



# Using Online Focus Groups As A Business-To-Business Research Technique

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## EVOLVING TECHNOLOGY IN THE MARKET RESEARCH INDUSTRY

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Reliable market research data depends on numerous factors, not least well-chosen respondents, well-designed questionnaires and good quality interviews. Arguably most importantly of all, the market researcher must choose a data collection methodology through which the target audience is comfortable communicating. For example, face-to-face interviews are widely used in many developing markets such as Russia, where there is a widespread distrust of people asking for information, which can only be assuaged if the respondent can see the whites of the interviewers' eyes. Similarly, research into the views of medical patients frequently requires self-completion methods to alleviate concerns over confidentiality.

The technological revolution of the past 15 years has led to the rapid development of online data collection methodologies. Of these, the online survey is the most established, being regarded as an excellent way of obtaining the views of large numbers of respondents in an accurate and cost-effective way.

More recently, online focus groups have emerged, making it possible to obtain qualitative information online. This evolution has been driven not only by the speed and sophistication of new technology, but also by respondents' willingness – or even their request – to provide their views over the Internet rather than face-to-face or over the telephone.

B2B International, which has been firmly established in the online research industry since the company's inception in 1998, remains one of the forerunners in e-enabled research. In developing new online applications for data collection, the company is recognising that the most reliable market research data is obtained by engaging the interest of the respondent. This is achieved through a subject matter that is perceived as relevant, but is also dependent on us communicating through a medium of the respondent's choosing at a time that suits them.

This paper outlines the principles of online focus groups, before examining the 13 key benefits of the technique.

### PRINCIPLES BEHIND ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS

The principle behind B2B International's online focus groups is similar to that behind Internet message boards. Participants are given a user name and password to access a secure website, on which questions about the research topic are 'posted'. The participants are asked to reply to each question, rather like they would with an online questionnaire.

A key difference with an online focus group, however, is that every participant sees the responses of all of the other respondents, and is asked to respond to these views as well as to the initial question posed by the researcher. In addition, the researcher inserts questions as the discussion develops, in order to probe areas of particular interest, or to gain further information on new topics that participants introduce to the discussion. In this way, a real-time, dynamic discussion develops between the researcher and the respondents, just as would be the case with a face-to-face focus group.



Online focus groups can take place for a defined period of, say, 90 minutes, as with a face-to-face focus group. In this case, all respondents are asked to log on at the same time and give their views on a variety of issues throughout that period. In our view, however, online groups are more effective when spread over a period of 2 days, with respondents entering the discussion at different times to suit their convenience. Our experience also shows that two-day groups generate more considered opinion and a greater volume of information, advantages which are discussed in detail later in this paper.

An online demonstration is available at <http://www.b2befocusgroups.com/overview/>.

## 13 REASONS TO CONDUCT ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS

### 1) Volume of information

One of the factors instrumental in limiting the growth of online research techniques has been the view by many research buyers (and indeed agencies) that e-research is only suitable within very limited boundaries: specifically short questionnaires consisting mainly of closed questions.

The increasing success of online focus groups is giving the lie to this perception, however, and emphasising the immense potential of online qualitative research. The volume of information generated by B2B International's online focus groups has shown that a high proportion of business respondents provide more information in an online discussion than they would if the same discussion were held face-to-face.

Our results show that, once respondents have agreed to join the discussion, they are happy to log on two, three or more times over the duration of the group (typically a couple of days), providing perhaps two hours worth of comment each. Compare this with a conventional 90-minute focus group between 8 respondents – here each respondent will average a 10-minute contribution.

### 2) Depth and quality of information

Of course, obtaining a large volume of information is all very well. Of more importance in qualitative research is that the information obtained is in-depth and provides a profound understanding of the issues under scrutiny.

Examination of the data obtained by online focus groups indicates that there is no significant difference in the depth of information obtained in comparison with face-to-face groups. Just as in face-to-face groups, specific issues can be probed in detail where extra detail is required.

An online focus group typically generates around 10,000 to 12,000 words and this transcript is available immediately on completion of the group. This is a very similar output to the number of words from conventional focus groups run in viewing centres, although there is a significant difference – the output from an online focus group has more pertinent comment. People give more consideration to words that are typed than words that are spoken – there is far less waffle!



### 3) Reflection time

Online groups allow reflection time when it comes to considering questions and topics introduced by the moderator. Whereas a face-to-face group takes no more than 2 hours, putting pressure on the moderator and respondents to cover issues quickly, the online focus group takes place over the course of 2 days, with respondents entering and leaving the discussion as they choose. This provides valuable reflection time, increasing the chances of respondents saying 'what they really think' rather than making rash statements.

Online focus groups mirror the business-to-business decision making process. Most business-to-business decisions require consideration. Very often views can change as people think about the question and sleep on it. The focus group spread over two days allows respondents to do just this.

### 4) Accuracy & granularity

A simple reason why online groups are extremely accurate is the fact that this is a self-completion technique. The researcher receives, in written format, the views of the respondent as expressed by that respondent.

