



The Company

Three companies came together for this product positioning study: Pierre Bélisle, President of Bélisle Marketing Limitée, Gillian Humphreys of NFO CF Group, and Joanne McNeish of Canada Post. They conducted qualitative research on product positioning and benefits for a new web-based service from Canada Post. They were looking at differences between online and offline research methods and the results achieved from each.

The Need

The researchers used three different types of qualitative methodologies and compared the procedures and the results from each.

1. A face-to-face (FTF) mini-group allowed observation of reactions to gauge if a better understanding of the service's features and operations needed to be addressed.
2. A Real-Time Online Focus Group was decided to be an efficient way to assess alternative names in an online context (in which this service's name would be used).
3. An Online Bulletin Board was required to give insight into the usefulness of the service by allowing participants to experiment with it online.

The Solution

Because comparing qualitative research methods is a challenge, the researchers opted for two approaches:

- § A brief quantitative comparison of outputs (words).
- § A qualitative analysis of each method and its strategic implication.

Itracks software and services were used to provide an online environment for both the virtual chat group (Online Focus Group) and the extended time frame group (through the Bulletin Board Focus Group software). The face-to-face mini-group was conducted along traditional lines. Using the Itracks' suite of virtual solutions, researchers explored the degree to which online qualitative research differs from face-to-face.

The Outcome

Outputs: The five-day Bulletin Board Focus Group yielded nearly three times the number of citations than did either the chat or the face-to-face sessions. These BBFG citations comprised over 20,000 words, about twice the volume generated by the FTF session, and nearly seven times that of the chat session

Communication: Online participants type their answers and do so carefully, forcefully, and honestly. They may even reveal more of themselves through writing than FTF participants do through speaking. It may be that online participants are inherently more expressive, or that writing allows one to better communicate concepts and emotions. [Note, however, that modulation of emotions may be more difficult online].



Comprehension: Understanding the concept was not affected by method, but price was. Online, the service was seen as expensive, while FTF participants saw it as inexpensive. Brand image also varied. Online participants saw the brand as positive and desirable, while FTF participants did not necessarily feel this way.

Skill Sets: Many offline qualitative skills are portable to the virtual world, and non-moderating skills (problem definition, analysis, and report writing) are completely portable. Even moderating skills, such as knowing what questions to ask, how to phrase them, and when and how to probe transfer well to the virtual environment. However, some moderating skills, like “Performance Skills” are not needed online.

Importance of Internet Savvy: Keyboard skills are critical in real-time chat groups. Reliable computer systems and fast Internet access are also important, as is the ability to download and install the various applications and plug-ins that are often the subject of virtual qualitative research. To fully participate in discussions it is also important to understand Internet slang and emoticons.

Anonymity: It can be advantageous to not know how people in your group look, sound, or even smell. For example, in conducting a group with participants who mentioned that they “had a problem with weight” anonymity may assist the researcher to focus on their comments, and not their girth (which might have influenced the analysis). Virtual qualitative research would thus work well with sensitive groups, such as the disabled or those with other medical conditions.

Bringing the World to Your Office: Virtual qualitative research may do away with the need to repeat similar sessions in different cities.

Time Conquered: Bulletin Board Focus Groups are asynchronous. Participants log on, read messages, and post them at their convenience. This suggests applications across time zones and with hard to attract audiences (such as IT managers and professionals).

Richer Data: The research resulted in a richer data set, either because it was online, and/or because of multiple lines of enquiry.

“Virtual qualitative is an exciting new addition to the researcher’s toolkit.”

**Pierre Bélisle
Gillian Humphreys
Joanne McNeish**