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●●● new product research

Just-right indeed

The Goldilocks approach to innovation research

| By Isaac Rogers

snapshot

How a hybrid quant+qual mini-community can come together to make new product innovation research more effective.

In April 2015, Quirk's presented a Webinar titled "The New Quant+Qual Paradigm," hosted by my firm, 20|20 Research. The discussion looked at mixed-method studies and profiled three different hybrid strategies. A fourth, which was referenced in the Q&A session, was the concept of a right-sized community, which generated much interest from attendees. This article takes a look at right-sized communities and how they can provide a "just right" solution for hybrid quant+qual product innovation research.

These types of approaches are welcome in many cases because new product development research presents a somewhat unique set of requirements that the more common research methodologies can sometimes struggle to satisfy. Research and development teams are often moving quickly to assess new product ideas or refine a late-stage concept and the traditional field times of ad hoc qualitative research simply won't work. The idea of spending weeks and weeks in fieldwork and project setup for focus groups, ethnographies or online qual doesn't fit

well with the rapid responsiveness that is often required in product development.

At the same time, few brands are willing to invest large amounts of time and capital to erect large-scale panels or communities for products that have yet to generate sales or ideas that might never make it to store shelves.

Because of these challenges, many clients are turning to a "Goldilocks" method that attempts to fuse the quick-response capabilities of panels and communities with the depth of insight that can come from more traditional qualitative research. Some of our clients have taken to calling this hybrid quant-qual method a "right-sized community," an approach that provides a "just right" solution for projects that just don't fit in existing concepts.

On the surface, these projects share many common characteristics with traditional, more qualitatively-focused online market research communities. However, the hybrid way in which these studies are implemented creates a collaborative forum that can bring innovators and product designers closer to their customers than traditional, existing methods.

So what do these "just right" solutions look like? They normally comprise anywhere from as few as 50 to as many as 300 handpicked consumers who are recruited for a long-term engagement of approximately three to six months. These respondents are typically managed like small, temporary proprietary panels; their demographics, contact details and participation data are supervised by the agency through an online platform. From this system, the agency can communicate with respondents and define smaller breakout groups to participate in each required activity.

These online platforms usually integrate with online qualitative and quantitative data collection tools from a variety of vendors, allowing the right-sized community to be rather agnostic about the type of engagements that can occur. Since product development can often change course quickly, it is important that the research activities are able to take on a variety of forms to get the right kind of feedback. Need to sketch out a new product design and bounce it off the community? Launch the respondents into an online survey with mark-up capabilities. Want to hear the kinds of words and phrases "real people" use to describe your product? Drop a handful of customers into Web-based interviews. This flexibility is critical to create a responsive research capability for these kinds of projects.

Treated differently

From the very beginning of the recruiting process, the respondents of right-sized communities are treated differently than most market research subjects. In traditional research, we seek out representative individuals, process them through rigorous screening methods and communicate all kinds of logistical information about participation and incentives. But rarely do the participants know much about the goals of the research. Once the participant starts the research interview, they answer our questions, they provide their opinions and they allow us to peek inside their lives. But they seldom know (or likely care) what the end results will be for the client.

A right-sized community for innovation, however, is regularly pitched to potential respondents in an entirely different way. In these communities, we are often in search of targeted individuals who meet the same rigorous criteria as before but in addition to their demographics and behavioral attributes, they must also be willing to engage in a wide range of activities and events over the course of the community.

One week, they might participate in an online discussion among fellow consumers to brainstorm about new product ideas. A few weeks later they might have a group Webcam interview with the actual product designers and engineers to discuss some of their creative ideas. Next month, the participants might have an opportunity to test a prototype of the product in their home and stream back their un-boxing and setup experience to a live audience of product researchers.

As you might imagine, locating respondents who are not only willing to participate in such an intensive set of activities but also to share their ideas and discuss their creative concepts directly with the agency and end clients can present a unique recruiting challenge. In many cases, however, we've found that the idea of working with researchers to brainstorm and collaborate, as compared to simply responding to a researcher's predefined questions, can be an exciting opportunity for many consumers and clients. Especially for brands that consumers are passionate about, like their favorite brand of car or their favorite cleaning products. In those situations, we usually find many participants are thrilled at the idea of contributing in a real, tangible way directly to products they may purchase.

