

ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS

**Advantages
& Strategies**



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Introduction

People don't always say what they mean or mean what they say. The inability of many of us to make up our minds about something, and then once we do, the tendency to change them later, makes marketing research a particularly interesting and challenging endeavor. Marketing researchers are always striving to overcome the disparity that exists between stated intent and actual behavior by refining and developing new research methodologies that allow for greater understanding of consumer motivation.

Qualitative research techniques are often used to dive deeper into the psyche of consumers. While the findings are typically not statistically valid due to the sample sizes, qualitative research, in some cases, is seen as a more reliable predictor of actual consumer behavior than quantitative research techniques. The most popular qualitative research technique is focus groups and often, though you know it or not, a particularly effective way to hold a focus group is online.

Online focus groups were introduced several years ago as a less expensive, and in some cases, more efficient way to conduct focus group research than traditional in-person focus groups. Although online focus groups aren't perfect, there are many advantages to using online focus groups, and when executed properly, they are one of the most effective tools for understanding consumers that a marketing researcher could hope for.



Online Focus Groups

Advantages of Online Focus Groups

Much like choosing the right tool for a construction project, the decision to use an online focus group depends on the objectives of the research. Ever tried to drive a screw using something other than a screwdriver? It can be done, but it takes a little more skill and patience. Popular options include using the end of a knife, a coin, a key, a washer, or even the claw end of a hammer. Each of these options are inefficient when compared to a screwdriver, they may work to some degree, but will likely result in frustration and a stripped screw that isn't driven in all the way.

Like a screwdriver, online focus groups as a research tool are ideal for certain situations. But like a hammer, screwdriver, pair of pliers, or any other tool. Online focus groups should be used to accomplish specific research objectives and not used for others. Most of the time the choice of a research tool is obvious, however, it is important to know the advantages (and disadvantages) of online focus groups in order to determine if they should be considered for a specific research project or if a traditional focus group or other form of research would be more appropriate.

There are multiple advantages to using online focus groups. The following is a list of several of the advantages online focus groups have over traditional in-person focus groups.

1. Cost Savings

The cost of conducting an online focus group is almost always less than a traditional in-person focus group. There are no travel expenses that need to be reimbursed.

The time investment for participants is less, so compensation is typically less.

However, perhaps the biggest cost savings will be realized from not having to rent a focus group facility. Facility rental is often a significant portion of the cost of conducting a focus group. Even budget minded researchers who choose to rent a conference room in a hotel can't beat the cost savings realized from not having to rent a facility at all. Conducting focus groups in multiple locations, flying a moderator from city to city, can be the most expensive portion of the research project. Obviously an online focus group completely eliminates this cost.



2. Geography

One of the main disadvantages of traditional focus groups is that the participants are geographically limited. To overcome this barrier, traveling to multiple markets is necessary, and as pointed out previously, can be very costly. Each market is different and often the need to gather the opinions of individuals in multiple markets is critical for a product or service that has a national target. Online focus groups allow the moderator to bring together participants from all across the country or even gather participants globally.



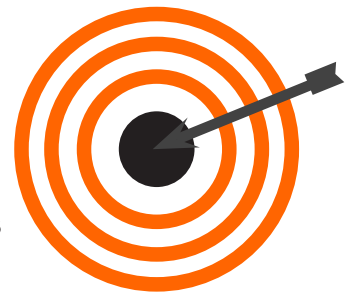
3. Participant Recruiting

Sometimes recruiting participants for a focus group can be fairly simple if the target market is general consumers and the demographics aren't restrictive. However, more often than not focus groups require recruiting participants that meet very specific demographic or usability requirements. The ability to draw participants from a national recruiting pool rather than from a few mile radius of a given facility, as with traditional focus groups, is a major advantage of online focus groups and can result in participants that are perfectly qualified to give their opinions.



