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March, 2011

# The “Virtual” Reality of Focus Groups



## Q&A by:

Duston Pope, Account Director,  
Financial & Diversified,  
Gongos Research



Jennifer Kluce, Account Director,  
Consumer Products,  
Gongos Research

Although in-person focus groups still contribute to the majority of qualitative research conducted, virtual focus groups are becoming increasingly popular among researchers and clients alike due to their ability to reduce costs and complete research more efficiently. In fact, CASRO's 2010 Financial Survey suggests that while research firms with up to \$25M in total revenues are either static or experiencing a decline in location-based focus groups and IDIs, revenues from online qualitative almost doubled. Assuming virtual focus groups comprise a healthy piece of the online pie, we felt it was important to pause for a moment to answer several key questions that allow us to examine the methodology and how it enhances the qualitative toolbox.

### **1. Were virtual focus groups developed to replace traditional in-person focus groups?**

DP: It depends on the way you look at it. Developed to make in-person groups obsolete? No. Developed to create new opportunities for qualitative research? Yes. Depending on the objectives of any given study, virtual focus groups can be considered either optimal or optional. There are circumstances where traditional in-person focus groups remain the best option, most notably research that requires understanding a deep emotional level where body language can reveal almost as

much as spoken words. Also, design research where consumers must immerse themselves with stimuli is always best done in person.

### **2. Are there certain scenarios where virtual focus groups may be a more optimal approach for consumer research?**

DP: Very low-incidence populations are nearly impossible to recruit for in-person groups due to the difficulty of finding those willing to participate in one geographical area. Virtual focus groups allow for national recruiting of these hard-to-reach groups making it possible to engage them in qualitative research, something very cost prohibitive, or even impossible, with traditional focus groups.

JK: In some instances, teen research can be optimal in the virtual space given teens' comfort with technology as their preferred mode of communication. To ensure a successful group, both the moderator and the recruiting facility need to be familiar with teen dynamics – not only in how to recruit teens, but also in how to moderate the group and communicate expectations prior to the session. Teens will likely need less “education” on the platform, but more “guidance” in how to communicate during the session—the do's and don'ts of virtual focus groups. For example, teens may be more likely to use the chat boxes to type their answers rather than verbalize, so communicating the expectation that they will be required to talk during the session is necessary. When properly prepared and executed, virtual focus groups can be a great way to engage with teens.

DP: There may also be circumstances where the ideal moderator for a project is unable to travel due to scheduling conflicts. In these cases, virtual focus groups allow the moderator to conduct multiple focus groups without have to sacrifice valuable time—both personal and professional.

JK: Virtual focus groups are also a great supplement to online research communities. When a particular discussion warrants deeper investigation, inviting online members to engage with a moderator in real-time streamlines the process – particularly because they have an established relationship with the moderator and are already invested in the topic. Recruiting costs can also be cut in half, since respondents are pre-qualified.



### **3. Are there barriers to entry for qualitative webcam-based platforms?**

JK: Yes, there can be respondent, moderator and client barriers.

While consumers are becoming more comfortable with web-based technology, some still may have anxieties with “foreign” programs. Properly preparing respondents and making them 100% comfortable with the platform prior to the session will ease their nerves. Best practices include offering technical assistance on how to install webcams prior to the day of the session, and having respondents join the virtual group 20 minutes prior to their session.

This allows time for any needed instruction, e.g. where to type technical questions, how to use voting buttons, or how to communicate privately to the moderator.

Moderators should be comfortable with the platform navigation – how to show stimulus, operate voting buttons, and recognize who is doing the talking.

Clients should have a good understanding of how the platform works and how the research questions will be answered prior to choosing a virtual focus group over a traditional in-person group. A demo of the platform and a walk-through prior to the session is often beneficial for first-time users, and can alleviate any apprehension.

DP: It is always possible that technical difficulties surface – respondents can lose Internet or webcam connection or media may not cooperate with the platform. However, these challenges are quickly resolved by having a technical expert as a member of the real-time team. This person is responsible for adjusting audio so that respondents can be clearly heard, properly placing respondents and observers into the right virtual room for the session, and all in all ensuring the sessions run smoothly.

