

## Are Online Groups the Future of Qualitative Research?

More organizations are exploring online qualitative research sessions, especially given advances with PCs, Internet, and telecommunications in the last couple years.

This recent trend in using technology tools is designed to help improve quality, increase speed, and reduce costs for qualitative research sessions. Long-term, they have significant potential as tools in the qualitative researcher's 'tool box'. Short-term, however, when examining a client's goals and needs, it is important to be aware of their respective pros and cons.

The advantages and disadvantages must be examined from several perspectives, i.e., client representatives, moderator, and participants. Each member of the research process has unique needs and desires, which need to be taken into consideration when evaluating the possible use of online sessions and their respective 'benefits' and 'costs'.

*In general, the 'benefits' include:*

- Saving 'wear and tear' on client representatives and the moderator from traveling from city to city, or country to country;
- Improving client, moderator, and participants' productivity with no travel time, less time away from the office, plus being home for personal responsibilities;
- Saving participants from having to travel to a central facility;
- Eliminating facility costs (e.g., rental, meals, refreshments);
- Decreasing (and in some cases possibly eliminating) the cost of incentives for people to participate;
- Enabling individuals to participate anytime (i.e., 24 x 7 x 52) from anywhere (i.e., their home, office, or any place in the world), so location is no longer an issue and more people can potentially participate, regardless of geography);
- Ensuring that each person can be actively engaged in the discussion, especially when brainstorming ideas or critiquing products and services;
- Covering more content in a faster time frame;
- Giving client representatives, either locally or in distributed sites, an opportunity to pose questions or share clarifications to the moderator to present to the participants;

- Capturing 'real-time', verbatim responses from all participants, so the researcher can analyze and present findings, conclusions, and recommendations faster; and
- Decreasing the overall length of the study by 25-50 percent since travel is eliminated and time spent watching videotapes and taking notes is either significantly reduced or eliminated.

*Conversely, the 'costs' are:*

- Losing the ability to actually see and hear the true, verbal and non-verbal, 'voice of the customer';
- Eliminating the opportunity to confirm a participant in a study (potentially, they might allow or invite a colleague, friend, neighbor, and/or family member to observe or participate in lieu of themselves due to a schedule conflict or lack of knowledge in the subject);
- Maintaining confidentiality of the subject material (whether branded or unbranded) because other people may be able watch and contribute to the discussion and/or the participant might make a copy of the proceedings to share with others (including potential competitors of the study's sponsor);
- Controlling and/or limiting the stimulus can be a problem because certain items, such as form factors, would be almost impossible to present. In addition, maintaining confidentiality with these materials, especially in digital form, would be a major challenge;
- Losing ISP connections and/or slow transmission may cause some participants to become disenchanted or frustrated with the experience (e.g., participation may be delayed for all participants, depending upon the software used, to the slowest common denominator - such as person with a 28,800 bps modem);
- Eliminating some individuals in the target segment from studies because they lack access to a PC, a modem, and/or an ISP;
- Receiving mixed or low participation from different individuals, especially those people who lack good keyboard or written communication skills; and
- Overcoming differences in languages, if a multi-national study is being conducted.

Analysis of pros and cons involves many considerations, but concentrates on the main question: "How does it affect the quality of the results and insights?" The benefits certainly mean online research sessions warrant careful consideration as part of a researcher's 'tool kit'.

Some of the disadvantages or challenges might be overcome by recruiting participants selectively, issuing them special passwords to restricted and secure Web sites, and requiring individuals to sign confidentiality or non-disclosure agreement, however, the real issue - what is the quality of results?

At the heart of qualitative research is 'peeling back the onion' to truly understand an individual's underlying opinions, reactions, motivations, and perceptions. The goal is going beyond their 'top-of-mind' comments to understand the participants' 'private voice' about their 'private world'. An online session, whether an in-depth one-on-one interview or a regular-sized focus group, has the potential for individuals to be very candid in their written comments. In fact, some people might be more blunt or frank because they do not have to 'face' anyone, plus they know they are not being videotaped, so they might be more relaxed or direct. It also can provide the researcher and client representatives with immediate text transcripts of the discussion to expedite analysis and report writing.

However, what is missing from online groups are the emotional cues or reactions, which are best obtained through non-verbal and/or visual communication. It is the more passionate or dispassionate responses to questions, which give a clearer picture of their true impressions or opinions.

As alternatives to complement an online, real-time, text-based group, to engage other verbal, non-verbal, and/or visual forms of communication, you might consider either an audio conference call and/or video conference using various solutions, such as [Microsoft's NetMeeting](#) or [White Pine's CUSeeMe](#).

[GQG Online](#) is GQG's online, secure, private, and virtual online focus group room. GQG Online offers full services, including design, planning, organization, recruitment, programming, moderation, analysis, and development and delivery reports and presentations. In addition, GQG Online utilizes a comprehensive set of tools, resources, and applications, e.g., video, white boards, Excel, PowerPoint, Word, polling, Web sites, PDF, GIF, and JPG files, that enable an online qualitative researcher to effectively plan and moderate a session, engage participants more effectively, plus accelerate analysis and report writing.

An additional variation of using the Internet as an online resource, traditional focus groups in facilities can now be broadcast live via video streaming on the Internet using different resources, such as [ActiveGroup](#) or [FocusVision](#). [Microsoft's Live Meeting](#) offers Web conferencing, which is a communications medium that allows you to combine the power of visuals with the clarity of sound; such as conference calls or streaming audio. Using just a Web browser and a phone, you can conduct live interactive meetings, presentations, seminars or software demonstrations to people all over the world-in real time.

A variety of other online tools are available for qualitative and/or quantitative research. A leading supplier is [GMI](#), which offers integrated solutions for market research. Net-MR is the "Microsoft Office of the research industry." Net-MR is a comprehensive integrated suite of powerful, reliable research tools. GQG is a GMI licensee and research partner. Please contact us for more details about Net-MR and how it can assist your organization.

A caution, though, about the use of different online tools. The more types, levels, or layers of Web-based or online tools used, the more challenges or complications you might face with them, especially with 'technophobes' or the IT challenged individuals. Moreover, the biggest 'Achilles heal' is still slow transmission speeds, especially with dial-up accounts, for many users.

As with a traditional focus group, online sessions still require a skilled, experienced, and insightful moderator who can actively engage them in the discussion. Obviously, this qualitative researcher almost must possess excellent written communication and keyboard skills beyond the normal skill set, regardless of the 'tools'. The researcher must be one step ahead of the participants, yet remain attentive and responsive to their individual comments and questions to ensure that 'nothing slips between the cracks' with the words or intent behind them.

**The bottom-line** is that online groups are growing in usage for selected studies where the target segment must have access to a PC, modem, and online service/ISP. More importantly, as bandwidth expands, transmission speeds increase, and software tools improve, we will see increased usage of them. In many respects, we're almost still in the Model T days with rutted roads for online groups. However, when high performance, fast, reliable, and multimedia (i.e., data, voice and/or video) wired (e.g., fiber, ATM, DSL, cable) or wireless digital vehicles for online groups become ubiquitous, we will see them become commonplace on the global infobahn.



Your reactions to this 'white paper' are greatly appreciated. Please call 503.471.1397 with comments or e-mail responses to [ghansen@ggg-mr.com](mailto:ghansen@ggg-mr.com).

Best wishes,

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