Online market research

Online focus groups and interviews

Lindridge:

So Peter, I've been reading recently about the growth in online focus groups and online in-depth interviews, which historically have been where you have interviewed someone or done a focus group and you have physically observed them. What are the implications of that for marketing research and your manager who's buying in that data?

Jackson:

The manager who's buying data will probably start and go into situations where the familiar methodology, for some years to come, will be a face-to-face focus group in which you see the people, you touch the people, I don't mean physically touch them, but metaphorically you're very close to them, and there are lots of ways in which you can handle a group and moderate a group to get the answers you're seeking, and get the truth from people. You can even, in extremis, throw someone out of a group who is disruptive. It's much more difficult with online groups, but what's worried me most about online groups is online groups have again this problem that we're not absolutely sure that we have who they say they are. We're not sure that they are telling the truth. This is not to say that most respondents are dishonest, it's just that always one of the biggest problems with qualitative research is are we recruiting the right people, are we screening them properly. Now with an online focus group, one of the problems you get is that they say they'll turn up at 8 o'clock online, in front of their computer, and sometimes they're not there. Now it's a problem with face-to-face focus groups that people don't turn up, but by and large, because they're collecting an envelope with £30 or £40, or even £50 in, they show up. There seems to be an honesty between the recruiter and the respondent that means that they actually show up. Now I haven't done many online groups, but the number I've done shows that people are less likely to show up at 8 o'clock. They'll roll into the room, our metaphorical room, when it suits them, they will drop out. They could be watching Manchester United play Manchester City, for all we know, at the same time, or on Facebook. So there's a problem there. Then there's a little problem that revolves around that, do we pay them their respondent fee, did they answer all the questions that we wanted them to answer, are they giving you their full time attention to the focus group, are they giving us their money's worth, and so, in focus groups online, we're never sure of those things, it can be a very ragged start. Once you get going, and once you get into it and once you've got your quorum, your reasonable number of eight or ten respondents, it's great from

the point of view of they're able to give vent to their feelings, they can talk metaphorically simultaneously, you can have them all answering the same question at the same time, you can have them all responding to their responses at the same time, or take people out and separate them from the crowd, if that's what you want, and throw them out if that's what you want, and suggest that they go and watch Facebook. The great thing about it is you can put it together very quickly, it's economical, it's not as expensive as hiring a venue and getting together a physical group, and there are variants on it called bulletin boards, or message boards. I mean you can get people, over a period of two days, to put their views up on message boards, to dot in and out the group and respond when they feel like responding, and if they want to write an essay, they can write an essay, if they want to write a one-liner, or tell you in a word or two what they think about the product that you've put up on screen, you can bring them in and out. That would be a bigger community, and they would have less identity with the group, if I can put it that way, but they would be cheap, easy to run, useful as a first view perhaps.

Lindridge:
Do you have any kind of like video camera on participants, so if you actually walk out to make a cup of tea or go off to feed the dog and come back, or is it just simply words on a screen?

Jackson:
Both.

Lindridge:
Okay.

Jackson:
So you can have them on the camera and you can bring them in and out, you can see all your eight or ten people together or apart. I mean up to a point you can tell what they're doing and you can have a better relationship, a human relationship, person-to-person, face-to-face relationship.

Lindridge:
And do participants like that approach, or do they prefer just typing words on a computer screen and making a cup of tea at the same time?

Jackson:
I think it's horses for courses. I think if you want to set it up so you have them on camera, that's great, they're going to be more in tune with the rest of the group, they're going to be able to see the rest of the group who're there. They're going to be able to become part of that community much more. On the other hand it is horses for courses. There are people who

just like to get in and out, who like to be not on camera, like to be anonymised a little bit more, maybe use a false name. I think the great purpose of this is the speed of getting in and out of things, the speed with which you can get a first skim of the topic area. Imagine you and I knew nothing at all, had never been in a dry cleaners. We can set up a group tonight, it's not sending a recruiter out onto the street, it's fishing on an existing panel of people, it's fishing on an existing database, scooping some of those people up who are going to turn up at seven or 8 o'clock tonight, or 2 o'clock this afternoon, if we want.