

**E**ven with the unfortunate moniker, researchers have found “homework” for in-person qualitative to be an effective tool to extend the learning of in-person research far beyond the actual time the researcher can spend with the respondent. Homework reinforces, accelerates and deepens consumer insights. Yes, it is extra work for everyone, but its use has grown as researchers strive to squeeze ever-deeper insights from each respondent interaction.

### Homework Adds Value to Studies

Homework comes in many forms and is conducted for many reasons. Some of the more typical reasons for assigning respondent homework include the following:


#### *Develop context.*

The researcher can peek inside respondents’ lives before they come to the focus group. Through pictures, ethnographic video or in-the-moment

descriptions of activities, respondents can provide vivid details of product purchase and use. Online and offline tools help the researcher understand the context that surrounds behavior and forms opinions.

#### *Explore the emotional context.*

Many tools give researchers the ability to go far beyond pictures, video and text because they support projective exercises that respondents complete



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behavior in a typical day related to a particular product or service. People are notoriously poor at remembering their behavior in focus groups. In-the-moment (or close-to-the moment) journaling of behavior can provide a much more accurate picture of how a respondent behaved than methods that rely on memory.

Interaction tracking differs from journaling by adding specific assignments. Each assignment consists of a task and a series of questions related to that task. For example, respondents might be asked to shop for a particular product and then answer questions about their shopping experience.

#### *Warm up respondents.*

Any type of pre-group homework “primes” the respondents so they enter a group ready to dive deeply into the topic. These assignments may be topic focused, to stimulate specific topic-level thinking, or they may be broad, to stimulate a particular mode of thinking. For example, a brainstorming exercise could help prepare your respondents to think outside of the usual parameters.

#### *Screen for engaged respondents.*

Homework can also be used as a pre-group screening tool. For example, a quick review of a creative homework assignment prior to the start of a co-creation session can be invaluable in selecting the best respondents for the task.

#### *Illustrate the research story.*

Many researchers use homework to produce visuals that help tell the story in the final report or presentation. The most common visuals are collages, pictures and videos.

Homework can take virtually any form that the creative researcher devises to achieve the research objectives. Regardless of the specific method, homework is effective because it gives the researcher a look into respondents’ lives beyond the two-hour focus group window and provides context for the focus group discussion with the ensuing analysis.

### **Typical Homework Process**

- The researcher and the facility platform manager prepare the online homework assignments.
- The platform manager sends out the homework assignments and log-in information to the respondents.
- The platform manager ensures participation and alerts the recruiter and/or researcher of non-participation.
- Respondents participate individually or in a group discussion.
- The researcher views the homework as it comes in.
- The platform manager sends transcripts, pictures, videos, etc., to the researcher at the agreed time.
- The researcher incorporates the findings into the discussion guide.
- The in-person research occurs.
- The researcher includes homework findings, visuals, etc., in the final report/presentation.

### **Benefits to Taking Homework Online**

There are many ways to use online homework tools and, thus, many benefits. Generally, online homework can dramatically reduce a researcher’s stress and anxiety related to homework, while increasing respondent participation and homework usefulness. Specific benefits include:

and submit prior to coming to the in-person research. Through online software, the researcher can collect, analyze and even probe the results before the respondent shows up. Such exercises can dramatically increase overall insights and inform a more productive discussion once the in-person group begins.

#### *Improve recall accuracy.*

A favorite homework assignment is to ask respondents to journal their

In this Journal response, the moderator is able to ask questions that allow further insight into the respondents' behavior and motivations.



Today's smart phone technology now allows research participants to easily bring greater visual information — both text and video/ photos — to answering research questions.

- **Respondent participation.** When they show, you know. Daily researchers know who is participating, simply by logging in to the platform. Non-participants can be encouraged, or they can be dismissed and replaced early in the process. There are no surprises the day of the group.
- **High focus group show rate.** Respondents who complete homework are more likely to show for the group; they are “primed” and eager to participate. Since non-participating respondents in an online homework assignment are identified and replaced early, homework participation rates are high, resulting in high focus group show rates.
- **Visuals. Visuals. Visuals.** Researchers and respondents can easily upload pictures, mobile video and webcam video from anywhere. Mobile apps make the homework fully portable, so researchers can easily gather visuals from anywhere the respondents go. Projective exercises that could never be completed in the focus group can be completed in homework and used to bring insights to life for a client team.
- **As-you-go analysis.** Because researchers can view responses in near real time, analysis can be conducted daily, eliminating the last-minute rush to incorporate homework findings into a discussion guide.
- **Security.** In research, security around corporate information and respondents' personally identifiable information (PII) is always a concern. Online platforms should be HIPAA and Safe Harbor compliant, providing a much more secure option than email, mail or the common “facility pickup.”
- **Organized analysis.** No more sifting through emails or piles of paper. The digital transcripts can be sorted, tagged and viewed in virtually unlimited configurations. In addition, the bulky picture and video files are arranged in an image gallery to be viewed, tagged and even edited as needed. The result is faster, easier and more effective homework analysis,

