

# Keep up the pace

It's very difficult to look at a new medium with fresh eyes. During the early days of television, many producers thought of it as radio with pictures, and indeed, the first television broadcast was a radio concert. At the same time, producers with a movie background looked at the emerging medium of television from their perspective, seeing both visual limitations and visual possibilities. These two influences, radio and movies, both contributed to the early development of television. But they also imposed conceptual limits that would eventually fall away once the first generation of pure television producers arose.

I see a parallel with today's online research practices. If our background is survey-based research, we look at the Internet and see faster surveys at a lower cost, and may simply put the mail survey or telephone script online. If our background is focus groups, we look at the Internet and see geographically dispersed focus groups without travel, and just put the discussion guide and moderation online. But what we are really faced with is an entirely new medium with which to conduct research.

## Harnessing market dialog

In this new online world we inhabit, expectations are different. We expect immediacy, anonymity and access. We expect to find what we are looking for, and we expect the opportunity to contribute our own ideas as we see fit. For example, most articles one reads online provide

an opportunity for readers to comment on what they have just read. We also expect to make connections with others online, from reading the other comments about that online article to e-mailing someone we had never

heard of until this moment.

These expectations work to our advantage in online research - if we, as researchers, can learn to get out of the way.

Take, for example, a project we were involved in for a biotechnology company last year. The goal of the project was to test the concept for a new instrument used by a certain type of biochemist. The company had tried two traditional (in-person) focus groups, but these had failed. The respondents that had been recruited were not all at the same professional level, so it was difficult to engage the group in problem-solving. For an online group, recruitment can be nationwide, making it much easier to find exactly the right people. By

## The case for real-time research



By Linda Stegeman

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recruiting the right target and watching the scientists collaborate on the problem, the solution became obvious.

Online research has the potential to remove the barrier between the client and the research results, enabling what amounts to a direct dialog with the market. It's one thing to have your engineering vice president on the other side of the mirror during a focus group; it's quite another thing to have entire engineering teams, wherever they are in the world, listening to their customers speak candidly about the use of a given product. Some of the most important findings in our projects have resulted from the impromptu questions initiated by observers on the client side, in real time, based on what they have just learned.

### **Provides flexibility**

Online research provides incredible flexibility. For example, we just did a project for an online travel company where a competitor launched a new site in the middle of the research project. No problem: we just incorporated the old and the new into the research.

Increased client involvement also turns out to be a huge benefit. In addition to the ability to observe and contribute directly to the research, simply having a shorter project helps clients to stay focused. A project can be fielded in as little as a week. Transcripts of the session are available immediately, with analysis available in a few days rather than a few weeks. A short research cycle yielding up-to-the-minute information also makes it much more likely that a client can quickly apply what has been learned right away to make better business decisions.

### **A new view of respondents**

Online research can also add entertainment value. This leverages one of the main reasons people go online – to have fun. Our customer satisfaction survey data consistently shows that most of our research partici-

pants enjoy participating in the process. I find this remarkable.

The traditional view of respondents has been almost adversarial. Most people don't want to be bothered with surveys, this view holds, so we either have to provide an incentive or use large amounts of sample force. And to capture a respondent's attention for a full hour is certainly expected to require a substantial incentive.

Indeed, these traditional views are true – when it comes to traditional research. It's no secret that overall response rates for phone surveys, for example, are dropping alarmingly. Those who are studying this problem are learning some interesting things about today's respondents. As some researchers in fields like customer satisfaction have known for quite some time, the strongest motivation for research participation is the desire to make a difference, especially in areas that we care about personally. Customer satisfaction research usually doesn't require any incentive – customers are generally willing to provide their opinions to companies with whom they have a relationship.

This principle of drawing on people's natural motivation to be helpful, and their natural curiosity, can easily be applied outside of customer research, as we found with our biotechnology group. These chemists are a natural community, they had things in common that made them interested in exploring the issues at hand. All we really had to do was create the opportunity for discussion and then listen in.

As the Internet evolves we will have more and more opportunities to leverage online activities for research purposes. Online ethnography, for example, is already emerging. I expect that in the next few years we will see the use of simulations in research, and research in the form of competitions or games.

The Internet already allows direct observation of consumer buying behavior. Last month I was defining

a survey for a prospect who needs to learn more about how customers are using an e-commerce Web site. People visit, but not enough of them download the product. We started thinking about how we could design a study to replicate this situation and then we realized we didn't have to – all that's needed is to point the respondents in the right direction, watch what they do, and ask them to comment.

### **A glimpse of the future**

The next generation of Internet research will be driven by a new understanding and appreciation of human behavior, both in general and as it applies to online interactions. The computer science community is making interesting findings in the area of computer-mediated conversation and the ways in which the Internet is enabling new forms of conversational practice.<sup>1</sup> I expect such findings will help to transform our field.

Another trend I see having an impact on research is the growing use of multiple media at one time. Over 20 percent of U.S. consumers across all age groups say they are regularly online while watching television.<sup>2</sup> Television advertisers have begun to take advantage of this, as with the Super Bowl commercial that sent viewers online to see the rest of the story – a superb use of multimedia advertising that takes advantage of our new multimedia world. Researchers can also leverage this development.

We are only at the beginning of exploring this new medium of Internet research. In another 10 years, online research will have characteristics we can't yet imagine. But there's no reason to wait until the transformation is complete. Online research is the right tool for the job today. After all, business is real-time. Why shouldn't research be real-time as well? | Q

### **References**

- 1 Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, Persistent Conversations mini-track ([www.hicss.hawaii.edu](http://www.hicss.hawaii.edu)).
- 2 Big Research, April 2003.