

Come Swim in the New Waters of Qualitative

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CONSUMERS ARE RAPIDLY EMBRACING TECHNOLOGY IN EVERY FACET OF THEIR LIVES. AS A RESEARCHER, WHETHER YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF A TRADITIONALIST OR TECHNOLOGIST, NO ONE IS IMMUNE TO ADMITTING THAT THE WATERS AROUND US HAVE GROWN. IT IS TIME TO WORK IN TANDEM TO PROVIDE A NEW LENS FOR WHICH TO SEE CONSUMERS.

As the saying goes, there are two certainties in life – death and taxes. But I believe there is another certainty – and that’s change. Bob Dylan’s lyrics are timeless because the world around us is in a constant state of motion. We frequently read statistics about how quickly our knowledge is expanding; and we personally experience the impact technology is having in our lives. As a result, the rate at which change occurs is becoming truly exponential.

The corporate world is not immune. Yet the very nature of change can present challenges for corporations that may be used to moving more gradually and deliberately. Exhibiting responsiveness and nimbleness are keys to not just adapting, but embracing changes brought on by technology. And, as a researcher, whether you consider yourself a traditionalist or technologist – no one is immune to “admitting that the waters around us have grown.” As partners to our clients, we have a duty to help drive, and usher in, this change.

The Role of the Changing Consumer

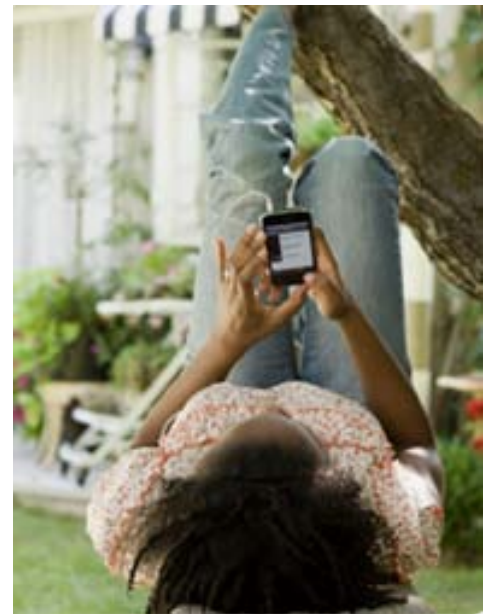
Consumers—considered the very life blood of marketing research—are rapidly embracing technology in every facet of their lives. New “gadgets” and lifestyle technologies have not only become ubiquitous, but necessary. Reaching consumers “where they are” and in a manner that makes them feel most at ease will ensure our qualitative insights become richer and paint a more authentic picture of how our clients’ products and services fit into their lives.

While it may be necessary to gather a group of consumers at a central location to discuss the features—and hear the sound—of a new home theater system, it could be just as effective to ask consumers to go to a store with smartphone in hand and upload a confessional video about their experience with that same system. Imagine the unabated insights as we effectively guide consumers toward this moment of truth. We leave the raw reaction, literally, in their hands. And, in the video archives that provide powerful evidence to back data.

Learning from the Past

To better understand how we can embrace opportunities to make qualitative methods richer through technology, we need to look into the past. The first live, online groups offered moderators a new way to interact with consumers. Yet, their dependence on typed communication eliminated the ability to read non-verbal cues. This set the pace of “listening” and probing at “only as fast as consumers could type.” These constraints limited the sorts of topics that could be covered in this medium. If you wanted to gauge facial expression and emotions, this approach came up short and certainly did not give the intimate feel of in-person sessions. The options for stimuli and screen-sharing were limited or non-existent.

*Come gather 'round people
Wherever you roam
And admit that the waters
Around you have grown
And accept it that soon
You'll be drenched to the bone
If your time to you
Is worth savin'
Then you better start swimmin'
Or you'll sink like a stone
For the times they are a-changin'
(Bob Dylan)*



The Pace of Platform Improvements

Today, the online focus group platform has drastically evolved, enabling us to have fruitful interactions with consumers through the use of webcams and shared computer screens. Webcams allow faces to be seen and expressions captured, creating a reality that closely replicates an in-person group. "Virtual focus groups" today also integrate screen-sharing, allowing researchers to conduct a variety of testing:

- website and app usability studies
- imagery and ad concept mock and mark-ups
- heat mapping
- picture and word sorting

With online focus groups, researchers can also share an array of multi-media stimuli such as PowerPoint decks, story boards, video and audio tracks. The online surge has not stopped there, as the evolution of online focus groups has been

occurring simultaneously with the advancement of other technologies. Online journals, communities, and video diaries are also embraced for their ability to capture in-the-moment consumer reactions. And, adding in photo and video uploads gets us another step closer to the consumer – in the store, at the point of purchase, and during consumption. They help bring feelings, emotions and motivations to life with minimal intrusion, capturing a rawness that other earlier forms of online qualitative were unable to provide. Unfortunately, these platforms require consumers to recall the moment they wrote their response, snapped the picture, and/or shot the video. They still lend themselves to after-thought interpretation by consumers.

