



AGING EDITOR

E GROUP MESSAGING

GICAL SPIN ON QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES INTO

online focus groups have upped the ante for qualitative researchers—creating a growing number of opportunities for companies looking to know what's going on inside their customers' heads. Technology is changing the rules of qualitative research, and the shape of focus group testing.

In a recent **American Marketing Association** Web seminar, "Breaking Out of the Back Room: Innovations in Focus Groups," Amy Millard, vice president of marketing for Zoomerang, an online survey software service from San Francisco-based MarketTools Inc.,

expectations. Customers are able to shop at J.C. Penney in three ways: retail stores, Internet and catalog. The retailer hoped to translate the findings to better integrate store and online shopping experiences.

The first challenge came in designing the study. It was unclear how consumers shopped across channels, so an online survey was designed to ask broad questions about shopping behavior and attitudes. From that study, heavy cross-channel shoppers were gleaned to participate in an online focus group. Consumers in one city were then asked to save one insert from the Sunday

"The research also showed that across all channels the messaging needs to be integrated, because regardless of how people buy something, they expect to be able to return it to the store. We heard this over and over," she adds. Essentially, the channels must not stand alone; they must complement one other.

Philips says technology's flexibility allows researchers to experiment with new techniques, and the new techniques allow the moderators to engage participants in a lot of other ways than just talking to them. For example, any stimuli that can be presented online can be presented in an online focus group: This includes actual print ads, multimedia environments, video, TV and movie trailers. And not only can participants be engaged, but internal clients can get involved in the process as well by, for example, viewing online focus group information online and seeing the immediate application of the research.

All of this is not to say that in-person focus groups will disappear. Online focus groups are not ideal for all types of research. Millard says the online format is really ideal when the consistency of research methods is important. "There's less geographical bias, less interviewer bias and less social desirability status because it's online and not face-to-face (which makes people reluctant to participate)," she says.

Online focus groups are also ideal for projects involving:

- Geographically diverse groups
- Hard-to-reach populations (doctors, b-to-b decision-makers)
- Internet users
- Electronic commerce issues
- Web testing
- Advertising media (images, logo, music)
- Those combined with in-home usage tests of products
- The need for a fast turnaround time

Another technique that's growing in popularity in online focus groups is panels turned into groups, which companies can access over and over again. So going forward

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and Carol Philips, president of Brand Amplitude LLC, a Stevensville, Mich.-based branding and market research firm, helped flesh out innovations in focus group methodologies and the benefits that clients stand to gain from these new approaches.

According to Millard, focus groups can really drive messaging. As an example of how this can be done, Philips cited a J.C. Penney Company Inc. case study in which the multichannel Plano, Texas-based retailer wanted to further its understanding of its cross-channel shoppers' behaviors and

paper and were given \$50 to go shopping. Those shoppers were invited to share what they purchased, where they purchased and their feelings about it, with an emphasis on why they bought that way.

Results from the focus groups revealed that cross-channel shopping is more prevalent and complex than Penney had expected. It was not limited to one demographic group, age or income. "What united them was that they loved to shop. Cross-channel shopping is not linear—it can start and stop anywhere," Philips explains.

in the future, you'll see more "building of customer communities and hearing their attitudes over time," Millard says.

When all is said and done, the technology component of online focus groups is not even the most important piece; it's about something bigger. According to Millard, "An online focus group isn't really about the technology anymore than a focus group in person is about four walls and a mirror. It's about working with the best companies [that] are able to take your business problem and help you answer it very quickly." **m**