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Promising but not perfect

Lessons to keep in mind when interviewing via Webcam

| By Michael Carlon

snapshot

An early user of online qualitative tools offers his tips on conducting Webcam-based studies.

In July 2011, Facebook announced a partnership with Skype enabling the social networking giant's 750 million users to communicate with each other face-to-face. While Facebook and other social media tools have been enabling people to stay in touch via quick (and impersonal) status updates and wall postings, the move to integrate a video-calling feature underscores the market demand for more interpersonal forms of communication from the online world. This is good news for those of us who have been championing the use of desktop-based videoconferencing for qualitative research.

In the mid-1990s, I was working for an online agency pioneering the use of online qualitative tools including online focus groups (OLFGs). The promises of OLFGs were appealing: people from a wide number of markets could participate in a session; clients could save money, given there was no need to

travel or rent a room in a facility; and moderators could explore highly sensitive topics as the computer screen provided a wall of anonymity for participants.

Failed to take off

Though these benefits are indeed present in OLFs, the method failed to take off and hindsight provides a variety of reasons for the market's lack of engagement:

- When looking for insights, what participants say is only part of the story we moderators look for. Equally important is how they say it. Both inflection in tone and body language (i.e., the context of communication) are key ingredients to any insight recipe. Unfortunately, these were trade-offs made in early iterations of online focus groups.
- Invariably, some participants are better at typing than others and this results in a suboptimal interview flow (oftentimes I was in the middle of the second section of my guide when some people were just answering questions from the first section).
- Finally, unlike in traditional qualitative groups, online participants don't wait for others to respond before offering their answers to a question; everyone responds at (or around) the same time. As such, moderators are challenged to read a burst of responses and respond with meaningful probes to each individual participant. This actually limits the ability to probe, thereby eliminating one key characteristic of qualitative research.

Much different

The world is a much different place in 2012 than it was in 1996. Broadband penetration is the rule not the exception. People in general are extremely comfortable using their computers to video chat with friends, family and colleagues. As such, online focus groups have been reinvented.

Today's online focus group uses Webcams to connect participants and a moderator. Voice data often goes

over a phone line to reduce demands on bandwidth, making the videoconference experience much more fluid.

The video-based online focus group marries the benefits of traditional qualitative research and the promised benefits of online focus groups:

- Moderators can see and hear participants, meaning that there is greater context to a participant's responses and probing is not compromised.
- Participants can log in from any part of the country (or the world, for that matter), thus eliminating the need for the moderator or clients to travel to a limited number of markets.
- Built-in collaboration tools enable the moderator to show multiple forms of stimuli (concepts, advertisements, images, etc.) to the group.

Some situations more ideal

We have used online Webcam focus groups for a variety of industries including financial services, pharmaceutical and CPG. That said, some project situations are more ideal for the Webcam approach. These include:

Physician interviewing. When interviewing doctors, an online interview using a Webcam means you can talk to doctors from all over the country vs. from one or two markets. It also means that they can participate from their office and not have to take as much time away from their patients (no need to drive to/from a facility).

Low-incidence populations. Traditional in-person qualitative research can be challenging when looking for low-incidence populations (e.g., people who suffer from a specific medical condition). Since Webcam interviews happen online, geography is removed as a barrier, making the recruit less complicated.

Recruiting from a client list. Many times when asked to recruit from a client list for in-person qualitative research, we can burn through the list quickly, requiring our client to pull more names. Removing geography from the equation means recruiting from a client-supplied list can become more efficient.

Interviewing Millennials. Online communication is quickly becoming the preferred method of communication amongst Millennials. For this reason interviewing them through a Webcam is just as natural as having a conversation with them in person.

Words of advice

After two years of experimenting and implementing video-based focus groups, I have some words of advice to share with anyone who is interested in using them for a project.

Recruiting. We have used both online recruiters and traditional phone-based recruiters for video focus group projects. We have had more success in the forms of show rates and respondent quality with traditional recruiters and hypothesize the reason for this is twofold: when a recruit commits to an actual person over the phone, they are more committed to showing up; and a recruit's articulation cannot be assessed through an online screener.

Screening questions. You will need to add a few questions to the screener in order to qualify someone for a Webcam-enabled interview: a question to evaluate a recruit's comfort level participating in a Webcam-based interview (strong comfort required); a question around broadband access on the computer they will use for the interview (broadband access required); a question around personal comfort using a computer and the Internet (you would be surprised at how often respondents rely on someone else in the household to help them use a computer); and a question around Webcam ownership. (Note, not owning a Webcam does not have to lead to a terminate in the screener. In the past, we have offered to send one to otherwise-qualified recruits provided they indicate they are comfortable receiving and installing it themselves.)

Technology providers. Many focus group facilities now offer the ability to license Webcam focus group software. The benefit to this for most moderators is that all of the hassles around technology are taken care of, namely sending instructions to participants and troubleshooting should something go wrong. That said, the

fees that many of these providers charge can make presenting a cost-savings benefit to your clients difficult. In some cost exercises we have conducted, the cost to run a project online actually was greater than the cost to run it offline. As such, if you

are tech-savvy
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(most,
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using the Adobe Connect platform).
Investing your time in learning the
ins and outs of Adobe's product can
lead to significant cost savings down
the road.

Running the interview. Running a Webcam-based interview is slightly different from running an in-person group interview. The primary difference is that when you are in person, you can use your own body language to indicate which participant should start answering a question as well as encourage engagement. Online, this is not possible as each participant sees the same view of the moderator. When running an online group interview, I tend to have to call on participants to avoid a free-for-all. This takes some getting used to but it becomes more natural over time.

Group size. When we run Webcam-based group interviews, we tend not to sit more than five participants, for two primary reasons. First, five participants plus a moderator leads to six boxes on the screen and from an aesthetics point of view, it is easier on the eye to see an even number of boxes than an odd number. Second, if group energy is not actively managed, participants may become disengaged. The more participants there are in a session, the longer the

time between responses from any one participant. As such, we tend to keep our online groups smaller than offline groups, where energy is easier to manage.

Note-taking. I do feel as if managing the energy of an online session is a bit more challenging than an in-person session. As a result, I prefer to spend more time listening and looking at my screen to make sure everyone remains engaged than I do taking notes. As such, I do advise hiring a note-taker or transcriptionist to capture the conversation as it unfolds.

Don't eliminate the need

Importantly, in our view, Webcam focus groups don't eliminate the need for traditional in-person methods. Rather, we view them simply as another tool for listening to consumers when it feels like the project would benefit from the use of this method. 📌

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