Quick access

In most research, the end client is a passive observer, with the research agency serving as an impenetrable buffer between consumers and the sponsoring company. That veil of impartiality is an important aspect for much of the research world but in product development research what is often more important is that the product team has quick and efficient access to the feedback of their consumers.

In many innovation-focused right-sized community designs, the research agency shares much of the direct interaction with participants with key members of the product development team. There is something unique that occurs when the end client is forced out from "behind the glass" and given the opportunity to interact directly with the customers they aim to serve.

The R&D team might take turns interviewing their customers in Webcam IDIs or help craft a series of questions that will be asked in an online survey. As one R&D manager describes, this kind of hands-on customer experience develops the "empathy muscle" that helps product developers better understand the needs of their target audience.

Additionally, when the formerly-passive research observers become active participants, they often become more engaged in the research process, pay more attention to the information that's collected and become more invested in the customer experience process.

In most right-sized communities, agencies are still the primary interviewers and research designers; however, when clients become more involved in the customer conversation, the role of the market research agency shifts to encompass some new skills and responsibilities.

First, the agency must clearly understand the needs of the client and where they want to take their product innovation. The size, scale and attributes of the community must be matched to the end goal the client is trying achieve, such as that in the following matrix.

Early product research

Purpose: Developing entirely new concepts to take to a later stage. In this mode, R&D teams need a community that can help them generate a number of new product ideas; these communities are often highly

experiential and may include in-home or virtual ethnographies to tap into unmet needs or establish an understanding of the customer experience.

Community: These communities are often smaller (less than 75), longer (six-to-nine months) and more qualitative in nature.

Get over the innovation hump

Purpose: Weeding through a large number of innovative product ideas to find those that work.

Community: These projects are larger (more than 100) and rely heavily on quantitative data collection to sort and prioritize concepts and features.

Late-stage refinement

Purpose: Working with existing prototypes or late-stage concepts to refine them before taking them to market.

Community: Can vary in size but if in-home-use tests are planned, the logistics and cost associated with product fulfillment can limit scale.

Generate more insight

One of the quintessential components of this approach is a clear mandate to generate more insight with less effort towards logistics and process. Product innovation research simply can't accommodate long fieldwork and logistics timelines; given the option of waiting for weeks in traditional research processes or going with their "instinct," many R&D managers choose the latter. It's not that they want to bypass customer feedback, it's that they simply don't have the time built in to their product development cycle.

Right-sized communities for innovation turn that problem on its head by assembling a group of ready-to-use customers entrusted with providing ongoing insights during the product development cycle. These respondents are ready and available; if a new idea sparks in the R&D team, they can bounce the concept off the community in hours or days. If new product attributes are considered, they can be worked into next week's scheduled online bulletin board discussion. This rapid access to feedback allows R&D teams to gather critical feedback quickly and efficiently, in turn allowing them to develop ideas that are based more on actual customer response and less on gut instinct.

By recruiting once, and using for a variety of activities over time, the total cost of a right-sized community for innovation is cut dramatically, as compared with multiple independent phases of research. In some cases, we have seen the overall research budget drop by 30 percent or more. These savings come from a variety of sources. Obviously, recruiting costs are significantly reduced, as we are able to reuse respondents for multiple events. Additionally, the total incentive paid to a right-sized community respondent is typically lower than paying multiple respondents in multiple phases; since they are already engaged and involved in the process, each incremental research activity can be incentivized more economically.

Not perfect for everyone

What felt right for Goldilocks may not have been perfect for everyone else. The same is true for this approach in product innovation. While right-sized communities can strike a balance between existing research solutions, every choice we make in research always comes with some concessions.

There must be enough of a research plan to make use of a ready pool of respondents. If participants can be engaged every two-to-four weeks with a new event or activity it can dramatically help long-term participation, as they feel more involved in a "living" process. If the agency and client cannot commit to regular activities with the community, it becomes difficult to retain high levels of engagement and the value of the community rapidly decreases.

Additionally, the client team must not slip back into the "passive observer" role and let the market research completely run the process. Product development staff will be involved in developing new product ideas or creating visualizations to describe new product features; if the researcher doesn't receive the deliverables on time or has trouble keeping the teams engaged, the process could become ineffective. A key client sponsor, whether it comes from the product development leadership or brand team, is a critical component to keeping everyone on task and dedicated to the process.

But if your new product innovation plan can make use of a hybrid quant-qual right-sized community, they can provide an efficient, effective solution that might be "just right" for you. ◍

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