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SPECIAL REPORT

THIS BULLETIN JUST IN

Online research technique proving invaluable

QUALITATIVE • Post it on the board

Dorrie Paynter, president of San Francisco-based research shop Leapfrog Marketing Research, has always shied away from real-time online focus groups, which she feels don't allow time for participants to interact. However, when a client wanted to do research among guidance counselors working throughout the United States, covering topics ranging from their job experiences to their reactions to an online product demo, Paynter didn't hesitate to suggest a different online qualitative method: a bulletin board.

With a bulletin board, moderators post questions on a password-protected Web page over a period of time, ranging from about four days to a month or more. Participants--typically numbering between 15 to 25--log on, read the discussion and respond at their convenience.

"It was a good method to use because the respondents were so spread out geographically. And from a content perspective, we wanted them to be able to use the product ... and not feel rushed in providing their feedback," Paynter says. "We could never have done this in a regular group."

Bulletin boards are relative newcomers to online qualitative research, having debuted in 1998 with Wilton, Conn.-based Greenfield Online Inc.'s Mindstorm product. But the methodology is winning support from a still-small but growing number of researchers. Paynter says clients are thrilled with the amount and depth of information; she and others estimate that bulletin boards can yield four times as much data as a typical focus group, based on transcript volume. Inappropriate for some types of research (when clients need immediate reactions to a concept, for instance), bulletin boards work best when targeting respondents who are too busy to engage in a live group, or for topics that are highly sensitive or complex. But experts caution that to ensure strong participation, the topic has to be relevant to the respondents—a quality that makes bulletin boards especially effective for b-to-b research.

As a technique, "Bulletin boards sit between the interview, where you are able to get lots of depth, and a focus group, where you can have the group dynamics," says Ted Kendall, vice president of innovation and development for Castle Rock, Colo.-based QualTalk.com, a provider of bulletin board research software.

The role that bulletin boards play in online qualitative research is evolving as researchers come up with new ways to use it, notes David Bradford, vice president of international sales and marketing for Saskatoon, Saskatchewan-based Interactive Tracking Systems Inc. (Itracks), which uses its own bulletin board software as well as real-time online focus group programs. For instance, some researchers use it as an inter-active journal, asking respondents to complete a task elsewhere and record their experiences or feelings on the bulletin board.

Also, software providers regularly unveil new features, such as masking, which allows researchers to conduct interviews with individuals by hiding participants and their respective posts from one another. Also popular are white-boards or daughter links--separate windows that pop up with a link to a Web site or ad--with which researchers can show participants concepts or site designs.

As word about, and researchers' comfort level with, the technology grows, so does that subset of the online research industry. In January, for example, 75 people participated in a set of QualTalk introductory bulletin board sessions designed for moderators, compared with 20 attendees at the last session in November. For competitive reasons, QualTalk and Itracks declined to be specific about the number of bulletin board groups each has scheduled with clients, but Kendall says QualTalk hosted four times as many boards for clients in January as

its monthly average in 2001, a growth trend he expects will continue.

Meanwhile, Bradford says that, although Itracks hosts twice as many real-time sessions as bulletin boards, he believes the newer method will eventually eclipse online real-time groups. He explains that while no online qualitative research method is designed to completely replace traditional offline research, "bulletin boards take such a totally different approach, they aren't perceived as a challenge to face-to-face groups, so there's almost no opposition"--a sentiment he's hearing especially from European researchers, who have been slower to embrace online research than their U.S. counterparts.

Some U.S. researchers, at least, think bulletin boards have some distinct advantages over real-time or even face-to-face groups, including more detailed responses. Bulletin board participants--with equal chance to voice their opinions and no pressure to talk or type fast--may write responses that run several paragraphs, compared with one or two lines in real-time chat, and will more likely comment on prior postings than in real-time, says Susan Semack, vice president for Farmington Hills, Mich.-based MORPACE International Inc., which started using bulletin boards a year ago. Paynter adds that she tells clients they will get about four focus groups' worth of information during one five-day bulletin board group, which produces about 120 pages of instant transcripts (compared with 30 pages for one focus group).

