



By Gregory Cobb

online research

Motivate and inspire

How to establish and nurture online discussion-board conversations

Conducting research online with discussion boards is an appealing option for many companies looking to reach out over a large geographic area or collect information on difficult-to-reach segments. It allows researcher and respondent to operate on their own schedules, corresponding on their own terms. Without restraints on location or time, studies can easily stretch across weeks, providing the research team with a more detailed understanding of the participants' lives than a single in-person visit or interview. Combine this flexibility and scope with increasingly mobile video-capture devices and researchers now have a powerful tool that, used properly, places them directly in the action as seen from the consumer's perspective.

As with any research, there is always the concern that recruits will not show up to participate. Respondents in an online study are self-policed; it is up to them to sign on at the appropriate time, and, as the study draws on, to continue posting. When conducting online research, the question is no

longer simply, "Will they show?" but also, "Will they stay?" With the longer study lengths, anywhere from one week to a few months, the concern about participation compounds.

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snapshot

The author offers tips on mounting successful discussion-board research projects. With planning and diligence, researchers can get the information they need while also ensuring a fun and fulfilling experience for respondents.

We all know how difficult it can be to motivate a respondent across the table, much less one 3,000 miles away. In the following paragraphs I will outline a few of the techniques we have used to keep respondents engaged. This is by no means a complete list of motivators that guarantee online research success. It is a collection of tools we have found to capture respondents' attention and create a space in which they are not only comfortable but excited to share their opinions and experiences.

Set expectations. Don't underestimate the importance of the initial communications with the respondents. You will not be there in person to deal with questions about the platform or expectations, and e-mail, the primary form of contact you will have with the respondents, is a poor proxy for face-to-face

conversation when dealing with an upset consumer.

We start by outlining the complete terms of the research in the screener; such as, expected time commitment per week, number of assignments and length of time for the study. We also include questions selecting for capabilities and comfort with equipment or tasks that are out of the ordinary or might require a certain level of technical or social grace. An example of such equipment would be the use of video cameras. These recording devices are highly valuable but useless if the respondent cannot upload the videos to the study Web site.

We have found that a reminder correspondence a few days before the study kicks off is also important. This helps manage the expectations of your respondents, many of whom were recruited a week or two in

advance. This also gives the moderators an opportunity to introduce themselves and start building a relationship with the participants that will keep them engaged throughout the study. In this e-mail/letter, be sure to provide more than the basic information, letting the moderator's personality show. Including a picture can go far in terms of retention down the road.

Send them something, anything. Everyone enjoys receiving packages. Starting a study by opening an important-looking box can almost ensure full participation for the first stage of your research. Beyond the excitement of opening a cardboard box or overstuffed envelope, the tool you send will serve as a physical reminder of your investment in them as a respondent and their responsibility to you.

Flip video cameras are light-



weight, easy to use and, most importantly, inexpensive tools that respondents love to use. These cameras can provide the research team with compelling video to support the findings distilled from online posts. But respondent packages do not need to be high-tech. We have had great success with “field reporter kits,” small notebooks and pens with research schedules and observation tips pasted in the covers. These notebooks are inexpensive and can be personalized and modified, by researcher or respondent, in many useful ways. Product samples and topic-specific stimuli are also great send-aways. What you send is important, but that you sent something is just as motivating to the participant.

Build a community. The same force that drives the immense popularity of social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Reddit can be harnessed to turn your online research study into a success. People find it exciting to have their thoughts and ideas considered and commented on by others. We create a community by requiring our respondents to interact with each other. Participants post an initial response to a topic or question before they are able to see others’ responses. Then we require that each participant reply to at least two posts by other respondents. The first few responses trickle in, but after the first topic the floodgates open. As the respondents get to know each other, the anticipation of their answers becoming the hub of a heated conversation motivates them to sign on early and often. It is not unusual for respondents to exchange e-mail addresses at the end of longer studies.

Moderator involvement is also an important factor in the strength of the community. Frequent, personal interaction with the respondents can create an environment which feels closer to a gathering of friends than a research study populated by strangers with a monetary reward the only moti-

vation to participate. Thanking respondents for their contributions and candor is possibly more important online than in person.

Keep it interesting. This is where the different tools you sent can be used to their full potential. When developing assignments, text-based or otherwise, strive to inspire respondent creativity. Switch up the venue by requiring the respondent to record video, pictures or simply notes in a setting outside the home. Set limits on the tools or topics they are allowed to use in their next post. Ask the participants to hand the video camera, notebook or keyboard over to a friend or family member, to record their perspective on an issue.

As with any creative exercise used during a market research study, there is a risk involved. Some participant personalities may not be suited to certain activities and this is where knowing the sample and choosing the appropriate exercise is important. That being said, the virtual anonymity provided by the Internet is an amazing social facilitator and we continue to be surprised at the honesty and courage exhibited by our respondents, both in terms of the personal detail they share and the locations in which they share it.

Give them a reason to stay. One of the major differences between online qualitative research and in-person qualitative research is the requirement of prolonged participation. In-person research, from the respondent’s point of view, is generally a span of a few hours on a set day. Online research asks the respondent to make an effort over a period of days, if not weeks. As interesting as your study may be, the main reason people are agreeing to participate is the promise of some reward for their involvement. The incentive is probably the most important motivator in terms of retention, if not quality of contribution. We use a progressive incentive that keeps a reward halfway to the horizon at all times.

For a multi-week study, we offer a weekly incentive, contingent on

completion of all required assignments for that week, and a final bonus incentive for completion of the entire project. For example, a respondent who completes a four-week group can expect four incentive checks and a single bonus check, generally twice the value of the incentive checks. If you sent a package which you would like returned it is a good policy to require receipt of the package before distributing the final incentive and bonus checks. In the case of more expensive packages such as flip video cameras, it is good practice to ensure the combined final incentive and bonus amount is greater than the replacement value of the camera.

Becoming more powerful

Online qualitative research is becoming more popular and more powerful. Internet connectivity is virtually ubiquitous in the U.S. The technological knowledge required to participate in online discussions, capture images and video and interact with online content is becoming less complex while the general population embraces more powerful, more mobile, more media-driven devices. As researchers, it is our responsibility to our clients to tap into this growing pool of communication platforms and distill from it the rich insights that will drive innovation.

As full of potential as the online space is, it presents us with unique challenges. The most relevant to online qualitative market research is motivating people you cannot see or hear to share with you their thoughts, opinions and reasoning. With the tools and techniques listed above, we have been able to generate huge amounts of text, video and discussion on a wide range of topics. So much data in fact, that organizing and analyzing the output of a discussion board that lasts a month are the most time-consuming tasks. This wealth of data, if properly managed, is an asset itself and can be used by clients as a resource for understanding their consumers beyond the specific scope of the study. | Q