Also important, online focus group software allows respondents to be individually identified far more easily than in a face-to-face group. Respondents of a different genre (e.g. customers and non-customers) can be mixed into one group, whilst researchers and clients watch the debate knowing who is who. Indeed, responses can be sorted by respondent or by company, meaning that online focus groups provide far more granularity of response than their face-to-face counterparts.

Thirdly, the higher numbers of respondents on online focus groups (often up to twenty, and sometimes more) mean that an element of quantitative questioning and analysis can be incorporated. Indeed, online focus group software allows us to construct 'polls', which are effectively mini-surveys of chosen questions, in which respondents can only see others' responses when they themselves have contributed a response.

### 5) Inclusiveness

Online focus groups are an extremely inclusive technology, allowing everyone to take whatever time they want to have their say, and to do so anonymously if they choose. Therefore, respondents who may by nature be intimidated or reticent in a face-to-face group are far more likely to 'speak up' when they are not 'eyeball to eyeball' with respondents they perhaps see as more knowledgeable, influential or articulate, or who simply speak loudly and are inclined to interrupt. In an online discussion, there is no reason for the less vocal to have less of a say!

Furthermore, in a two-day online discussion there is an opportunity to write more. Because there is no time pressure (as there is in a group lasting one-and-a-half hours), people can be more relaxed about their typing speeds and take their time to get over their point. Someone with 40 words per minute typing speed is not at the mercy of someone with 120 words per minute.



## **6) 'Honesty' of respondents**

The face-to-face focus group is often vaunted as an excellent means of relaxing respondents and getting them to 'open up', and we would certainly concur with this view. Furthermore, the results from a high proportion of our online focus groups suggest that the perceived anonymity afforded by an online discussion increases further respondents' willingness to air their frank views.

## **7) A better spread of respondents**

In a conventional face-to-face focus group, participants with a shared interest are gathered at a viewing centre. Very few respondents are willing to travel for more than half an hour to take part in such a group, however large the incentive.

Clearly in a 'virtual' group, logistical restrictions linked to geography do not apply. Respondents can be gathered from all over the country (indeed all over the world) to take part in the discussion. This means that in markets with a sparsely spread audience (and this applies to many business-to-business markets) there is a new opportunity to bring respondents with a similar interest together.

## **8) Incorporating different geographies and time zones**

As already stated, a key advantage of online focus groups is the ability to assemble sparsely spread respondent groups into a simultaneous discussion. This advantage is particularly pronounced when it comes to researching international markets.

A key distinguishing characteristic of online focus groups is the flexibility that is afforded in terms of time. In a face-to-face focus group, clearly all respondents must be gathered at the same venue at the same time, and for the same length of time.

In the case of online focus groups, however, respondents can dip in and out of the conversation at their convenience, returning to issues of interest as extra comments are added. Comments and questions are not ephemeral as in a face-to-face discussion – once a question or view has been aired, it stays on the discussion board for the duration of the discussion, for everyone else to respond to. This allows respondents from different geographical locations and time zones to take part in the same conversation.

## **9) Researching senior respondents**

The more senior the target audience, the more sparsely they are spread, the more they value their time, and the more difficult it is to assemble such an audience in the same room at the same time. When research agencies are asked to research the views of directors and other senior respondents, the typical response is to recommend an in-depth face-to-face or telephone interview.

The advent of the online focus group, however, removes many of the barriers preventing an interactive discussion between senior businesspeople. Ten heads of businesses spread across the world can all take part in the same discussion, and the respondents can fit their contributions around their busy and fast changing diaries. Furthermore, senior people are usually well-educated and relatively IT-savvy, making them extremely responsive to the online discussion format.



Whilst it should be cautioned that convincing high level, time-hungry respondents to take part in market research has not become a piece of cake overnight, the online focus group is a tool that is proven to increase access to senior respondents and engage their interest.

### **10) Participation rates**

The fact that online focus groups can be spread over a period of days has great implications in terms of participation rates. In any face-to-face focus group, the researcher must seek a suitable time and venue at which to assemble the target audience. Inevitably, some invitees then have to pull out shortly before the group due to work or home pressures, traffic, etc.

An online group, however, can be fitted around the respondent's working day (or indeed his/her leisure time). There is no need for it to be booked in the diary at a specific time; the only restriction is that the respondent must be able to gain access to a computer and spare an hour or so in total over the course of the group. This has proved to be extremely beneficial to research agencies and clients alike. Firstly, the costs of recruiting respondents to online discussions are lower than for face-to-face discussions, as they occupy a much less rigid place in the diary. Secondly, once participants have been recruited, they are much less likely to pull out at the last minute due to extenuating circumstances, as they can simply take part in the discussion at a different time of day (or night).

### **11) Introducing stimulæ to the conversation**

It must be acknowledged that there are limitations to the variety of stimulæ that can be used in online discussions. Essentially, we are limited to displaying the stimulæ on screen (stimulæ can then of course be printed out by respondents), but for physical objects which we want the audience to touch, feel or smell, some kind of tangible contact between the respondent and the stimulus must be arranged.

Nevertheless, online focus groups are extremely effective at providing on-screen visual stimulæ to respondents. Questions can easily include embedded images, links to websites and uploaded documents; indeed they can include links to video clips, sound files, and other multimedia files. As with the questions themselves, respondents can look at the stimulæ for as long and as frequently as they wish, taking time to consider their views before expressing them.

