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The good, bad and unknown of

INTERNET FOCUS GROUPS

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As market research professionals become more familiar with the Internet's ability to make distance and location irrelevant, cyber focus groups have become a bigger part of their repertoire.

However, those in the know say the idea of conducting research in the form of an Internet chat is not without its problems.

Fairfield-based Dialogue Resource, Inc. (DRI) is a strategic research and consulting firm with more than 15 years of experience in qualitative research, idea generation and meeting facilitation.

"There's no doubt about it, conducting studies on the Internet is a new and powerful tool for the marketing research profession. As e-commerce expands, its medium provides more penetrating techniques and its application flexibility on the web appears to be limitless," said pres-

ident Nino DeNicola.

In recent years, DRI has been fine-tuning the process of conducting research online. Their technique is relatively simple. When the discussion begins, all recruits enter a waiting room until the moderator invites them to enter the focus group room. Each participant must then give their log-on I.D. and password for access.

At the same time, the moderator permits clients to enter the viewing room that is invisible to the respondents. After it's over, the clients and the moderator can immediately "debrief" online in the viewing room.

Full transcripts can be downloaded 24 hours after a project ends and are provided via an Excel spreadsheet. Comprehensive data can be sorted by question, number, participant, room location, by first word or the category of the response.

Three benefits

DeNicola, who holds a master's degree in clinical psychology, said there are three key benefits to online research.

First, participation is more convenient, inclusive and less inhibited online. By using their home or work PC to interact, the people involved don't have to be concerned with distance, location, time or weather.

For example, Internet transmission is ideal for reaching high-level executives with limited time available or professional experts who are geographically dispersed. Sample opinions can be obtained anywhere, at any time.

"We establish three forums tailored to client needs. One advantage of online communication is the use of a format that people are comfortable with. It is similar to chat rooms or bulletin boards. The difference is the dialogue or

continued on page 2

(Continued)

threads are focused and specific to a particular marketing question," said Senior Vice President Jeffrey F. Shannon, Ph.D.

It's also difficult for certain personality types to dominate an on-line discussion or for bias judgments based on personal appearance to affect responses. Sensitive subjects, such as workplace relations, are easier to talk about when there is no fear of personal reprisal.

Another advantage is the speed of data incorporation. Changes to project program activity can be done instantly and discussion transcripts can be available within 24 hours.

The final advantage DeNicola mentioned was the project cost factor. Travel, food and videotaping expenses for meetings are eliminated on the Internet.

"The advantages of online research will increase," DeNicola concluded, "as the comfort level of the Internet deepens and eliminates hesitancy with this novel methodology."

The drawback

Of course, Internet research demands participants with certain traits, including computer literacy, typing skills, reading comprehension and patience.

The question then becomes, do people with these traits represent a true cross-section of society, or are they similar people with similar views who will skew the resulting data?

"Qualitative research is non-projectable data anyway. You don't conduct this type of research with the intent of projecting the results to a larger

group," said DeNicola, who described the research DRI conducts as directional and exploratory in nature.

For instance, he said the process works well for examining an idea for a new type of brokerage or financial service, but not as well for researching a bar of soap.

DeNicola predicts that Internet marketing research will become universal as the increase in the online population mirrors the increase of computer users within overall demographics of our population.

The unknown

As with traditional focus groups, DeNicola said the screening or recruiting process is the most important step in getting accurate results.

The screening and recruiting process is the same as for traditional focus groups except for the number of participants. The e-groups and panels are smaller so the "rapid fire" nature of Internet data does not become overwhelming to participants and monitors.

Research coordinators call candidates and ask a series of questions. The person's answers determine if they fit the profile for the study.

Once the person qualifies for the study, it's conceivable that they could be collaborating with other people who are in the same room as the computer terminal or that they will let someone else sign on in their place. Either scenario could corrupt the research results.

"The one thing you have to take on faith is that the person on the

other end is the person you screened. You don't know that for sure over the Internet. It's always a risk," according to DeNicola.

He lists good questions, follow-up probing, insightful analysis and great report writing as the hallmarks of accurate research whether it be online or in front of a two-way mirror. (Reprinted with permission.) ■
