

Nervous About Conducting Online Bulletin Boards Focus Groups? So Were We. Here's Why the Time Is Right to Jump In.

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“Cost-cutting.” It certainly seems to be the mantra these days, and 2009 is likely to be more of the same, with market research budgets slashed at companies both large and small. In these leaner times, companies will rely on market research suppliers more than ever to be at the forefront of creative ways to deliver quality research for fewer dollars.

Quantitative research has been moving increasingly toward online data collection for years now, and the improvements in online sample and programming capability have made online research almost a no-brainer for any company who needs to reach a large number of respondents quickly and cheaply. Meanwhile, though online qualitative research has certainly gained ground in the past few years, clients are often reluctant to leave behind tried-and-true focus groups and in-depth interviews. And with good reason: if qualitative is supposed to provide a true in-depth look at an audience, how good a look can we get when the audience is hidden behind a computer screen?

As a supplier specializing in both quantitative and qualitative, we, too, embraced online quantitative quickly, but hesitated about qualitative. Our brief explorations into live online focus groups left us with concerns: the fastest typist can dominate the group; participants have no time to think about their responses; the lack of visual contact -- or even voice inflection -- makes it difficult to draw out the wallflowers or subtly suppress a dominant personality. How could we take advantage of the best the web has to offer, without sacrificing the personal, intimate aspect of qualitative research?

Enter bulletin board focus groups (BBFGs for short). Bulletin boards allow participants to log on at any time over a set period, usually three to five days, and answer pre-posted questions by the moderator. Participants typically log in once, answer the day's questions, and then come back later to comment on others' posts and respond to probes and follow-ups. We knew that BBFGs would help mitigate some of the problems with live online groups: the “on your own time” schedule allows each respondent to participate fully, with time to formulate their thoughts; it also allows moderators and clients to change the topic guide mid-steam, adding probes and topics.

What we weren't prepared for was the incredibly rich, personal, deep information we received from our BBFGs. Clients who had been reluctant to try a bulletin board suddenly became converts, moving more of their qualitative projects to this approach. So why jump in? Here are some of the reasons we're so strongly on board:

- **Convenience for participants, convenience for clients:** Our BBFG participants love logging on at all times of the day: midnight, 2am, noon. We can capture new moms who would never be able to leave their babies to attend a focus group, or even schedule a phone IDI. We can include busy professionals who haven't even time for a cup of coffee during the day. And clients don't have to worry about freeing up a full day or a week to attend in-person groups.
- **Time to think equals better insights:** BBFG participants read the questions, think about their responses, and formulate well-reasoned responses. This leads to much richer feedback than even we had expected. The verbatim comments generated here are so insightful, some of our clients have asked for reports with pages and pages of quotes. This is truly the voice of the customer.
- **Everyone plays, not just the team captain:** In a traditional group or even a teleconference group, the same few people nearly always jump in first. Moderating techniques can help contain that, but the group dynamic is obvious to everyone. In addition, there's never enough time to hear from every participant on every question. But in a BBFG, the asynchronous nature of the replies places everyone on a level playing field. Maybe aggressive Mary or John will post replies first, but quiet Sandy or Mitch will have to provide a reply as well – and sometimes will uncover a deeper layer that would never have come out in a traditional group. And because BBFGs can require participants to post a comment before seeing anyone else's reply, the more outspoken group members don't have as strong an effect on the others.
- **Got something to review? No need to sacrifice:** BBFG software includes a "white board" area where participants can look at ad copy, magazine layouts, product concepts, or other visuals. Innovative software such as Itracks' IMarkit application even allows group members to draw on visuals, adding smiley faces, frowns, and comments. Group members can also be referred to a website to view content and then return to the group to make their comments.
- **Pure and simple, it's fun!** In every group we've done – even those recruited by phone, with participants completely new to the technology – group members universally say, "Thanks! That was fun! Please tell me when you do another one of these." Group members get to know one another, share ideas back and forth, and often wish each other well when the group is done. In addition, there's something cathartic in seeing your own opinions in writing, and many participants say that the BBFG experience was a rewarding and even moving one. Clients love the fun of logging on and seeing what's new, and the ease of getting a full transcript immediately following the groups is an added bonus.

Is a BBFG for every client and every project? Of course not. But it's an increasingly important tool in our qualitative toolbox, and we strongly recommend giving it a try.

For more information regarding this methodology and/or Zeldis Research Associates, Inc. please look for us online at www.zeldisresearch.com or call us at 609-737-7223.