### **12) Everyone has an equal say**

One of the major weaknesses of a conventional focus group is that they can be hijacked by two or three respondents who are dominant, extrovert or who enjoy using it as a platform for their views. The other six or seven respondents may say relatively little and their views get overlooked. In online focus groups the spread of comment from different respondents is more evenly distributed. Everybody gets their say and has time to say it.

It is also worth pointing out that in a conventional focus group it is difficult for a moderator to manage more than 10 people. Indeed a focus group with 10 people in it would be quite daunting to some respondents who might choose to sit back in the wings and say very little. In an online focus group, respondents do not get 'stage fright' as they are on their own and



in the comfort of their office or home. They are not intimidated by their colleagues or by the strange venue with the viewing mirror and so are likely to open up more.

### 13) Client participation

In most cases, clients understandably wish to view focus groups first hand, recognising that this is an excellent means of hearing the target market's independent and honest views with their own ears. Most face-to-face focus groups are therefore conducted in viewing facilities with one-way mirrors.

In the case of an online focus group, viewing the proceedings as they happen is rather easier. Clients are simply provided with a user name and password, allowing them to view the conversation at any time of day or night. As online focus groups tend to take place over a couple of days, this allows the client to liaise with the agency and steer the conversation towards the areas that interest them most over the duration of the group.

## LIMITATIONS OF ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS

We have argued strongly in favour of online focus groups and discussed their merits in detail. Like any research tool, however, it must be acknowledged that online groups are not suited to every research project. In addition to the limitation with presenting physical stimulæ for respondents to touch, feel or smell, it must be recognised that certain target audiences are less suited to online groups than others.

An obvious point is that the more web-savvy the audience is, the more suited that audience is to the online focus group technique. IT managers are ideal participants for an online group, and office-based employees are, on the whole, extremely receptive to the technique and comfortable with the technology.

Non-technical, manual employees – particularly those that are advanced in years and those that are below management level – are the least responsive to, and as a general rule the least comfortable with, the technology. We would perhaps not expect an online focus group with farmers or miners to be enormously successful, and experience tells us that online groups with mechanics or removal men, whilst achievable, result in a high number of technical queries during the project. Nevertheless, there are now extremely few target audiences which should be regarded as out of bounds for an online focus group.

It is also worth mentioning one or two limitations that online focus groups share with face-to-face groups. Firstly, recruitment is initially conducted by telephone, which is relatively labour-intensive and expensive. Email recruitment has a very low success ratio, as target audiences tend to regard invitations as junk mail. In business-to-business markets with a limited target audience, a target database that is often limited in accuracy, and a complex decision making unit to navigate, this technique is rarely viable. However, once the respondent has agreed to take part, contact from that point onward is online, with log-in details, a link to the site hosting the discussion, and instructions on how to take part in the discussion all emailed to the respondent. A technical helpline is provided for the rare occasions when respondents have difficulty navigating the discussion.



Finally, many would argue that in certain situations, there can be no substitute for seeing and hearing a respondent give their views on one's product or service. Body language, tone of voice and other visual signals are simply not picked up by online research techniques.

## THE FUTURE FOR ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS

With worldwide expenditure on online research predicted to almost treble over the next three years, the future would appear to be bright for most online techniques. We predict that the following factors will increase the prominence and effectiveness of online focus groups:

- Businesspeople's increasingly busy schedules will make online focus groups a more viable option than face-to-face focus groups.
- Target audience's increasing familiarity with bulletin boards and similar technologies – both in the workplace and socially – will make it easier to convince respondents to take part in online focus groups.
- We can expect a blurring of the line between online focus groups and online surveys, mirroring the blending of qualitative and quantitative research taking place across the research industry. We expect 'super-groups' of up to 50 people to emerge, with a large number of closed 'poll' questions supplementing the usual open-ended questioning. We may also see groups lasting a week or two in order to maximise response rates and cover a greater number of topics.
- The ability of audiences to take part in online focus groups will further increase as mobile phone technology becomes increasingly sophisticated and user-friendly, allowing participants to take part via their cell-phone handsets.
- Online discussions are likely to move further into traditional qualitative areas, with respondents using not only words, but also emoticons, colours and shapes to express their moods and feelings as well as their views. This trend will be driven both by increasingly well-presented interfaces and by the increasing familiarity of the target audience with bulletin board technology.
- Online focus groups are likely to incorporate high resolution, moving graphics, particularly as stimulæ for respondents. This will make online focus groups even more viable for product development research in particular.
- The immunity of online focus groups to geographical and time-zone restrictions means that online groups are likely to emerge as a useful opinion tracking technique. It is far easier to reconvene a group of respondents online than it is in a viewing centre. The quantitative capabilities of online focus groups make them all the more suitable to tracking research.
- As the capabilities of online translation software increase, ultimately we would expect respondents speaking different languages to be able to participate in the same discussions via simultaneous translation tools. This will open a completely new frontier in international market research – for the first time respondents speaking different languages will be able to interact directly with each other.



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