

It Takes a Community...

Michelle Soto discusses the applications of online communities for marketing research and shares tips for recruitment and study implementation.

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Where do dog lovers, foot fetishists, singles, or members of professional associations like QRCA get together to discuss their common interests? In the thousands of online communities that address every imaginable topic. Businesses have also established online communities to keep them connected with their customers or for their employees to use as a communication and collaboration tool. eBay and iVillage are examples of online communities; virtually any website where people with a common interest meet interact can be considered an online community.

Interaction typically takes place online via synchronous (chats) and asynchronous (bulletin boards) communication. These are currently the two main platforms used for conducting online qualitative research. Online

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communities are usually open to anyone with a particular interest or affiliation, and they can include thousands of members or just a few. There has been a good deal of sociological research conducted recently about these virtual communities, including the patterns of interactions, connections, and friendships that develop in these virtual spaces.

While online communities are nothing new, they're still young enough that it is worth researchers' time to develop new ways to use them specifically for market research. The next logical step in the evolution of bulletin-board research is asynchronous discussions involving more respondents, over longer periods of time.

CommuniSpace, a software platform developed by sociologists with expertise creating Web-based communities, is designed specifically to host online communities for market research purposes. In this case, a targeted set of 250-300 respondents agree to be part of the community for six months to a year or even longer. Members communicate with each other freely about their own topics, as well as participate in market research activities.

Requirements

Since the platform is Web-based, Internet access is the only technical requirement for people to participate. Respondents go to a secure URL, enter their name and password, and can begin communicating with each other.

Recruiting

As with chat or bulletin-board focus groups, respondents can be recruited through various sample sources, using various methods. Potential respondents can be identified from client lists, purchased samples, or existing online panels. They can be solicited via email, by a programmed screener, by telephone, or even by distributing flyers at a convention. Selection and recruitment methods generally depend on the recruitment criteria and what information you need to know about respondents prior to participation.

Incentives differ depending on the respondent type and length of participation, but they are typically not cash. You could offer a point-reward system based on participation, or free product samples, sweepstakes, or prizes. Motivation to

participate is also intrinsic to the process because the respondents are interested in the topic, invested in the study, believe that they are contributing and adding value to the sponsoring organization, and feel connected with the other members of their community.

Virtual Facility Features and Capabilities

The online community offers a wide variety of features and activities for flexible and creative data collection approaches.

- **Chat.** Invite only certain participants such as a small group of 10, for example, or open participation to anyone who wants to come for a live chat on a particular topic at a particular date and time
- **Bulletin board.** This is the commonly used form of dialogue. The researcher posts questions and respondents answer at their convenience. If you need quick feedback, you can send an email to all members asking them to reply within 24 hours. You can also set aside private bulletin board areas for online journals.
- **Brainstorming.** This separate feature walks respondents through three phases of brainstorming: idea generation, categorizing, and prioritizing. Members can be anonymous if desired, and they are encouraged to list any and all ideas that come to mind.
- **Polling.** Polling is not intended to provide quantitative results, but rather a quick read on ideas, or to record ratings or preferences, as you might do with worksheets in a face-to-face focus group.
- **Multimedia viewing.** Respondents can view graphic and video files for evaluation, or you can upload photos for a picture-sort exercise. In addition, respondents can upload photos and create their own photo gallery, creating a form of online ethnography. For example, you can ask respondents to upload photos of their home interiors, such as their cupboards, grocery purchases, kitchen appliances, or home offices.
- **Participant profiles.** Members fill out information about themselves and include their photo, if they wish. This feature becomes more and more robust as

participants get to know each other and feel comfortable in the community.

- **Library.** The library is a place for documents, links, and other resources of common interest, which can be placed there either by the client or by the respondents.

Implementation

Like organizing traditional research projects, the first step in organizing an online community is client communication. Talk with your client to confirm and review all of the elements of the future community such as:

- Site configuration
- Purpose
- Screening
- Ground rules
- Participant commonalities, or what will keep them talking.

The site is configurable in many ways, including colors, titles, access restrictions, and the client's logo. Preferably, there should be one client contact through which all research issues filter, and to whom you provide findings or information for dissemination. The planning and recruiting phase of launching an online community may take up to five or six weeks.

