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Fundamentals For Those Considering Online Focus Groups

Almost three of every five people in North America are now wired. More importantly, the Web is increasingly becoming an essential part of daily life. As this trend continues, so will the demand for conducting online research. Price and convenience are two factors that will drive demand for online focus groups. However, collecting data online brings with it a new set of assumptions and considerations. Understanding the advantages of conducting research online as well as learning the limitations of this data collection method will help researchers avoid potential pitfalls and ensure the successful collection of data online.

What is An Online Focus Group?

Sometimes known as "Chat Groups", focus groups take place online in a space known as a chat room. Participants are directed to the chat room by invitation emails and assemble at a specific date and time to discuss a pre-defined topic. The discussion is lead by a moderator who controls the conversation by asking carefully crafted questions and probing the responses of participants. Each participant is identified only by his or her login name. The anonymity of the online forum encourages participants to confidently share their opinions.

Advantages Of Online Focus Groups:

The primary advantage of online focus groups is that it provides a cost effective alternative to conducting traditional groups. Traditional focus facility rental fees along with transcription expenses are eliminated. Transcripts for each group are automatically generated and available immediately after the focus session. During an online focus group, participants can join the conversation simultaneously from multiple locations around the globe. For convenience, respondents can participate from the comfort of their own home or office while moderators can conduct multi-city groups in the same day without having to leave their office. This reduces travel costs for moderators and incentive costs to virtual participants are reduced.

An increasing proportion of the general population is accessible online but there are still certain segments of the population that are more accessible online. For example, those who work in technology-related industries are easily reached online. The younger demographic is also wired and reachable online.

Youth Audience

The youth audience is a unique group that garners special attention. The reason for this is that young people have developed a language all their own that they use to communicate online. They have special jargon and creative symbols they use to express their thoughts and emotions in the online environment. For this reason those who moderate groups with this demographic must be well versed in the online vocabulary of young people. This means not only being able to understand their vocabulary but also being able to communicate using this vocabulary. This will help moderators to communicate effectively with young people, which will in turn keep the focus sessions flowing smoothly.

Best Practices For Conducting Online Focus Groups:

1. **Each online focus group should last between 60 and 90 minutes.** Any shorter and there is the risk that the researcher will not gather enough useful information. Any longer and participant attention wanes and the amount of useful information that is gathered declines.
2. **The optimal number of participants for an online focus group is 10.** Anymore than 10 and the groups become difficult for the moderator to manage effectively and there is a tendency to develop free riders. Recruit 15 for 10 to show. Some who have conducted online focus groups in the past contend that the optimal group would consist of an even smaller number of participants.
3. **Screen for Internet connection speed.** There are varying types of Internet connection speeds. Those with faster computers and connection speeds will tend to respond first and this can impact the session or even bias the group. Recruit participants with similar Internet connection speeds whenever possible. Eliminating the use of emoticons will also help those with a slower connection keep up.
4. **Short questions work better.** Avoid long, layered, moderating methods. Try not to include multiple ideas in one question – allow participants the chance to answer each question separately. Ensure that all respondents have sufficient time to answer questions and take part in the discussion.

Factors To Consider When Deciding Whether To Conduct An Online Focus Group:

Online focus groups work well for ad testing whether the medium is video, audio or static imagery. Concept testing and disaster checks are ideal types of studies for the online environment especially when these tests need to be done across cultures and span wide geographic regions.

There are times when there is no substitute for conducting face-to-face focus groups. Those studies that depend largely on physical reactions along with verbal responses can only be conducted in-person. The visual component of communication missing from the online focus group environment takes some getting use to according to traditional moderators.

Moderators must be patient and more diligent to ensure all members of the group participate. Agreement or disagreement, which can be easily conveyed non-verbally by participants in the traditional focus group environment, must be stated in the virtual environment. Since participants think faster than they type and they hear faster than they read, online groups take longer to cover content than traditional groups.

Choosing An Online Focus Group Facility:

If you are looking to conduct online focus groups there are some essential services that your chosen vendor should provide.

1. **Password Protected URLs** - This restricts access to your focus session. Only those who have been invited are allowed to enter your focus room.
2. **Private Messaging** – This allows the moderator to speak to each participant individually if they so wish, but limits participants so that they can only “private message” the moderator.
3. **Link Insertion** – Insert links so that participants can view stimuli you wish to present.
4. **Participant Removal Procedure** – An easy-to-use method for the moderator to remove disruptive participants.
5. **Easy-to-Navigate Facility** – Each focus room should be easy-to-use even for a novice moderator. Since the group can be fast paced there is little time to learn the environment. The features of each room should be laid out in an intuitive manner.

These features help to keep the moderator in full control of each session.

As research budgets continue to be divided between conducting traditional and online research, the demand for online focus groups will increase. There are a number of reasons why demand for this methodology will build; price and convenience are perhaps the biggest influencers. However, researchers need to understand the advantages and the limitations of this methodology in order to maximize the potential of this new data collection tool. To this end, I hope this article has shed some light on the fundamentals of conducting focus groups online.

Bio:

OnSurvey merges conventional approaches with leading-edge technologies to deliver strategic and actionable researched results for improved decision-making. OnSurvey is a full service market research consultancy that specializes in using both online and traditional methodologies to conduct market research.

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