Enhancing the Hybrid Research Approach

The increase of "hybrid" research methods is a reflection of how researchers are leveraging the strengths of multiple techniques to form new integrative approaches. Doing so allows us to view consumers through multiple different "lenses," creating a more complete consumer picture. And, while these innovative techniques *can* serve as a replacement for traditional methods, they are often best utilized as enhancements to research. While each technique is not "one size fits all," we must recognize and leverage the benefits of each to create a fully comprehensive research solution. Let's look at a few select "hybrid" scenarios:

a.



Website Usability

An online retailer needed to test the layout, design and functionality of their new website within the constraints of a tight budget.

Online IDIs – Utilizing our virtual focus group platform, we are able to share the moderator's screen with respondents, give them control and perform a standard usability interview with them seated at their home computer.
Note: Virtual IDIs can also be conducted to test smart device app usability using a special low-glare, HD webcam.

b.



Product Exploration

A candy manufacturer needed to understand awareness of their NFL sponsorship, including the role snacking plays with consumers during game viewing in-stadium, in-home & at parties

Video Diaries/Confessionals – View consumer "rituals" including pre-game preparation, shopping, game-time activities, and all food & beverage consumption on game day.
Online Focus Groups – Gain deeper understanding of behaviors and discern differences between regular season games, playoff games and the Super Bowl itself.
Short-term MROC – Gather data (quantitative) and post-game reactions (qualitative) regarding awareness and "fit" of sponsorship along with feedback on further related promotional concepts.

c.



Product Placement

A clothing manufacturer wanted to perform product placement research with "fashionable" men to determine their pant's fit, comfort, style, durability & washability, as well as competitive benchmarking.

Online Journal – Gather unaided consumer feedback & observation during the wear, wash and re-wear cycle.
Bulletin Board – Glean additional insight into targeted areas of interest by posting specific questions (with follow-up probes for more depth & clarification) over the course of the product placement.
Online Focus Groups – Gain detailed feedback and competitive perceptions from groups with respondents and their friends. The discussion guide was developed to address themes revealed through the Online Journals and Bulletin Boards.

Forward to the Future

With the onset of 4G smartphones, we are dabbling in the ability to access consumers through video-chat platforms. Sure, we can chat online now, but a smooth audio and video feed is not possible without a direct Wi-Fi connection. This limits where consumers can take us and what they can show us in real-time. Once the kinks are worked out, mobile chats will offer an unencumbered, real-time glimpse into the lives of consumers.

Imagine this...a client is observing via computer a consumer entering a retail outlet with the same home theater system as in our earlier example. Synchronized in real-time, the moderator from her office directs the consumer to a special seasonal display and asks what they notice first. Both client and moderator witness what the consumer sees and the questioning begins. No memory recall is needed. No reflectivism enters the research process.

Innovation through Adaptation

Innovation is not accomplished solely through invention. It's driven through adaptation – taking an old idea and making it better—leveraging existing tools and applying them differently to suit yours and consumers' changing needs. But it's also driven by dreaming. It's okay to ask ourselves, "what if?" No longer reserved for quantitative research, online—and very soon mobile—methods will breathe new life into qualitative research. These options will enable researchers to think more creatively and perhaps less scientifically as a discipline.

This will also allow us to bring consumers into the research process in a manner that better resonates with them. As a result, insights will be better rooted in reality, adding a fresh layer of authenticity to research.

In continuing this process, traditionalists must work in tandem with technologists to uniquely present corporations with a new lens for which to see consumers. That way, we can give them ability to swim in the new waters of qualitative with us.

No over-rationalization is brought to the table. No team of researchers following them in the store.

In reality, we're not far off. Current trials of real-time interviews via smartphones and other 4G mobile devices show great promise. So far, we're witnessing seamless video observation and audio communication without lags. With 4G rollouts on the rise, we expect this transition to take hold by the end of 2013.

In the meantime, we are leveraging 4G hotspot devices as part of incentive process, breaking the Wi-Fi tether and further enabling participation of 3G owners. Similar to sending external webcams for online groups, these hotspots are a great interim solution to getting closer to mobile netnography.



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