Companies often turn to bulletin boards when target respondents are far-flung or extremely busy because they can respond at their convenience--an attractive selling point when recruiting b-to-b respondents.

Also, bulletin boards work well when the research topic is sensitive, complicated or even controversial. Ricardo Lopez, president of East Brunswick, N.J.-based Hispanic Research Inc., ran a four-day bulletin board group with Hispanic cancer survivors, eliciting information about their experiences with the disease. Cancer and death are taboo topics among Hispanics, Lopez explains, and when he conducted a face-to-face group on the same subject, the participants were unable to offer much beyond an emotional response. The bulletin board group members, because they were anonymous and had time to formulate their thoughts, Lopez says, "were able to say what they had to say. What came out of the bulletin board were answers to the critical questions we had."

Moderating bulletin boards does require a different set of skills than real-time or face-to-face focus groups. To get those thoughtful, rich responses, for example, moderators must set up the questions properly, since researchers aren't able to probe while the participant is answering online.

Paynter says, "You don't have as much control ... so you have to get them ...

used to using a lot of detail."

At MORPACE, for example, researchers pose "meaty" questions that require more thought than those asked during a real-time group, when pacing is important, Semack says.

Plus, Kendall explains that without the moderator's constant presence, bulletin board groups are like an open meadow, where it's easy for participants to walk away from the discussion.

"To draw them back every day, you have to keep the conversations relevant," he says.

Moderators, then, can't simply post the questions and abandon the board for days at a time. During the first two days of a group, Paynter goes on 10 to 12 times, and less often the following days depending on how the discussion is going. Others may log on every hour for 10 minutes or have the software send a message every time there's activity.

Furthermore, when recruiting, researchers must ensure that participants have a strong interest in the topic. Kendall remembers one five-day bulletin board discussion on music that experienced a high drop-off because the members enjoyed music but weren't passionate about it, and didn't have much to say on the topic after a day or two.

Not surprisingly, then, bulletin boards have been most effective among professionals who share a specific interest. One bulletin board group, comprised of bulk energy suppliers, created a side discussion through which they networked and discussed other issues, Kendall says. Similarly, Patricia Sabena, president of Westport, Conn.-based Patricia Sabena Qualitative Research Services, conducted a bulletin board in which all 31 participants stayed for the entire week and then formed their own e-mail network.

"It's not the first time I've seen it happen; they got so involved with each other's stories and their views," Sabena says.

Because bulletin board participants will donate much more of their time than a 90-minute focus group--as much as 30 minutes to an hour daily--researchers must be upfront about the time commitment and then reward them appropriately. Paynter, who feels the bulletin boards work best with about 15 participants, says that while she'd perhaps offer a \$60 incentive to focus group members, she will pay bulletin board participants \$100. To keep respondents active, moderators may also send out daily e-mail reminders (most software programs offer that option), or hold a drawing at the end of the group.

Still, bulletin boards aren't the online method du jour just yet. For one, bulletin boards carry a hefty price tag, compared with other forms of qualitative research. One bulletin board group costs about \$12,000, compared with about \$5,000 to \$6,000 a session for a face-to-face or real-time focus group, according to Kendall. However, he also points out that bulletin boards produce much more data and may involve three times as many participants than a focus group, making a one-to-one price comparison unfair.

And experts agree that bulletin boards aren't an appropriate tool in all circumstances, such as when a client wants to gauge immediate reaction to an ad concept or when the topic is a low-involvement consumer product, such as chewing gum. Semack adds that some clients want the involvement they get with real-time focus groups, for which they may bring the team together to track the chat.

"But no one really does that with a bulletin board; it doesn't generate the same sense of urgency and camaraderie. Does that mean it's not good? No," Semack says. "I like having the option of offering it."

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