

## **Nine Tips & Pitfalls to Avoid When Doing Online Qualitative Research**

*Here are a few things we've learned (sometimes the hard way) when conducting online qualitative research that we hope you'll find useful. Please feel free to contact us if you'd like to discuss how some of the ideas below would apply to your needs.*

### **1. Think about the kind of answers you want to get before you select a platform**

The format of the online forum will influence the style of response; discussion boards tend to get shorter answers, but also tend to foster more interaction between participants (if you permit them to see each other's posts) than blog-style boards. On blogs, people typically feel more comfortable uploading pictures and videos. Online ethnography provides the deepest dive, but usually without interaction between participants and generally at a higher cost per respondent (which often means talking to fewer people).

### **2. Consider how you want to use the 'assets' generated by the research**

If you just want a transcript and to get a more in-depth set of responses to questions you will ask again in quantitative research, you don't need to give people cameras. If you want to 'bring to life' segments or ideas, video and still cameras can add a lot of color to a final presentation - if you focus the activities on tasks or behaviors that will illustrate your findings. If you don't have the time or resources to watch and transcribe several hours of video, keep exercises short and sweet. If you want to explore behavior in addition to attitudes, engage people around their routines, getting them to video tape, photograph, narrate, and write about their behavior and attitudes, and then follow-up with questions about specifics.

### **3. Be sensitive to people's privacy**

Prepare them up front (during recruiting) for the types of activities and information you want them to do/share. Some questions should be marked as private, so only you and the person posting can read the answers, but other questions will benefit from the exchange of ideas between participants. In general, if it's the kind of topic you'd do IDIs for because of privacy/sensitivity/controversy, keep it private.

### **4. Ask fewer questions that are more open-ended**

This is true for all qualitative research, but online you will get richer responses if the questions focus on the person you are talking to, offer them a wide berth in expressing themselves, and provide clear, if broad, parameters.

**5. Don't assume online interviewers will be able to elicit emotions in a chat without the proper probes**

One downside of in-depth online interviews is that moderators can't see the facial expressions and hear changes in tone that would lead them to probe further in a traditional face-to-face interview. The moderator's guide needs to include very specific probes to make sure that the interviewer gets underneath rational responses to uncover emotion and what's driving attitudes/behavior.

**6. Provide a friendly voice on the other end of the line**

Don't just upload a discussion guide and watch. People like to know that someone is listening, so having an active and engaged project manager to troubleshoot, clarify and encourage is important to foster the sense of community that gets people to open up.

**7. Always start with a "soft launch"**

When doing either in-depth online interviews or online ethnography, it's always wise to begin with a handful of interviews before proceeding full-steam ahead. Things don't always go exactly as you'd expect when a moderator's guide or respondent instructions for online ethnography come to life and this gives you the opportunity to make important tweaks to ensure your goals are met.

**8. Use video wisely**

If you are incorporating video, send people cameras (this is a 'sunk cost' of the project, don't expect to get them back, but don't expect them to be seen as an adequate incentive, either!), and get them to DO THINGS. It's easy for people to either use the camera for stream of consciousness self-reporting, or to not use it at all because typing is easier. If you construct activities, tasks, missions or games for people to play/do, and document with their camera, you will capture some of the benefits of ethnography along with the stories they tell about how and why they engage in their routines.

**9. Don't expect online qualitative to be a lot cheaper**

You still have to recruit people and incentivize them for their participation, and the hosting & set-up fees from online qualitative platforms can be almost as expensive as a focus group facility. However, we will say that online qualitative **is** cheaper with Equation for two reasons: 1) Our unique distributed business model saves us a ton on overhead that we can in turn pass on to clients. 2) We've streamlined some of the programming that goes into online qualitative projects allowing us to execute quickly and affordably.