

Qualitative with different qualities

For a while now, the term Web 2.0 has been bouncing around in business circles. But what exactly is Web 2.0? A software program? The next generation of Web sites? Just another new marketing buzzword? And perhaps more importantly for us, why should the qualitative research world care?

While the term suggests that it is a new version of the Internet, Web 2.0 is more about facilitating information exchanges and collaboration among Internet users. It is Web technology and design that creates a conversation. In contrast to Web 1.0, which was a static and largely one-way communication vehicle, Web 2.0 has led to the evolution of Web-based communities like social networking sites and blogs, and creates the ability to interact by using visuals, audio and text.

Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia written collaboratively by contributors around the world, is a great example of the Web 2.0 concept. So are virtual communities like Second Life or Webkinz, where stuffed animals have both an online and offline existence via a unique identifier that is entered when logging on.

“At its core, Web 2.0 is interactivity,” says Doug Bates, vice president and CDO of Saskatoon research firm Itracks Inc., who gave a presentation on Web 2.0 at the QRCA Annual Conference in 2007. “It creates conversations, dialogue, content sharing and many other interactions that were not possible with Web 1.0.”

A good example of communication and interaction between marketer and customer is the Wells Fargo virtual community known as Stagecoach Island (www.stagecoachisland.com), which was created based on the knowledge that young people don't tend to go into bank

branches anymore and prefer to do their banking online. To build a brand and create brand loyalty with younger customers, Wells Fargo decided to interact virtually rather than relying on face-to-face contact. On the site, customers can do everything from play games to attend financial seminars.

Impact is enormous

The impact of Web 2.0 on the qualitative research industry is enormous. Many researchers are already embracing the opportunities that interactivity presents to the research industry. Bates says that while he is seeing both online and offline techniques thrive, he has several



By Steve Richardson

Are researchers ready for Web 2.0?

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clients who have abandoned face-to-face focus groups altogether in favor of online groups. "They're just not doing it. Online is emerging as the standard. Web 2.0 is really a major sea change that has enormous historical relevance in the world of qualitative research," he says.

While its practical applications are evolving gradually, most researchers agree that Web 2.0 marks an important shift in how qualitative researchers must think about conducting projects and reporting results. "Web 2.0 is interactive, and that's what qualitative researchers do with individuals is interact," says Jim Bryson, QRCA member and founder of 20/20 Research, Nashville, Tenn. "Whenever you have a medium that is interactive - online or not - it gives you that much more insight into a person's motivations and choices about products and services."

QRCA member Catherine Dine of Toronto-based Dine and Associates used video and the Internet to inform focus groups on trash bag use. Garbage is a sensitive subject in Canada, where municipalities mandate recycling and composting. Dine felt traditional in-home ethnographies were potentially too intrusive and unlikely to yield truly natural and potentially environmentally incorrect behavior. It proved much more effective to send participants video cameras and have them videotape their behaviors around trash bags and taking out the trash. Participants then delivered these videos to Dine via a simple Web upload prior to in-person focus groups.

This approach enabled Dine to learn - well before the focus groups - how participants carried out the trash process and what the issues were, particularly the sensitive ones. A richer discussion guide was then developed based on the learning from the video ethnographies. This allowed more time in the focus groups to find underlying motivators and those all-important key insights. "We unearthed deeper learnings as a result of the process,"

she says. "Those in-depth insights were huge for the client, and the self-ethnographies enabled that."

Dine adds that creating the videos also added a level of involvement that contributed to a higher level of openness and enthusiasm in the group on what is typically a highly-charged topic. "Participants loved the process and quickly moved beyond posturing to share their real frustrations," she says.

Fragmenting methodologies

Like so many other industries, Web 2.0 technology is stirring up the qualitative research industry by fragmenting its methodologies. On one hand, technology has increased the number of tools available to qualitative researchers. Message boards, video clips, blogs and online focus groups are all additional tools in the arsenal. The pie has gotten bigger.

At the same time, having so many additional options - and varying degrees of interest in them from clients - can complicate research decisions and methodology choices. Bryson says this is good for researchers, because "we have to be smarter and more thoughtful in our decisions and our recommendations. It encourages smart, strategic thinking, which boosts the professionalism of our industry."

