

Marketing News

NOVEMBER 19, 2001

WWW.AMA.ORG

A PUBLICATION OF THE AMERICAN MARKETING ASSOCIATION

RESEARCH ● *Not complicated unless you make it so*

Quality Inter(net)action

Researchers should adhere to offline nuances online

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The rush to get online research services up and running—a rush that began as opportunistic but, with the number of players rising, now is often defensive—has created the prospect of a serious casualty: qualitative research professionalism.

Quantitative is less problematic. As long as the online protocol is a more-or-less direct conversion of a standard structured questionnaire, the change in formats likely does no great harm. Indeed, from attention to respondent-friendly Web site design to the development of the underlying (and, one hopes, transparent) Q&A software and its uniform behavior on different browsers, the emphasis on the mechanics is appropriate. In quantitative research, the methodological objective is to put the respondent in as direct a relation to the content as possible.

But qualitative is just the opposite. Here, it is the researcher's express purpose to promote interaction, uncover and resolve ambiguity, and mediate and direct the relation between participant and content, and in the focus group format among the participants themselves. In short, online qualitative research requires the same basic skills and talents as conventional qualitative research. Just as every in-person focus group has distinctive interactive dynamics, so too does each online session have its unique character. And the moderator must learn to read the group as quickly as possible—that is, understand the nature and intensity of participants' involvement with the subject and get comfortable with the group's rhythm, feel and tone.

Finally, as with a traditional focus group, an e-group moderator must recognize and manage the mix of personalities and communications styles, containing the dominant participants while drawing out the reluctant ones and probing to get beyond knee-jerk or courtesy responses.

And so the basic moderating principles and

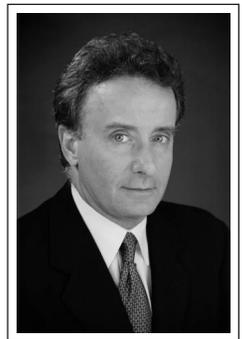
skill requirements are the same, but the customary tools for applying them are not available online. For example, while in-person groups automatically incorporate at least three senses—sight, sound and touch—and may involve taste and smell, online research precludes using all five senses directly. Moderators, then, have the added burden of gathering clues they would otherwise glean from participants' body language, voice volume or inflection, or cross-talk. They must take note of several things, such as the tenor of the participants' self-introductions; the length, frequency and pertinence of their typed-in contributions to the discussion; and the more subtle signals, such as how often and how appropriately participants use emotions and whether the others are drawn in or put off by them. In the process, just as with a conventional group, the online moderator must develop a working profile of each participant and that person's relationship to the rest of the group, with an eye on getting as complete, rich and balanced a result as possible.

Further complicating the picture is the scrolling text screen, which at this early state-of-the-art does not often permit individual contributions to be read in the order in which they would have been spoken in a traditional group. That is, some of the responses to Point A may not appear until after one or more comments have been made about Point B and perhaps Point C. Surprisingly, this is not all bad. A learning phenomenon called the Zeigarnik Effect shows that because of the natural human impulse to make things whole, interrupted tasks are better recalled than uninterrupted ones. This forced focus not only sharpens the attention of everyone involved—client observers, session participants and the moderator—but also helps offset the initial cognitive dissonance caused by the staggered-response text scrolling.

The challenges and requirements we have reviewed here apply to all online qualitative formats to some degree, including individual or multiple-depth interview, e-group or e-panel (a group extended over a week or so, during which time participants can check in on the discussion at their convenience). They apply wherever

moderated interaction is central to the task. Not that online qualitative research does not require new tools and techniques, but rather those tools and techniques must support, not replace, the application of classic qualitative principles. Internet technical savvy, experience with online quantitative research, good keyboard speed and even a first-rate virtual focus room provider cannot substitute for core qualitative research skills. Listening still matters, as does on-the-spot analytic and interpretive judgment. Just as a good, professional, in-person qualitative researcher is formally or a de facto psychologist (and she had better be), a good online qualitative researcher is an e-psychologist.

In the lemming-like stampede to capitalize on the speed and (often overrated) cost benefits of online research, client users would be well advised not to let the means obscure the goal. Once qualitative research has been reliably established as an appropriate approach for a given project, and the particulars of content and sample population are proven suitable for online execution, the first consideration should be qualitative research expertise, and then online technological competence. ■



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