### **4. Do you follow the same recruiting process for recruiting respondents for virtual focus groups?**

JK: Similar to in-person focus groups, respondents for virtual groups are screened over the phone to meet the target criteria; and in some cases are

screened to meet the target criteria more accurately. By being able to cast a wider net geographically, targeting a very specific group of consumers is now feasible – there is no need to “loosen” your criteria to get your group fully recruited.

DP: Unlike traditional focus groups, a pre-screen via an online survey may be necessary to ensure that the respondent’s computer is compatible with the online platform and their Internet speed is up to par. A pre-screen survey can also provide the opportunity to target consumers more efficiently, streamlining the phone recruiting process and securing hard-to-reach consumers.

JK: Articulation and language barriers are particularly important for virtual focus groups, since you are relying on audio through a phone. In this regard, scheduling and confirming their qualification by phone is mandatory.

### **5. Do the same techniques that moderators use for in-person studies translate to virtual focus groups?**

DP: The fundamentals of moderating hold true regardless of the setting. Most probing techniques are equally effective online as they are in-person. Laddering and projective techniques can also be done as part of virtual focus groups in the same way they are done in-person. However, there are many “tricks” that moderators have historically called upon that are no longer effective in a virtual environment. This includes the basic ability to make eye contact with the participant speaking or the person about to speak, and detecting reactive body language. Without the use of many of these “crowd control” techniques, it is not uncommon for participants to speak over each other, forcing the moderator to pre-select someone to lead in, while encouraging others to then add to the discussion.

JK: Techniques that require the use of whiteboards, flip charts and Post-it® notes to record responses or ideas to use later in the group are, of course, altered. Although many virtual platforms do provide a virtual whiteboard, they can be less natural to use than the in-person tools many moderators have grown accustomed to.

## 6. Do any misconceptions exist around the validity of virtual focus groups?

DP: There seems to be a general misconception that if something moves to an online environment then it must mean it's significantly cheaper and faster. (As researchers, we experienced this phenomenon when quantitative surveys moved away from telephone and mail methodologies and into online environments).

However, this is not entirely true for virtual focus groups. When conducting virtual focus groups, like traditional in-person focus groups many of the steps and expenses remain the same. Respondents still have to be recruited and compensated, and reports have to be written. Any time or money savings occur while conducting the actual groups themselves. With virtual focus groups, you can conduct more groups in a shorter amount of time due to the lack of travel. This lack of travel also leads to lower costs on both the supplier and client side. However, some of those cost savings are offset by the costs to purchase and ship webcams to participants prior to the groups.

JK: Many researchers assume that because you are not meeting participants face-to-face, that you can't ask them to complete a pre-session homework assignment. In reality, pre-session homework assignments are just as possible to use in conjunction with virtual focus groups as with traditional groups. Asking participants to complete and email their homework assignment one or two days prior to the virtual focus groups actually provides a key advantage over the typical homework as-

signments. It allows the moderator and client to pre-screen the participants for those who may be most engaged in the topic, most creative or most out-of-the-box thinkers. Moderators and clients now have one to two days to do this pre-screening rather than one to two minutes before the group starts. Additionally, homework can be scanned and entered into the virtual focus group platform, so it can be shown to participants and discussed during the group.

## 7. What does the future hold for virtual focus groups in market research?

DP: The virtual focus groups of the future will more closely resemble in-person focus groups as technology designed to gather people in a virtual space continues to advance. These changes combined with the ability to reach specialized populations will lead to continued growth of virtual focus groups. This, in turn, could increase the overall use of qualitative research to help answer critical research and business objectives.

JK: The presence of virtual groups will continue to grow, particularly as an avenue to tap into younger consumers. Younger generations and "digital natives" will continue to embrace technology, making virtual interaction the most natural and comfortable outlet to express their opinions. Also, as data transfer speeds increase and webcam technology improves, virtual focus groups will be more permissible to conduct other forms of qualitative research – such as virtual ethnography or virtual journals.

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