could handle much more information in one online session. Not only did it improve the speed, but it provided great feedback depth. Ogura noted that, "I have never seen so many people write so much. We could give 40 questions and people would write 4 or 5 lines each. That's better and more useful than a long essay from an online focus group."

Choice research is also very well suited to the hybrid approach. Presenting product concepts in a visual and highly descriptive format allows researchers and marketers to really explore how the market makes choices. We recently worked with a department store that was looking to expand one of its service offerings. We provided consumers with the product/service concept and we were able to generate a whole range of suggestions of how to present the service more effectively and what the expectations would be for the service.

A hybrid online study is not a silver bullet for all marketing research challenges. This kind of approach is most appropriate when the answers to marketing problems need clarification and probing, rather than straight-up counting. The best place for the hybrid, qual-quant approach is somewhere between the clean sheet stage of product development and pre-launch acceptance testing. It's not really appropriate for pure brainstorming nor is it appropriate for really large samples (300 respondents maximum). A hybrid qualitative/quantitative research platform will not look inexpensive when compared to a straight online survey.

But, compared to a series of traditional focus groups, the costs and timeline will be very competitive. The requirement for all participants to log-in to the discussion at a set time can also make recruiting difficult if you are looking for business professionals or low-incidence sample.

One of the biggest advantages of all online qualitative methods is the fast turnaround of raw results. Since everything is documented in digital format, transcripts from an online group, bulletin board or hybrid DynamicInsights session can be provided practically immediately. However, since bulletin boards and the DynamicInsights session do provide a greater volume of data than a traditional focus group, a full analysis of results will still take time. There will always be a component of qualitative work that cannot be turned over to the computer.

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