



Add a bit of quant to your qual

Focus groups have been getting a lot of bad press lately. Malcolm Gladwell has spoken out against them in his book *Blink* and in several recent presentations. *Business Week* celebrated Gladwell's perspective in a November 2005 article entitled "Shoot the Focus Group."

Is it really a good idea to throw away this time-honored research technique? We think not.

It's true that traditional focus groups have limitations. Recruiting is a challenge, sample sizes are small, and projectability to the greater population is an issue. It's also true that the early software for moving focus groups online, which consisted only of chat streams, did not preserve the true goal of a focus group: to get consumers to talk about their feelings, attitudes and opinions using projective and probing techniques. However, these limitations are fast disappearing.

When focus groups fail, it is usually because they are not properly designed in the first place. Research design for traditional groups is

fluid, often only a topical outline. Moving the same discussion online requires a more rigorous approach.

Better focus groups through better design

Researchers have challenged companies like ours to move traditional research online. To do so effectively, we have had to invent new capabilities. Today's online focus group technology, based on Web conferencing software, goes well beyond chat to include capabilities such as annotation and drawing tools that can be used for collaborative exercises. This makes it possible for qualitative researchers to design creative projective and probing exercises that duplicate the best aspects of traditional focus groups.

When it comes to recruiting, online focus groups present an advantage. Because in-person focus groups require participants to be in the same geographic areas, it is often not possible to attain samples that reflect a company's true market segments. Geography becomes the

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primary segmentation by default. With online focus groups, geography is no longer the primary consideration, since participants come together virtually rather than in a brick-and-mortar facility. By eliminating the geographic constraint, focus groups can be conducted among whatever populations are most meaningful, no matter how far-flung. And by taking advantage of the availability of online consumer and business-to-business panels, recruitment based on sophisticated segmentation is relatively easy to accomplish.

It's crucially important when conducting a focus group to make sure that the right people are in the group. Participants must be fully qualified for the research being conducted. One way to ensure that the group includes the right people

is to use a research design that includes a quantitative as well as a qualitative component.

Finding the right people

Consider for example a major retailer that was interested in learning about online shopping. A clear understanding of cross-channel shopping behavior is important to retailers today, as they struggle to make the right investment trade-offs between brick-and-mortar retail establishments, Web-based shopping environments and catalog sales. This retailer was interested in using online focus groups to gather perspectives from light, medium and heavy users of online shopping. Artafact was asked to recruit to these three segments. Because of our experience with the Artafact hybrid methodology and our knowledge of how quickly the use of the Internet changes, we recommended that these segments first be validated.

To do so, we added a short quantitative survey to the project, asking about online shopping habits. From the resulting data, we derived the correct characteristics of the three segments of interest. Light online shoppers used the Internet for shopping less frequently than the firm had assumed, and the heavy-use segment used the Internet much more. Had the groups been conducted without benefit of the quantitative data, the retailer would have run the risk of talking to the wrong people and basing their directional decisions on bad data (which is of course worse than no data at all).

This process of refining the segmentation before conducting the

groups is available for little or no additional cost. That's because the recruitment process for a focus group already includes a screening survey to ensure the proper demographics for the project. By thinking through the segmentation issues in advance, it is easy to add additional questions to the screener survey in order to refine the criteria and perform better focus group research.

Complementing online surveys with deeper insights

The example above shows how a quantitative element can add tremendous value to a qualitative project. The reverse is also true. Qualitative research can be used to answer the questions left unanswered by quantitative research.

For example, Artafact partner BIGresearch, which provides syndicated data, now supplements its quantitative research with Artafact online focus groups when the topic warrants this approach.

One such topic is the BIGresearch study of RFID, which is the first study to track consumer attitudes about this emerging technology. RFID (radio-frequency identification) allows manufacturers, distributors and retailers to better manage inventory by attaching a tiny tracking device to products. Because it is not well understood by most consumers, this technology is often viewed with suspicion. Unlike a survey, an online focus group allows a dialog with consumers about their fears and concerns. By adding qualitative research to this study, we were able to articulate why consumers held certain beliefs about RFID, includ-

ing what was most feared and hoped for as a result of this emerging technology.

Taking advantage of a new medium

Online research is enabling both new technologies and new methods. Approaches such as our hybrid methodology allow researchers to make the most of online research by combining traditional methods in new ways for better results than ever before.

In some cases online focus group technology is enabling entirely new types of projects. As an example, take the ability of some online focus group software to access the Internet directly from within the tool. This is useful for research that includes online assessments, such as a project we recently performed for a consumer firm that wanted to research the usability of an online product. Participants in this online focus group took a trip to the Web and used the online product while the researchers watched from Artafact's virtual back room. Using our annotation tools, participants showed us exactly what they liked and disliked about the online products. The moderator was then able to engage the participants in a conversation about the findings. This project combined usability and discussion in a way that would not have been possible in a traditional focus group.

It's ironic that after all these years, focus groups are starting to get a bad name just when they're really getting good. In our view, the demise of the focus group has been greatly exaggerated. | Q