



Online Focus Group Platforms Evolve to Meet Market Needs

By Jeff Walkowski

The acceptance of online qualitative methods by qualitative research consultants and by research buyers continues to increase. Multi-media online methods that utilize webcams or enable respondents to submit pictures and videos are in vogue right now. But the heritage is with text-based methods – online environments where we never see our respondents or hear them speak, but read what they have to say through posted messages. The two text-based methods are online chats and message boards.

While chats were first to market, it seems that they've been eclipsed over the past several years by message boards. It's easy to understand why. Message boards are perhaps the most relaxed data collection method available to researchers and buyers. And vendors keep enhancing their platforms in an attempt to obtain market share from other vendors. Boards also shine because they have been recognized as a truly unique online qualitative methodology that has the potential to provide more depth of response than just about any other qualitative technique.

Still, chats have their place. They are the perfect solution when researchers need quick, gut-level reactions to issues, concepts, or any other stimuli. (With message boards, there is the potential for respondents to "overthink" their responses because they have the time to ponder before posting a response.) Data collection for chats can be over within hours, whereas it typically takes at least several days for message board data collection to be complete. Because they require less "labor" of the moderator than message boards, chats are almost always less expensive than boards.

For most of the 2000s, new developments in the text-based online arena focused on message boards. In that time, new asynchronous platform vendors were introduced, but no new chat platforms emerged. In fact, several chat platform vendors disappeared. For many years, only one chat platform seemed to be available, making some wonder if this was a signal of the end of online chats. Relatively recently, however, several new chat platforms have entered the market. Chats aren't dead after all!

The proliferation of chat platform options will hopefully lead to the development of additional enhancements to increase the ease of use and functionality of the platforms.

This is not to say that vendors have been lax in adding features to chat rooms. In just the past few years the following developments have been introduced:

- Indicators of who's typing at the moment, helping moderators avoid the clumsiness of asking a question before all have answered the previous one.
- Image sorting gives respondents the ability to move images around.
- Polling utilities enable respondents to provide feedback without being influenced by others in the group.
- Concept mark-up allows participants to highlight what they like and don't like about various concepts, areas they don't understand, etc.

Increasingly, features are being added that help online chats live up to their original promise – to mimic as closely as possible the effectiveness and capabilities of in-person sessions while eliminating the need to travel and expanding the markets that are included in qualitative studies.

Jeff Walkowski is the president of QualCore.com Inc. and a member of the [Qualitative Research Consultants Association](#), a content partner of the American Marketing Association. He will deliver an in-depth presentation on this topic at the QRCA-AQR Worldwide Conference on Qualitative Research, Inspiration in Action 2010. For more information or to register for the conference, visit www.inspirationinaction2010.org.