

# Qualitatively Speaking

## *Online focus groups ... here today, not gone tomorrow*

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So here is my question: What was the initial reaction from clients and market research vendors when they were told that telephone data collection was a viable alternative to door-to-door interviewing?

Do you think they decided they didn't like this new methodology because they couldn't see the respondent's face if the interview was conducted over the phone? Or, did they say they tried telephone interviewing once, didn't like it, and therefore were not going to use it again? Or, perhaps they expressed concern that people were not used to talking on the phone for as long as a survey takes. Or, maybe they said they were not making the switch because their clients weren't requesting they do so.

I am asking because these are exactly the objections that I encounter when I recommend conducting online focus groups. Even though online groups have been available for at least 7

years, there is still a vehement prejudice against this methodology, and the reasons are the ones noted above: they can't see the faces of the respondents; they had one bad experience that soured them "forever;" participants can't adapt to the new technology; and their clients aren't asking for it anyway.

### **Seeing The Faces**

I am sympathetic to the concern about losing facial expressions, although I think their importance is greatly exaggerated. Whenever we observe people in a traditional group, we are interpreting what their facial expressions mean. Anyone who has lived in different parts of the country knows that regional differences alone make such interpretations risky and often wrong.

My favorite example is former President Bill Clinton. He smiled all the time; it didn't mean a thing. And while one can compensate to some extent by becoming knowledgeable about different regions of the county, people move around so much that it is often hard to know where people

are from and how to interpret what their facial expressions mean.

Similarly, skeptics ask: "What about non-verbal cues?" There are ways to compensate for them online. In fact, the very act of having to type their responses forces participants to be *more* expressive in words to get their points across. Furthermore, the use of emoticons (smiley faces, frowns, etc.), short hand (e.g., *LOL*, for laughing out loud), capitalization, and punctuation enables participants to get their points across quite well.

### **Bad Experiences**

Negative opinions about online focus groups are rooted in misconceptions about how online groups work. There are generally two stereotypes: either they are free-for-all sessions that veer out of control and provide useless information, or they are staid, boring events that are, as one prospective client recently told me, "like watching paint dry." Of course, most of the people who tell me this have never actually *attended* an online group, or they fall into the "I tried

it once, I didn't like it, and I am never doing it again" category.

Well-moderated online focus groups are not free-for-all chat fests, and they are not boring. If that's been your experience, you've been working with the wrong vendor. When properly designed and executed, virtual groups are structured discussions, much like you have when people are seated around a table, with the added bonus that everyone can "talk" at once.

Participants quickly learn that they can both respond to the moderator and to their fellow participants, which generates some very enlightening dialogue. There is, in fact, a sense of community in online focus groups, which cannot always be achieved in traditional groups. Yet this is not a community with a "herd mentality." It is one where people are more at ease challenging each other's points of view because they are anonymous. The dynamics of the online group enable us to accumulate even more data than is often possible in traditional groups. And, it's not just more words being said; the data are rich, in-depth and actionable.

Some people raise the specter of a "powerless moderator," who can't control the online participants. They characterize the moderator as being helpless and lacking the authority to direct and control the group. The truth is the quality of the moderator is not a function of the methodology but, rather, depends on her experience and expertise. In-person moderators have as much opportunity to lose control of the group as online moderators – no more and no less. In fact, sometimes it is easier to keep control online, especially if the virtual focus facility has a "mute" key and a "boot" key.

### **Technology vs. Participants**

Participants don't need to be "Mavis Beacon typists" to provide

good information during a group. Two fingers work quite well and, judging from the length of the transcripts we typically get, participants are not being held back by their typing skills. There may be some sort of self-selection going on (i.e., the people who agree to participate are the better typists), but it's rare these days to find people who have Internet access who can't bang out his ideas in one way or another.

Visual materials display quite well on the Internet, including ads (print and banner), concepts, Web sites, and message statements. What's more, being able to change exhibits between groups is much easier on the Internet than in-person. More energy can be put toward creating new visuals, rather than figuring out how to get them to the moderator the next day. Security is also less of an issue today because the technology exists for curtailing copying of exhibits.

### **My Clients Aren't Asking**

In all my years of research, I can't think of another methodology that was ignored because clients didn't ask for it. Most clients want the best data they can get and, while some might suggest and even fewer dictate the methodology to be used, most are looking to us researchers to recommend the best approach.

After I work with clients on their first set of online groups, I find they loved them! Why? First, many more clients can observe the groups in real-time than is possible in traditional groups because the time and cost of travel is prohibitive. And the more observers, the greater the likelihood that clients will believe and be ready to act on the research results. Second, clients can provide instant and unobtrusive input at any time during the group, by sending private messages to the

moderator. Third, clients can "talk" among themselves during the group, even if they are not in the same location. Of course, that means the boss may be more involved than is customary with traditional groups, but it also means she can't complain about the results!

### **Nothing is Perfect**

While I have extolled the virtues of online groups, I cannot claim that they are always appropriate over traditional groups. Most people don't have the bandwidth for video clips, and three-dimensional exhibits cannot be displayed. It's not always possible to find the target population online and, just as you can have a blizzard in New York in March that prevents people from getting to traditional groups, the Internet is not perfectly reliable, which brings me back to my original question.

Ask yourself whether you are judging this methodology fairly or holding it to a higher standard than other methodologies. After all, just like there are good telephone data collection agencies and bad ones, there are good practitioners of this methodology and bad ones. And when we get one of the bad ones, we simply don't use them again. It doesn't mean we abandon the methodology!

Are online focus groups the answer to all of our qualitative research prayers? Certainly not! But, whether you are for or against their use, online focus groups are not only here to stay, their use is actually increasing, if for no other reason than they save money, time and travel. And, assuming that you are planning on continuing your career in research, adding this methodology to your "market research toolbox" makes more sense than closing your eyes and wishing it away.