



Three Intriguing
Lessons from
Online Qual

Learn and Earn

Online qualitative research as quite a new method has many benefits. It can provide deeper context, new insights or the ability to engage consumers in ways that are difficult with traditional research methods. **Isaac Rogers** illustrates how online qual allows researchers to reach their consumers in new ways.

The conversation usually starts out something like this: “The project was fine. It just doesn’t feel any different to me. I think we came in under budget, and we got what we wanted, but we don’t see the difference versus traditional focus groups”. With all the best intentions, this marketer commissioned his most trusted research agency to take him into the new world of digital qualitative research, on the hunt for thought provoking new consumer insights he hasn’t found in more traditional focus groups or interviews. Yet, here sits that same marketer, weeks after the project first began, staring at a PowerPoint presentation that looks and sounds familiar to the one from his last, traditional design.

With a few changes to the way we approach new project engagements, clients can extract more value from their research, and researchers can be set free with a whole new set of capabilities.

Lesson 1 – The Conversation Should Change

One of the critical inflection points in a researcher's online maturation process is when he realizes the conversation with the consumer can be radically different than what we have come to expect from a focus group or traditional interview. The entire format of our consumer interaction can, and should, change to take advantage of what we can learn from them online.

An example of an evolved digital design comes from a recent online discussion among luxury car owners. The car manufacturer wanted to hear new ways that their customers talked about their chosen brand. They felt there was a level of honesty that was "left at the door of the focus group" because the customers would avoid conflict or challenge among their peers, and the brand manager wanted a way around this roadblock. Rather than choosing to field a typical three-day online discussion, the researcher designed a format that is uniquely suited for online. She started her 3-day online discussion much like any other. The first day be-

gan with introductions among the respondents, a few questions regarding brand loyalty and product perceptions, and an opportunity for the users to share stories about their favorite memories with this particular brand of car. On day 2, however, the conversation changed dramatically. The moderator began the day by having these brand loyalists read over a series of statements made by competing brands and drivers of other makes and models that called into question the performance and reliability of these driver's favorite automobile. Many of these comments were highly inflammatory to the participants and called into question some of the most cherished attributes of their preferred brand. Rather than have the participants respond immediately, the moderator

took advantage of something that is in short supply in traditional focus groups – time. She asked them to log off and join her back in the discussion the following day. She emailed each respondent a copy of some of the more hard-hitting comments to rub salt in the wound. The final day of the discussion opened with an explosion of pent up commentary. For the past 24 hours these ardent brand loyalists bit their tongue, and so for the final day of research they let out a torrent of passionate statements about their cherished automobile. All that the moderator had to do was post a few stimulating questions, and the community of drivers did the rest.

Lesson 2 – Seek the New Data

Qualitative research has been quick to adopt mobile methodologies, and quicker to highlight the benefits of “anywhere, anytime” insights to marketers. However, while most agencies can list off the simple advantages of mobile journals versus their analog counterparts, few have been able to tap into some of the new data this approach can provide a brand. A recent project seemed to be a typical digital diary from mobile devices. These respondents were recruited nationwide, all having one thing in common: they are all completing a major home improvement project. Each day of a ten day online qualitative project, the respondents used their mobile devices to capture images and videos of shopping excursions to hardware, plumbing, and kitchen appliance stores. All the respondent was asked to do was to provide a “digital shopping list” of items purchased at the store. These images could be from on the shelf, during the checkout process, or in the parking lot – but must be captured within minutes of a purchase.

While many researchers would be satisfied with the hundreds of photos of tools, tile samples, and lumber these respondents provided, this agency realized that mobile qualitative could paint a radically more detailed picture than traditional approaches. Using a concept we call “DayStreaming,” the agency took the photos, the precise geo-location of each purchase, and the time of day of each event to display a visual storyline of each respondent’s ten day experience. By weaving together these new contextual elements of place and time, alongside traditional journaling feedback, the brand could develop a fuller picture of the customer experience.

Lesson 3 – Redefine the Scope of Engagement

Marketers and researchers have become conditioned to think that we only have a short window of time in a focus group observation suite. And once the allotted time is up, that respondent is released

back into the wild. However, a strange thing happens when we bring the research to the respondents rather than having them come to us – we are no longer limited to a “single serving” of insight.

One recently popular method mixes the old with the new by using webcam interviews as a follow-up to face-to-face focus groups. In these projects, researchers select some respondents for follow-up online interviews or groups one to two weeks after the initial face-to-face interviews. These follow-up sessions can be used to revisit concepts that weren’t fully covered during the initial round of interviews, or as a way to further iterate the learning by exposing the respondents to new ideas or concepts that the client generated after leaving the initial sessions. This method has become popular due to its ability to dive deeper with the same respondents at a fraction of the cost of two separate phases or projects. We have seen clients cut their overall costs by 30-40 percent by using this method, and save weeks or months in execution time, when compared to running two separate face-to-face phases.

Stop, Think – and Demand Change

In a way, it is unfortunate that online qualitative has developed an uncanny ability to mimic or mirror project designs initially developed for face-to-face research. This makes it far too easy to ignore the intrinsic benefits online qualitative can provide marketers – deeper context, new insights, and the ability to engage consumers in ways that are challenging or impossible in traditional settings.

While it is not only possible, but easy, to ignore these new possibilities and instead replicate physical approaches in the digital world, the brands and researchers we see getting the most value from online qual are the ones who stop and think about their objectives and how digital might allow them to reach consumers in new ways. ■

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