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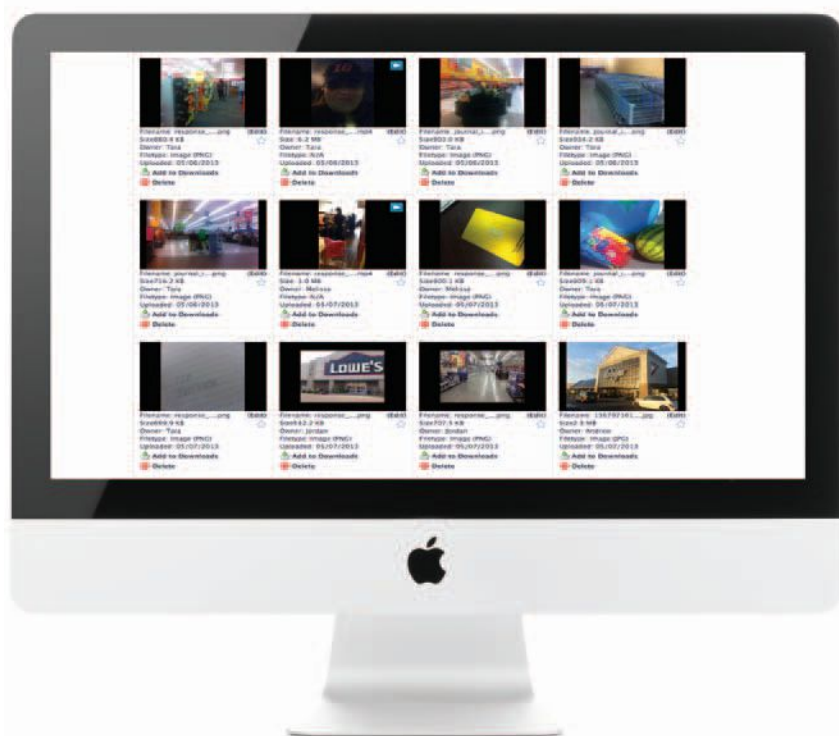
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The online media gallery, below, shows all the videos and images uploaded to a particular study. Researchers can now gather and sort through media-rich participant data all in one location. This allows for quicker, more insightful analysis that can help form the in-person discussion.



Homework is no longer limited to just written text and pictures. Now, participants can share videos, giving researchers a first-hand look at the lives and habits of consumers.



saving hours of researcher time and yielding less-rushed analysis.

### Online or Not?

When considering whether or not to bring your homework online, factor in the following:

#### *Additional screening for internet and/or mobile access.*

Be sure to include access and use of the internet to your screening criteria. Fortunately, online access has grown dramatically in recent years, so this problem is not nearly the issue it was a few years ago.

#### *Cost of the platform/service.*

The platform/service adds little cost to the in-person research, while saving hours of analysis time and dramatically increasing the opportunity to gather insights.

#### *Additional communication required.*

Online homework often requires more communication between the researcher and the platform manager at the beginning of the study. Therefore, in a multi-market study, it is often best practice to identify one platform and use it across all markets to achieve economies of scale and reduce the opportunity for disappointment in one or more markets.

#### *Platform capability.*

Most online qualitative platforms are very flexible and multi-functional. However, different platforms have different strengths. Therefore, it is best to discuss all anticipated needs with the platform provider prior to engaging that provider for a project.

## HOMework CASE STUDIES

### Product-Testing Case Study

Product placements are a common use for homework or pre-group assignments. Usually, respondents pick up a product and a questionnaire at the facility. They use the product and complete the questionnaire to bring with them to the group.

A clothing brand planned to test three products in five markets with focus groups. In each market, the



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 Delve (Dallas)  
 Fieldwork Dallas  
 Focus Pointe Global  
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Participation was extremely high because the respondents were now highly involved in the discussion topic and had formed personal relationships with other respondents in the focus groups.

recruited respondents agreed to participate in the test and provide their feedback online. Respondents picked up the products at the facility and agreed to wear each of the three products on three separate days. While wearing each product, they recorded a short webcam video describing their impressions of the product with demonstrations. They also answered questions about each product.

In the first few days after product pickup, the research assistant noted that some respondents were not participating. These participants were contacted and reminded to participate. A few did not participate even after the reminder. These were replaced, and the resulting focus groups were filled with respondents who had all fully participated in the product evaluation.

