

BY PIET LEVY//STAFF WRITER

# IN WITH THE OLD, IN SPITE OF THE NEW

ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS MAY BE CHEAPER AND NEWER, BUT IN TODAY'S ECONOMY, TRADITIONAL SIT-DOWNS CAN STILL BE BETTER, ADVOCATES SAY

**EVEN IN THIS** economically challenged, digitally enhanced era, new and cheap doesn't always beat tried and true.

The Canadian Broadcasting Corp. (CBC) in Ottawa, Ontario, does 75% of its qualitative research via in-person focus group sessions rather than use newer online techniques, says Jennifer Lang, senior manager of research for the company. Ford Motor Co. in Dearborn, Mich., continues to invest 90% of its qualitative research budget in traditional focus groups, says Ford's communication research manager, Kelly Krulikowski.

Traditional focus groups cost more than online. Jerry W. Thomas, CEO of marketing research firm Decision Analyst Inc. in Arlington, Texas, says that, on average, an online focus group roughly costs between \$5,000 and \$7,000. A traditional focus group, however, can roughly run between \$6,000 and \$10,000, he says, plus travel costs, which alone can cost more than the focus group itself.

But traditional focus group advocates say the older, costlier method provides for deeper discussions, greater emotional responses and greater security for the concepts being tested.

"You cannot overstate the importance of having your clients in the room to hear the reactions of participants," Lang says. "To see [participants'] body language is still so important for us to test TV programs, radio programs and online creative. That value between participants you don't get online."

Not that traditional is always best, says Brad Griffin, vice president of Qualitative Hothouse for Ipsos Public Affairs North America in Toronto.

Griffin, whose clients include the CBC, says online eliminates geographical barriers and is effective for product and concept testing, or for "something succinct that you know what you're going after." But when it comes to assessing something more complicated, such as a number of creative ideas for an ad or a new government policy proposal, online doesn't allow for the same level of control.

"If you take something as broad as healthcare, things can get off topic pretty quickly," Griffin says. "Having someone there to control the verbal and non-verbal response tends to be of paramount importance."

For clients, seeing the research conducted live provides prized insight unique to the format, says Tony DiMiceli, vice president of marketing insights for Madison, N.J.-based Wyeth, the producer of pharmaceutical and healthcare products such as Advil, ChapStick and Robitussin. The company relies on traditional



## CONSIDER TRADITIONAL FOCUS GROUPS IF YOU WANT OR NEED TO:

- See research conducted live
- Get an intricate read on emotional reactions
- Engage in broader conversations
- Insure that top-secret testing material isn't leaked
- Share participant materials—such as photo or video assignments—with other group members

## CONSIDER ONLINE GROUPS IF YOU WANT OR NEED TO:

- Spend less
- Gather large or geographically diverse groups
- Be less intrusive on participants
- Turn results around very quickly

*"Having someone there to control the verbal and non-verbal response tends to be of paramount importance."*

focus groups to explore innovation opportunities and nuanced messaging, and to act as a prelude to a major quantitative study. "The fact that we're all together in the back room is important because it is a way to get everyone on the same page, to make sure the qualitative learning that is taking place is being interpreted properly," DiMiceli says. "Probably the largest advantage is the spontaneity it engenders and the ability to make on-the-fly changes to discussion flow or stimuli."

Ford's Krulikowski says one reason Ford does so many live focus groups is because interaction and communication are not as effective among online participants. Even when Webcams are used, it's still difficult to read facial reactions.

Also crucial to the in-person format is the security it provides. "We all know with the World Wide Web, once you put something out there, it's as secure as the public domain," Krulikowski says. "We're very restrictive with how we present stimulus. Whether it's vehicle images or campaign ideas, we want them to remain proprietary and secretive until we choose to launch them."

Traditional focus groups may have "traditional" in the name, but new techniques better position the method for today's needs. At Morpace Inc. in Farmington Hills, Mich., which does focus groups for Ford and was No. 29 on *Marketing News*' Honomichl 50 last year, there's been more emphasis on using metaphors to solicit responses, such as compar-

ing a tested brand's meaning in the market to differing levels of clothing or watch brands, says CEO Frank Ward. Donna Taglione, vice president of field operations, adds that group sizes are trending downward, going from 10 participants to between six and eight, to attain more in-depth engagement.

Westport, Conn.-based Greenfield Consulting Group is incorporating more homework assignments, such as diaries, photography and videography, so that results can be shared among focus group participants.

"The incorporation of digital tools makes this a real renaissance," says Cheryl Stallworth-Hooper, chief operating officer for Greenfield Consulting. "It's not your grandmother's focus group any more."

True, the economy has hurt demand for traditional focus groups, Ipsos' Griffin says.

"In the past when budgets shrank, one of the first things to fall by the wayside was marketing overall, and within marketing, qualitative research," he says. "It's less spreadsheetable."

So if you need to convince your boss of focus groups' value, stress how qualitative gives you the "why" that's found through quantitative research, which will ultimately allow you to better know your customer.

"Now more than ever, it's important to be in touch with your customers or stakeholders," Griffin says. "One could argue there's nothing closer than seeing them in a room grappling with an issue, product or service." **m**