4. Focus Group Environment

One of the disadvantages of traditional focus groups is that a group of strangers are gathered together in an unfamiliar environment and then asked to open up and share their opinion. The situation isn't natural and is one of the reasons why the results from focus groups are sometimes not duplicated when a product goes to market. While online focus groups don't overcome the fact that strangers are coming together to share opinions, the familiarity of a home environment can put people at ease,



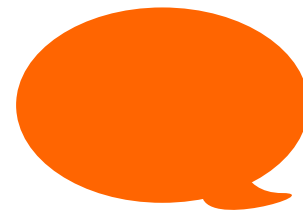
5. Observation

Not being able to observe a focus group from behind a one-way mirror may be a disadvantage to some. However, for others the convenience of being able to observe from their desk is advantageous. The main reason for this is the time savings. Travel to and from the facility is eliminated and other meetings in the



6. Moderator Communication

Another advantage is the ability to interact with the moderator. Depending on the application, observers may be able to send the moderator messages when they hear something they would like the moderator to explore further. With a traditional focus group, getting messages to the moderator during a session is difficult and disruptive to the focus group, and should be avoided unless absolutely necessary.



7. Multimedia

Pictures, video, audio, mini-surveys, tasks, interactive white board. All can be accomplished to one degree or another with traditional focus groups, but are much easier to implement using an online focus group platform.



Disadvantages of Online Focus Groups

The advantages of online focus groups outweigh the disadvantages. However, there are situations when a traditional focus group is a much better option. The following is a list of some of the disadvantages of online focus groups compared to traditional in-person focus groups.

1

Product Usage

If participants are to use a product as part of the focus group, a traditional focus group is clearly a better option. If the product is small enough and can be shipped to the respondent before-hand, online may still work. However, observation of the participants using the product is accomplished much more effectively in person.

2

Group Dynamics.

One of the advantages of a focus group is to not only hear what participants have to say, but to see their reaction to questions and observe their interaction with other respondents. While an online focus group allows for this, it doesn't do it as well as an in-person focus group.

3

Technical Issues.

Technical issues can manifest themselves in two forms. The first is the limited number of people that may have the necessary equipment to participate in an online focus group. Although in recent years the number of people who possess a laptop or tablet with a webcam has increased notably, there are still people who don't possess the equipment required to participate in an online focus group. The second technical issue is the focus group application itself. Ease of use varies from platform to platform and while most are fairly intuitive, not everyone may be savvy enough to use the application. Especially if they have never done anything like that before. Additionally, they may think they have everything good to go, but when it comes time to participate, realize that their computer isn't compatible, or that they can't get it to work properly, resulting in non-participation.

Conducting an Online Focus Group

The first step in an online focus group is the same as for any research project; define the problem. This includes a clear broad statement of the problem followed by defining the associated individual components. It is important to consider if an online focus group is the best methodology to address the research problem. Assuming it has been determined to be so, the next step in the process would be to clearly define the objectives. The objectives are derived out of the problem and typically address the components. The objectives are used to form the topics of discussion for the focus group.

It is always a good idea to ensure that all participants have the necessary equipment and connection prior to conducting the focus group. It may take some time, but contacting each participant separately for a quick test run prior to the focus group to ensure there are no last minute complications can eliminate this. If participants are having technical issues, trying to resolve these as the focus group is beginning can be disruptive and shorten the allotted time for the discussion. Contacting participants beforehand can also serve as a reminder and help participants who likely have never participated in an online focus group before feel more comfortable with the situation.

As with in-person focus groups, it is important not to start with a hard intro to the subject. Participants need to get to know each other a little. The moderator should appear friendly, relaxed and social. The moderator should explain everything clearly and ask for participants to be totally and completely honest with their responses. This can help break down the natural barrier most people have of not wanting to offend.

The role of the moderator is to facilitate the discussion and listen. The hallmark of a good focus group is respondents talking and interacting with each other in ways that reveal additional information. The moderator should never enter into a debate about the subject or explain why something isn't possible. The focus group moderator should also ensure equal participation from all members of the group. If one or two individuals are dominating the conversation, the moderator should call on others for their opinion.

