

The Virtues of VIRTUAL FOCUS GROUPS and WEBCAM TECHNOLOGY



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The tried-and-true nature of focus groups and one-on-one interviews has not lost its power as a means to gain a full-picture read on consumers. “Virtual” focus groups enable us to capture the spirit and energy of traditional focus groups without the traditional limitations.

It is 8:00 a.m. on a Tuesday, and a senior researcher from Boston is off to Logan International. After weeks of collaborating with his clients, Jack is ready to gather feedback from their target consumers on a series of ad concepts. With six focus groups in two cities, the next couple of days will be pedal to the metal!

This project has definitely had its challenges along the way. Since the product is new to the market, trying to recruit respondents who have already tried the product was tough. Finally, the clients were able to settle on Chicago and Los Angeles. And though it came down to the wire to fully recruit the sessions, they are now set. It will be a long couple of days, with the time change and the groups, but Jack knows it is all part of a researcher's life.

This is a familiar scene to those of us in the research world. Today, though, life is very different than it was five years ago. Research design is more complex, respondent criteria are more targeted, turnaround timing is tight, and research budgets are limited, particularly in today's economic climate.

On the upside, these challenges have created a welcomed environment of creativity and development. Specifically, advances with internet-based methodologies have created the means for researchers to have an ongoing connection with consumers. They have opened up new ways to quickly engage targeted consumers. In some instances, research questions can be fielded and reported within hours! In effect, technology has given rise to endless possibilities in marketing research.

However, this creative environment has also taken us down a path that tends to support research methods that lack a vital in-person component. Regardless of how engaging an online survey or bulletin-board discussion may be, there is still tremendous value in going face-to-face with consumers. While online focus groups have been in practice for several years, today's webcam technology allows us to preserve that face-to-face connection with consumers. “Virtual” focus groups enable us to capture the spirit and energy of traditional focus groups without the traditional limitations.

Before we return to the hypothetical example of our moderator Jack, let's take a look at the benefits of today's focus groups utilizing webcam technology.

No Geographical Restrictions

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join the group from their office, home or hotel room anywhere in the country, without the costs and hassles associated with travel or specialized videoconferencing equipment. Respondents no longer have to fight traffic or allow extra time to get to an unfamiliar location for a two-hour focus group. They settle at the computer for their discussion from the comfort of their own home. Furthermore, webcam technology allows us to reach beyond our borders when the project calls for it.

Expanded Consumer Reach

Recruits are no longer limited to a 20-mile radius of a facility's database. Recruiting on a national level and the opportunity to interact with low-incidence targets in hard-to-reach areas is endless. As well, the concern of over-sampled, professional respondents is diminished due to the significantly larger sample base.

Enhanced Respondent Engagement

Because consumers are able to participate from a location most comfortable to them, they are apt to be more open and honest with their feedback. Since group members can see and hear each other, the dynamic of the discussion is much richer. The moderator can observe facial expressions and other voluntary and involuntary cues to assess the full read of the respondent, as well as further clarify ambiguous responses. Clients can offer their input or ask questions to the moderator in real time rather than wait for a message to come in from the back room.

Multidimensional Feedback

Respondents also provide written feedback, which can be done openly to the group or privately to the moderator. Typed responses to questions, concepts or other stimuli can be gathered through chats, ratings, polls and multiple-choice selections.

Cost Savings

Travel expenditures make up a large piece of the budget with traditional focus groups. When such costs are omitted, virtual focus groups are nearly 30% to 40% less expensive to conduct. In addition, productivity is not lost from endless hours waiting in airports and sitting on planes.

Easy Access to Research Results

Using a browser-based platform, multidimensional insights are captured in real time. Video snapshots, written notes, polls and discussion chats are instantly recorded online. Discussions between the moderator and client team are also preserved for documentation purposes. Waiting for deliverables such as DVDs to share with colleagues are replaced with online viewing capabilities within hours of the session.

Now, let us check back with Jack.

