



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

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ONLINE TECHNOLOGY IN THE MARKET RESEARCH INDUSTRY

Ever since the emergence of the Internet, the market research industry has sought ways of using online research in order to achieve more effective results. Desk research conducted over the Web is a long-established technique that has made desk research quicker, easier, more up-to-date and more cost effective. Similarly online surveys are widely regarded as an excellent way of obtaining the views of large numbers of respondents in an accurate and cost-effective way.

To the benefit of the research industry itself and market research buyers alike, the use of e-technology continues to evolve. This evolution is being driven by the increasingly sophisticated technology available to research agencies, the increasing speed of these technologies, and most importantly of all the relative ease with which target respondents now adopt new e-based techniques.

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. An increasingly lucrative arm of the company's activities is online focus groups, which are demonstrating that effective qualitative fieldwork can be conducted online.

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 web-site, 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.

BENEFITS OF ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS

With any research technique there are some projects, some subjects and some target audiences that are more suited than others. There is also a natural wariness of adopting techniques that have not been proven over a period of years. Over the coming pages we argue that online focus groups are an extremely reliable and effective research technique, whose adoption and popularity can only grow.

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 current 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 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 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 examination. It is fair to say that this is another issue around which researchers and research buyers alike have traditionally held concerns.

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. Many respondents provide better depth and more relevant information in an online discussion as – in the case of groups lasting a day or two – they have more time to reflect on the questions being asked.

3) Quality/reliability of data

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. However, 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.

Furthermore, 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!

Finally, the online discussion allows respondents to take their time in considering their responses to questions, and to other respondents' comments. This differs markedly from face-to-face focus groups, in which the conversation can move on before some respondents have had the opportunity to express their views, and in which dominant members of the group can more easily influence their colleagues.

4) 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.

5) Incorporating different 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 'forgotten' 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 time zones to take part in the same conversation.

6) 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.

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.

7) 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 much 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).

8) 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 links to web-sites 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.



9) Providing a viewing facility

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 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. The strides that have been made in speed and sophistication of technology are certainly important factors in making online focus groups look like a really viable qualitative technique, and these trends will surely continue.



The key to what we believe will be the rise of online focus groups over the next three years is however not technological development per se; rather it is agencies' increasing belief in the technology, and most importantly of all the confidence with which business people of all types use the Internet and associated technologies.



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