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"The New Face of Focus Groups"

Sidebar: Moving Focus Groups Online

By: Kevin Zimmerman

Companies are rethinking their approach to focus groups to adapt to the online environment. Web-based focus groups can be either synchronous—with the marketer and participants together in a chat room or online community at the same time—or asynchronous, where respondents can submit their reactions to a posted query on their own time, via online bulletin boards.

The latter "offers a much broader range of research possible than simply bringing a group of people together in a room," says Van Patten Research head Liz Van Patten. "It also can be extremely cost-effective."

As an example, she points to an online focus group she conducted shortly after 9/11, when a mobile-carrier client was seeking input from first responders (fire, police, EMTs) across all seniority levels. "They had no budget to travel to the 12 markets they were looking at," she says, "but by setting up asynchronous online bulletin boards for several days, the issues of geography and time zones melted away. With a population like that, it's not always easy for them to come to a focus group because of their schedules. With this approach, they could log in at 4 a.m. when their shift ended and answer the questions."

Another advantage, she says, is that the anonymity aspect of such online interaction is attractive "when you're dealing with sensitive topics that someone might be embarrassed to talk about in front of a room full of strangers. It usually leads to more honesty and depth in responses."

Disadvantages include recruiting challenges, where a marketer must be able to confirm a participant's identity to make sure they're who they say they are, and, if conducting a focus group in real time, taking into account varying typing abilities among the participants.

Another Web-based approach involves online communities. Debi Kleiman, director of product marketing at Communispace, says online groups can establish long-lasting communities where consumers share their experiences with a particular company or brand over time.

"A focus group is a one-time event, even if it's an online focus group," she says. "Online communities allow companies to learn about and innovate longitudinally over time. It's about getting down to the real attitudes and ideas that people have."