Because the videos and the respondents' evaluations were available in near real time, the researcher incorporated the findings into the discussion guide to drive deeper discussion and insights from the research. Because all the respondents had fully participated, they were fully invested in the research, which led to a lively and thoughtful discussion.

### Journaling Case Study

A condiment manufacturer wanted to understand how people use its products.

Prior to the upcoming focus groups, the researcher asked respondents to take pictures each time they used that particular condiment. In addition to uploading the picture, respondents answered several questions related to each use occasion. The homework was completed as in-depth interviews, so each respondent did not see the results from other respondents.

The researcher viewed the pictures and use descriptions as they were uploaded each day. The reported use-occasions provided points in the focus group discussion guide that were clearly relevant to the particular respondents in the group.

After the focus groups, respondents participated in a follow-up online discussion where they responded to additional questions, uploaded additional photos and interacted with other respondents on the use of the condiment. Participation was extremely high because the respondents were now highly involved in the discussion topic and had formed personal relationships with other respondents in the focus groups. These post-group findings were rich and helpful for the researcher and, ultimately, the end client.

The researcher grouped the pictures into several "Product Use Collages" for the final report to provide a

visual context for the client of the researcher's analysis.

### Shop-Along Case Study

A cosmetics company wanted to better understand how women shopped and chose their brand in chain drug stores. A traditional shop-along study was commissioned with women fitting the target market in three geographically dispersed markets.

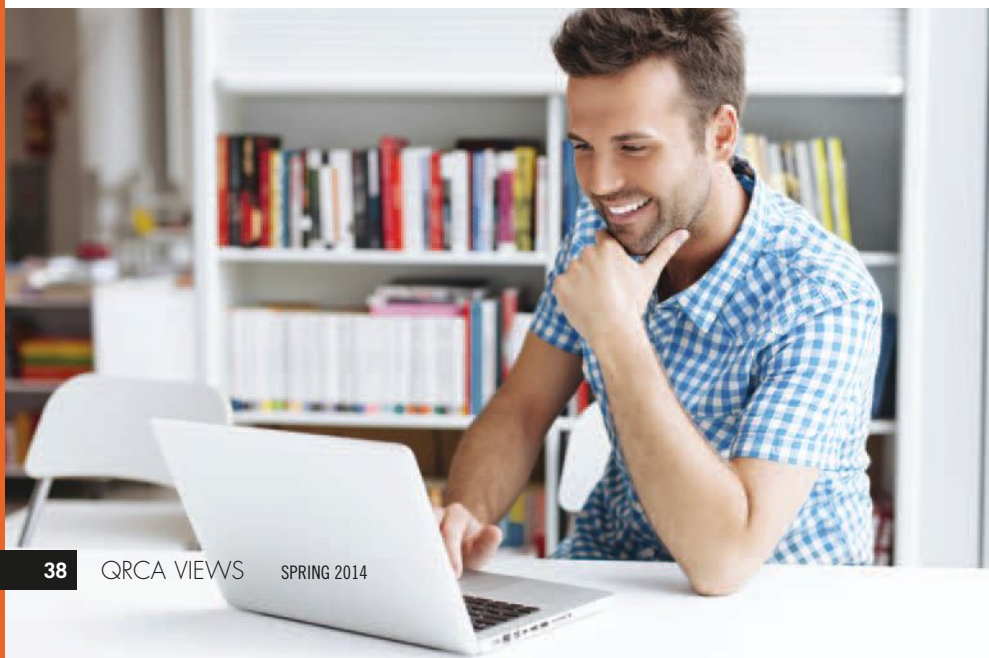
Prior to the shop-along experience, each respondent participated in a three-day homework study about her use and opinions around this particular cosmetics category. Each woman provided daily feedback on the types of cosmetics she used that day and why. One day, the women recorded a webcam response after they had applied their make-up. During this short webcam response, each woman described how she applied the makeup and what she liked or did not like about it.

On the shop-along day, the researcher was prepared with information about the respondent's behavior and attitudes. The researcher carried the homework transcripts, with follow-up questions prepared to ask the respondent before or after the shop-along, as appropriate.

Reporting for the shop-along study was much more robust. Not only did the researcher have the shop-along data, she also had detailed behavior and attitude data from the homework. In addition, the researcher edited several of the webcam interviews to produce a montage for the research presentation that highlighted "real people" using the client's products and describing their efficacy.

### Conclusion

Homework has always been useful to researchers for driving deeper and more impactful learning. Integrating today's online technology with traditional in-person methods can give qualitative researchers greater context, more depth and greater insights with less stress and faster than ever. 📺



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