The moderator should have five or six specific questions to ask or topics to cover and should let the participants know this. This can help bring the discussion into focus if it gets off track and help guide the focus group. These primary questions can be augmented by additional questions or subtopics to promote discussion. A few good universal questions that can be used to open up areas of discussion are:

- 1 If you were in charge, what kind of changes would you make?
- 2 What would it take for this [product, service, ad, concept, idea] to get a gold star? Or, if this [product, service, etc.] received an award, what would it be for?
- 3 If you were the moderator, what would be the next question you would ask the group?
- 4 What would you tell a best friend or family member about this [product, service, etc.]?
- 5 Assume this [product, service, etc.] could talk, what would it say about itself?
- 6 If you could only change one thing about this [product, service, etc.] what would you change, and what's the main reason that one thing needs changing?
- 7 If you were responsible for selling 1,000 units of this product, what key point would you stress in the ad campaign?
- 8 What do you need to know about this [product, service, etc.] in order to accept or reject it?

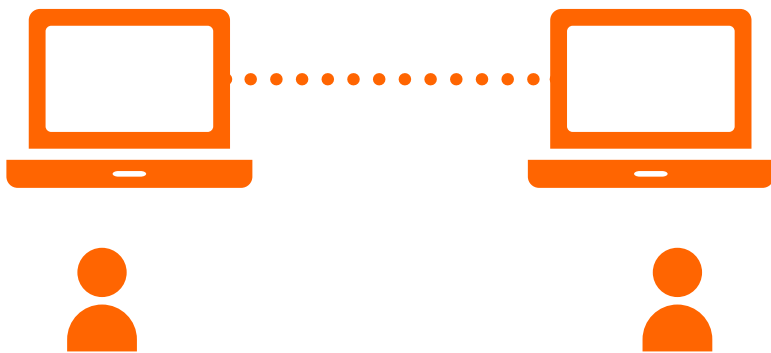
Finally when the focus group is complete close the discussion by thanking them and reminding them of any administrative details such as when and how they will receive compensation.

Online Focus Group Applications

There are several applications available for conducting online focus groups. While most offer the ability to conduct the focus group via a webcam, some offer only a chat feature. It's important that you understand the needs of your research to establish how effective the platform will be at answering your research question.

Platforms created specifically for this purpose will likely include the most robust options available for conducting an online focus group, but they are not the only method available. Other less expensive options are available, but typically sacrifice some features. One option is the use of online meeting services such as Adobe Connect, WebEx, or GoToMeeting to conduct online focus groups. What they lack in research features, they make up for in user awareness.

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Selecting an online focus group application that is simple for participants to use should be considered an important qualification. It is also important to consider all available features such as the ability of participants to participate via a tablet or cell phone, participant and moderator interaction options, white boarding options, the ability to upload and display video, audio and images, the ability to record the session, how observers access the group, etc.

Finally it is important to consider how often the online focus group application will be used. Most are set up on a monthly payment or a per group option. For most companies that are considering a research vendor to conduct online focus groups, utilizing the services of a market research firm that subscribes to a service like this is the most cost effective choice. Additionally the experience and expertise that the market research company brings to the process also makes utilizing their services the most efficient and effective option.

Conclusion

No form of qualitative research is without limitations, including online focus groups. But the availability of technology to the masses makes online focus groups an extremely valuable and practical research tool. The ability to gather participants from all around the country or world to share their opinions on a specific product or service and dive deeply into those opinions is a research methodology that was out of reach for many companies only a few years ago due to budget limitations. Online focus groups now allow for just about any company to gather important qualitative information efficiently and effectively.

One of the biggest mistakes companies often make when it comes to qualitative research methods, like online focus groups, is simply not asking the right people the right questions and in the right way. Given that relatively few people are required to participate in online focus groups compared to quantitative methods, such as surveys, finding the right people is often a fairly simple task. Asking the right questions is a matter of having a skilled moderator assist in or develop the moderators guide. As for asking questions the right way, online focus groups allow for the kind of interaction and deep dive questioning that most other research methodologies come up short on. It is important to understand the reasons behind why people feel or think the way they do. When conducted properly, online focus groups allow for this level of understand and provide the kind of information that is critical for effective decision making.






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If you know you need to conduct an online focus group and you're unsure about how to implement it, please contact us. We're experts in the area of online qualitative research, qualitative research analysis, and text analysis. We know how to collect the information that you need and what to do with it once it's been collected. Contact us and we'll work through this process with you.

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