Due to the client's travel-budget constraints, only two vital team members are able to be on site for the groups. As Jack arrives at the airport, his thoughts drift to the morning's staff meeting at the office. But he just cannot be two places at once.

Things move quickly once Jack arrives at the facility in Chicago. He greets the group in the lobby, and after a short round of introductions, it is time to gather feedback on the concepts. The clients have comments, and a few notes are passed from the back room into the group. All in all, things go well. However, the clients are concerned that a local event in Chicago might be skewing consumer reactions. They will have to complete the groups in Los Angeles to know for sure.

To help illustrate the nature of virtual focus groups, let us consider the same set of groups conducted by our moderator Sara, who is using a webcam-based focus group platform.

A senior researcher and moderator in Atlanta, Sara logs into her computer to start her day. It is 8:30 a.m. on Monday, and she spent the entire weekend with her family. It will be a busy day — morning staff meeting, client lunch and concept-evaluation focus groups in the evening. The goal of tonight's groups will be to finalize the positioning for the client's new product. Thankfully, since the sessions are online, the sample was national, and the recruit came together easily.

Getting familiar with the software and installing her webcam were quite simple, and the platform is very user friendly. All of the key clients will watch the groups, so they will hear first-hand what customers say about the new product.

It is 6:00 p.m. and time to begin. With their webcams streaming and the conference line locked, the clients can see and hear Sara and the respondents. Introductions commence, and the discussion moves seamlessly to the concepts. The private client chat room was different than she was used to, but in the end, their "live" input is invaluable.

It is easy to see how Sara, her clients and the participants were able to experience the benefits of

While there is certainly a case for virtual focus groups to replace traditional focus groups, traditional focus groups are by no means going extinct. There are, in fact, limitations to the virtual focus group process. There is always risk in transferring highly confidential materials over the internet; therefore, collaboration with an integrated IT team is highly recommended. As well, highly detailed design concepts and schematics often need to be presented and viewed with hands-on detail. Results are best achieved when evaluated in person.

In order for virtual focus groups to be successful, there are important considerations and matters to take into account. They include the following:

- Ensure that the client's product or service can be accurately represented online.
- Determine if the customer target requires a national reach.
- Enlist strong recruiting support.
- Keep the group length reasonable – 90 minutes is recommended.
- Maintain video compression limits when presenting video concepts.
- Utilize experienced technical support throughout the entire process.

the virtual focus group. It allowed Sara to maintain her routine at the office and enabled her clients to cost-effectively connect with targeted consumers. Participants were able to impact the development of future products from the comfort of their own home.

The Added Value

Perhaps the most understated advantage to conducting virtual groups versus traditional groups lies in the desire to maintain work/life balance. Researchers and clients have personal lives outside of questionnaires, tabs, discussion guides and advanced statistical analysis! They too are spouses, parents and friends with additional interests. Traveling city to city, with time only to admire the views between the hotel room and focus group room, greatly disrupts that balance.

Let us take one last look at our moderators as they wrap up for the evening.

Jack finishes his sessions and heads back to the hotel. The night was a success, and the groups for tomorrow seem ready to go. He gathers his things for the night and clothes for tomorrow before repacking his suitcase for the flight in the morning. He makes one last check of the day's email and phones his wife to say good night. He will be home the day after tomorrow, and he is looking forward to hearing how school conferences went. It is hard to miss them, but with the tight timing, this was the best week to conduct the groups. The lights go out, but falling asleep in a strange hotel room always seems to take longer.

As for Sara, her groups draw to a close, and the team signs off for the night. The sessions produced some great feedback, and a couple of clear suggestions are emerging. The groups tomorrow will help to direct the final recommendations. She checks her email one last time and shuts down her computer. After a short drive home, she finds the kids asleep, but she kisses them and heads to the living room to catch up on the day's events with her husband. There are conferences at the school in the morning, and then she will conduct the last groups from home in the afternoon. It will be a busy couple of days, but the client is happy, and that is what we strive for! Sara crawls into bed, sets her alarm and quickly falls asleep. ☺

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