He adds that when it comes to newer methodologies versus traditional ones like in-person focus groups, "no single method or technology is right for everything, but they are all good for something. We have to open our minds and think about how we best apply them for the best possible insights for our clients."

Key implications

Tools, techniques and access to participants are all being impacted by Web 2.0. Here are a few key implications from Doug Bates' presentation to QRCA.

Brand-related social networks.

Nike has created its own social network called Nike+ (nikeplus.nike.com), which offers various consumer products that log the activity of runners on their iPod. Runners can then upload their results to a

community on the Internet. This information gives Nike insight into how its products are being used and what customers think.

Emerging techniques. Bates cited an interesting example: online focus groups conducted using instant messaging. This technique allows the researcher to create an ongoing dialogue with participants, which overcomes a challenge with traditional one-off focus groups where it's nearly impossible to get participants back in a room again once the first session is finished.

"This technique allows you to involve participants multiple times throughout the creative process. It enables iterative feedback, which engages participants and gives them a real sense of ownership of the outcomes. It harnesses creativity, insight and engagement," Bates said. Another example is the video blog booth, where participants can leave an audio or visual message at the end of an online questionnaire.

Access to youth. Social networks like MySpace and Facebook provide invaluable, large-scale access to respondents for the insight industry - especially 16-25-year-olds. But be sure not to presume that Web 2.0 applies only to youth.

Opinions on-the-go. Real-time data collection is a big advantage of Web 2.0 technology. Participants can provide input - such as texting or pictures - right when they experience something relevant to the project. Online participant forums offer nearly real-time input, as participants become fieldworkers who offer immediate feedback and can also be given instructions or follow-up tasks that can be executed quickly.

Longer-term relationships. The days of a check and a thank-you to participants are waning. Web 2.0 facilitates longer-term relationships. This also implies that clients will have to take the step of letting research continually influence the design and marketing of a product.

Less regimented

Bryson says he now thinks of "venues" rather than "facilities" for research. Venues can be an online

social network, someone's home or a brick-and-mortar focus group facility. "We are becoming less regimented in the methodology and more focused on how to adapt our methodology to the respondent and research question at hand," Bryson says. "There will always be a need for focus group facilities, but there are emerging methodologies that allow us to better accomplish our clients' objectives."

Bryson had an "aha" moment recently that showed the importance of being open to embracing new forms of research and communication. After he left a voicemail for his daughter requesting the total of her phone bill, she responded by sending the dollar amount via text message. "It was a small thing, but in her mind, sending me a text was the most efficient way to get information to me," Bryson says.

Bryson's experience points up the need to communicate with people in the manner they prefer or are accus-

tomed to. Market researchers will always have the opportunity to do face-to-face interviews, discussions and ethnographies, he says. Even young, early adopters still like to talk face-to-face. But if you do not communicate with people in the ways they believe are appropriate, they will get frustrated with the process. That means fewer participants and less fruitful insights.

Jeff Walkowski, a QRCA member and principal of Minneapolis research firm Qualcore.com, adds that it's about more than just tools that allow us to do research. "Those tools allow us to potentially have stronger, deeper and better insights from participants, and they certainly improve relationships with clients," he says.

Varying levels

Ah yes, clients. Just like qualitative researchers, market research buyers have varying levels of knowledge about Web 2.0 applications as they

relate to research. But if a client wants her researcher to consider video ethnographies, online focus groups or even be part of a WebEx presentation, the researcher simply must understand how to do so.

Walkowski, an admitted "middle of the roader" when it comes to technology, encourages research colleagues who are less savvy to understand two things. First, you don't have to understand everything at once. Take time to patiently explore one technology at a time until the comfort factor increases. Second, the risk associated with burying one's head in the technology sand is high. The likely outcome? Obsolescence.

"The concepts of lifelong learning really come into play," Walkowski says. "Clients and participants have an expectation that we can function in their world. The key is not to fear the unknown, but rather to embrace it - even if you do so slowly." | Q