It is important to clearly define participation expectations in advance. Typically, respondents are asked to participate once or twice per week for an hour or two. The first few months should be spent on relationship-building activities and helping to foster open communications by inviting

respondents get to know one another. Sometimes relationships can be built in a matter of days in online bulletin boards, but the goal with online communities is to build long-term relationships.

Participation is usually not equal among respondents. About a third of the respondents are typically highly active and participate daily, while another third participates a few times a week, and the final third's participation is low. Since some level of attrition can be expected, you may want to replace some of the inactive participants with new recruits every few months or so. The best way to reduce attrition is to keep participants involved. One way to foster involvement is to send respondents product samples regularly and have them report their user experiences back to you.

Moderators can introduce about three activities per week, including bulletin board-style questions, a poll, or an evaluation of advertising concepts. Moderators usually spend about 10 hours per week reading responses, posting follow-up questions, and encouraging interaction within the community.

Reporting varies based on client needs. Typically, a summary report that highlights any new activities initiated by clients or respondents is prepared every two weeks. In-depth analysis, accomplished primarily by reading transcripts, requires an average of about 20 hours per month of a moderator's time.



Costs

Costs vary based on many factors, including the number of respondents, respondent criteria, time required for moderating and reporting, and specific incentives. Additional costs include an initial set-up fee and a monthly maintenance fee based on the number of respondents. Total costs for maintaining an online community over the course of one year can run anywhere from \$100,000 to \$300,000. Once a client has established one community, spin-off communities can be created at a lower cost, using the original configuration as a template.

Market research managers who are used to buying research services on a per-project basis may have difficulty comprehending or justifying the cost of an ongoing online community. They also may not have the need to conduct weekly or monthly research. However, brand managers, strategy and customer insights divisions, R&D, sales, and HR groups who need to envision and plan the big picture within their organization are more likely to benefit and to be able to justify the costs of using online communities.

Benefits

Online communities offer a great number of unique advantages, such as:

- The capacity for respondents to communicate with the researcher and amongst themselves as well. Respondents are able to initiate bulletin-board topics, a poll, or post links to favorite websites. This rich communication allows clients to see what is on their customers' minds and what is important to them, and may potentially lead to the discovery of unmet needs.
- The ability to get quick feedback. By reaching out to community members on Monday, you can provide information to your client about a quick hunch or reaction for a meeting on Wednesday.
- The capability to invest research dollars more effectively by weeding out less valid ideas upfront, and then pursuing only the ideas that resonate within the community. In addition, multiple groups within a client company can use the feedback from the community for achieving different objectives.

Hallmark Cards, Inc., was one of the first companies to use online communities for market research. Hallmark launched its first community, the Idea Exchange, in November 2000 and has since established three others—each with a unique target market.

In a presentation at the 23rd Annual Marketing Research Conference in September 2002, Tom Brailsford, manager of advancing research at Hallmark, explained that Hallmark looks to their communities for innovation.

“We are experimenting with inviting the ‘outside’ in to make our innovation efforts more focused and productive,” Brailsford said.

Communities are not meant to replace all other market research efforts. While qualitative insights can't be projected to the general population, Brailsford pointed out that community insights help formulate the right questions for quantitative research, and can help develop new products or advertising concepts based on a better understanding of consumer needs.

Applications

An online community may be the best



approach when a client is looking for any of the following information sources or learnings:

- Information from a customer advisory panel
- An opportunity to eavesdrop on customer interactions
- The ability to observe their products being used long-term
- A research source for achieving multiple objectives from among different teams within the same company
- Reactions to a brand change over time
- Learning from employees by communicating with the people on the front line who are talking to your customers

Limitations

Online communities are not appropriate for every situation that calls for qualitative research methods. Depending on research objectives, clients

may not want to hear from the same respondents over the course of a year.

To maintain vibrancy in the online community, respondents must develop a strong connection with each other; if they do not, the community is likely to fail. A toothpaste users community, for example, probably would not work well. However, a community of moms with kids who can share interests, stories, and experiences, and evaluate toothpaste along with other products, advertising, and other common issues could be a very effective way to generate rich consumer insights. B2B respondents typically value the online forums as a vehicle for sharing information with their peers, while also providing research data for your clients.

As with any new information technology, the more online communities are used, the more new uses for them will be identified and utilized. We don't exactly know where it all will lead, but traveling down this new road is intriguing, don't you think? 📺

