

THREADED QUALITATIVE DISCUSSIONS

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Like the advent of the paperless office, the imminent demise of the traditional focus group is perpetually just a few years away. In addition to new variants like "friends groups," high hopes for online focus groups (real-time chats recruited and moderated like a focus group) have contributed to pessimism about the future of the traditional in-person group. And to some extent this pessimism is well-placed – by many metrics, traditional focus groups are time- and cost-inefficient.

So how many online focus groups have you conducted or attended in the past year? If you're like most of our clients, chances are your answer is "very few." The traditional group is alive and well, even as corporate travel budgets are increasingly constrained. Indeed, FocusVision Worldwide estimates that the total number of US focus groups increased 10% in 2000, up to 213,000 – nearly double the norm for the 1990s. Worldwide, the traditional focus group has experienced a similar rate of growth. The online focus group has not disappeared, but most researchers have found the process disappointing, or at least limited to certain well-defined populations such as online gamers or IT professionals.

Concerns with online focus groups range from user-friendliness to security to inadequate cost savings or show rates, but the complaint we hear repeatedly is about the quality of the interaction. With many topics and populations, online focus groups seem to create an environment that encourages a very casual and even sassy tone (inspired, of course, by chat room conventions) at the expense of "serious" discourse.

Like so many ideas that have arisen from the internet, however, online focus groups have nevertheless borne interesting fruit. The threaded discussion, or bulletin-board focus group as some call it, seems to be filling the gaps that online focus groups have left. The basic technology and process is much like the online focus group: participants are recruited by email (if a source is available) or telephone or traditional means; they visit a secure website and contribute ideas to a moderated session. Unlike the online focus group, however, the threaded discussion takes place over multiple sessions and days (typically two sessions a day for two to four days). This approach overcomes the shortcomings of the synchronous online discussion in a number of ways:

Quality of interaction improves: Threaded discussions offer the opportunity for more, and more leisurely, participant/moderator interaction because the content is not being posted in a fast-and-furious, time-constrained environment. In addition, posts in threaded discussions are typically longer, more articulate and even more grammatical than comments in an online focus group.

Client interaction increases: Just as participants have more time to ponder their input and the moderator's questions, clients have more time to scrutinize what they are "hearing" and relay ideas for new questions – even new stimulus – to the moderator. Especially when evaluating new product ideas or marketing deliverables, the format offers a lot of flexibility in altering the path of inquiry or showing iterated stimuli that are driven by previous responses.

Technical and keyboard skills of the participant are less likely to affect participation rates. Because the ability to get online and type fast no longer privileges those with fast connections and faster fingers, the threaded discussion allows all participants to contribute at an equal level.

Technology for threaded discussions (coming as it does from a long and glorious history of newsgroups) is readily available from firms like QualTalk (with which Doxus is an authorized Partner). Over the next couple of years we expect to see significant UI refinements and a growing awareness of this method. This will likely lead to a shift of research spend – some from traditional groups, and some from other methods – toward threaded discussions.