



Alert!



Bulletin Boards: A New Research Method that Happens to be on the Internet

Jonathon fielded another client call that caused dread to roil up inside. The client wanted focus groups with the CIOs of Fortune 500 companies. Since he knew there was no way of getting a CIO into a focus group, not to mention that there is no one city with enough to recruit into a facility, he would have to propose in-depth interviews over the phone. And that meant a recruiting and scheduling nightmare. And having to sit through long drawn out interviews over the phone.

Sherry looked again at the budget figure. Her internal clients wanted to talk hold focus groups with the top insurance brokers in the country. That meant the logistical nightmare of trying to recruit agents who had no time to spare and get them to come to one location for a full lost day of work, for a small incentive. And the opportunity to change the industry.

Now Paul and Sherry have another option. They can use a new method conducted on the Internet-the bulletin board (or, as we fondly call them, QualBoards).

Debate still rages over the merits of surveys on the Internet, though they seem to have become more mainstream. And the efficacy of chat groups seems to bring up a multitude of differing opinions. Consider that in both cases, these methods are more or less just moving a method from the analog world to the digital. Bulletin boards are different, and possibly this explains their appeal, because they are taking a digital capability and adapting it to market research needs.

In form, a bulletin board is only similar to a focus group in terms of the recruiting process and the fact that it involves a qualitative discussion. The results of a good bulletin board discussion generate the equivalent volume of content associated with a set of four focus groups. However, I dislike comparing them to focus groups, because they are truly a different qualitative tool.

What is a bulletin board?

Bulletin board technology has been around since long before the Internet became popular. Comuserve featured forums and America Online message boards, and news groups on the

Internet were all precursors of the bulletin board. The bulletin board simply uses the analogy of a real bulletin board to allow people to communicate with another outside time constraints. People post comments which can be replied to by others over time. Unlike chat, where everyone has to be there as the conversation takes place, this allows people to converse without being there at the same time.

When applied to research, participants are recruited in the same way as for focus groups—though often this can be done via email and the web. From 15-25 participants take part in one discussion session. They are invited to log in to the bulletin board two to three times a day over a three to four day period. The moderator posts new topics for discussion—questions and comments, each day. As participants take part in the discussion, they are able to respond to the moderator and to each other, generating conversations that build off each other in what are called threads.

What situations call for considering the use of a bulletin board?

Not all situations call for the use of bulletin boards. For example, getting the gut reactions of consumers to the taste of a new soda would not be a good use—at least until Broadband is able to dispense soda. However, there are situations where a bulletin board is going to get you the rich, on target results you need. The following list is in no-wise comprehensive, as the method is new enough that new uses are still being discovered, but these are some common uses of bulletin boards.

Dispersed Participants

Often in business-to-business situations, the participant you need exists in very limited numbers in any locale. For instance, how many CIOs of Fortune 500 companies are there in one city? Not having enough to recruit from in a locale prevents you from holding focus groups unless you go through the cost and hassle of flying people to a central location. One company needed to talk to guidance counselors from the top school districts in the country. They also needed the participants to generate ideas and build from one another's comments. By using QualBoards, they were able to have guidance counselors in LA, Seattle, Montana, Michigan, Maryland, Florida and Texas talk to each other.

Busy respondents

The demands of life make it harder and harder for any consumer to take the time to go to a focus group facility and spend two hours in a discussion. For high level executives, busy professionals, doctors, lawyers and working parents, attending an interview or focus group at a facility is difficult and near impossible. But these are precisely the same people who already spend a great deal of time on the Internet. Taking a few minutes here and there throughout the day to take part in a discussion is convenient enough to fit their schedules. A bulletin board provides the participant with the freedom to take part in the discussion from any location with an Internet connection, home, office, hotel room or kiosk. Each time they take part, they only need take a few minutes of their time. The convenience and control this affords increases their ability to take part. Additionally, their opinions are more crafted and articulate, so they have a greater sense of contribution. A large manufacturer used bulletin boards to pull together a group of IT managers.

Sensitive topics

Imagine people talking about sex, religion and politics without exchanging blows. Hard to imagine. But a discussion on the economy and stress amongst American consumers included just such conversation. The ability to be anonymous, which comes from participants using screen names instead of their real names, encourages honesty and open discussion. And the format of a bulletin board, where participants can be thoughtful in their answers, encourages civility in group dynamics. The combination provides rich discussion in a way that would be difficult in a face-to-face situation. This makes this tool also useful for internal employee discussions.

Involved products/services

Because participants are not constrained by time limits when they take part, they can craft their responses. Of course, this limits the spontaneity and impulsiveness of the discussion, but it greatly enhances the depth of thought and articulation of the participants. The key is to make sure the participants are highly involved in the topic of discussion. A discussion among young women on shopping and fashion was extremely rich. You could tell by the discussion that the participants were having fun taking part. (To see for real the richness of this discussion, you may go to www.qualtalk.com/fashion/ to see the transcript.)

The use of bulletin boards for market research discussions is still in its infancy. As it matures, I am sure new uses and greater expertise around their use will come about. In the meantime, it is worth the researcher's time to get to know this method well enough to use it when appropriate.

This article was written by Ted Kendall, Vice President, Innovation and Development for QualTalk.com, a maker of online qualitative software. You can contact him at tedk@qualtalk.com.

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