

VOVICI COMMUNITY BUILDER AND FEEDBACK INTELLIGENCE REVIEWED

TIM MACER TAKES A LOOK AT AN OFF-THE-SHELF PANEL MANAGEMENT TOOL. DOES IT HAVE THAT WINNING COMMUNITY SPIRIT THAT RESEARCH AGENCIES SEEK?

Today more and more companies are realising the benefit of building online panels of customers to involve in research. The idea is simple, but the reality can be complex and costly to deliver from a technical standpoint. Whether firms try to build them for themselves or park the problem with a research agency, it is an area crying out for an off-the-shelf solution like the new Vovici Community Builder, which was released last month and effectively relaunches the concept of the panel management tool for the demands of Web 2.0-style research.

WEB'S THE WAY TO GO

The product is a completely web-based suite which sits astride a database of contacts or panellists, and allows you to interface directly with the Vovici EFM survey engine as well as other enterprise platforms or CRM systems – such as Siebel or Hyperion – so that sample selections can refer to real behavioural data from recent transactions for that customer. Configuring the interfaces with other enterprise data sources is, understandably, beyond the lay user, but once these have set up a customer's purchase history can be used just like any other piece of panel profile data, such as age or

location, or be used to drive sample selections for just-in-time research.

At the heart of the software is the Portal Builder, in which you design the pages of the community site your target panel members will visit. It is effectively a content management system which allows you to lay out pages with placeholders for content that will be streamed in from other sources, and which you can arrange neatly in different columns and boxes in the way most websites are organised these days. So, in the centre you could choose to put a list of the surveys the respondent is invited to some introductory text above, headlines from the current community newsletter on the left, highlights of recent survey results on the right and so on. The portal has built-in support for just about all of the objects you are likely to need to add when building a research community site: a profile editor so panellists can view and update their personal data; current survey invitations; past surveys taken; containers for welcome messages, help and links to more information or contacts. The list reaches far into the Web 2.0 milieu: you can add forums for collaborative discussion, blogs for respondents to view and react to, data mash-ups.

There is also a wealth of collaborative tools, from a simple suggestion box to access-controlled forums that can be used for asynchronous focus groups, so that quantitative surveys can be backed up by some selective qual work or vice versa. The highly modular approach means that any tool can be access controlled, and only available to invited participants. And if you are concerned that this portal page is getting a bit busy, it is easy to spread it across a series of tabbed pages, which you can title and organise how you like. There is a large template library, and it is very simple to create an overall theme with your own imagery and branding.

PUBLISH THROUGH A PORTAL

You can also publish results through the portal and make these relevant to the respondent – you could present each member with a report showing their answers compared to the survey as a whole, for instance, show highlights and add commentaries. Vovici emphasise this as the means to build interest and engagement, and work on the assumption that the kind of interest a community member will derive from the experience as a whole will eliminate the need to offer financial

inducements. As a consequence, there is no built-in incentive and reward management capability in the product – something that will not go down well with agencies wishing to build panels.

BIT OF BACKGROUND

Though the Vovici name may be unfamiliar to many, what is now branded as Vovici EFM was originally developed as Perseus EFM. The main web survey capabilities and engine are an incremental development of the Perseus EFM software which Interface reviewed in *Research* July 2006 when it was already a mature and capable offering for online research. Vovici has recently established sales and support offices in London and Singapore alongside three existing locations in the United States.

The other major addition since Vovici took over is in reporting. There is now a dashboard reporting system largely in place, with some development ongoing. It follows a similar philosophy to the Community Builder by allowing you to arrange graphical and tabular reports across the screen in columns and rows – as designer, you choose what reports to show simply by pointing and clicking, selecting them from menus and so on. Again, the overall appearance is controlled by externally defined templates and stylesheets, so the entire reporting experience can be themed and branded to match a corporate intranet site.

REPORTING FOR DUTY

The reporting system is, in fact, built on Business Objects (using Crystal Reports), which is a widely used reporting tool in the mainstream corporate database and business intelligence sector. However, Business Objects is typically of limited use with survey data, because it does not understand common survey concepts such as multiple-response data, respondent bases that may differ from the number of responses to a given question, or one-off data formats for each short ad hoc survey. The breakthrough with Vovici is that the developers have created a data model and accompanying metadata to make

THE VERDICT: VOVICI COMMUNITY BUILDER AND FEEDBACK INTELLIGENCE

VOVICI COMMUNITY BUILDER AND FEEDBACK INTELLIGENCE

Web-based suite for building online research communities and custom panels, for both quantitative and qualitative research. Allows you to create fully branded respondent community portals easily, using an online point-and-click interface. Feedback Intelligence module offers sophisticated dashboard and drilldown reporting systems for individualised reporting to stakeholders across the enterprise from multiple data sources, and integrated with Business Objects.

Ease of use ★★★★★

Cross-platform compatibility ★★★★★

Value for money ★★★★★★

COST

Annual fees in US dollars: Community Builder module starts at \$24,995 for up to three named users; Enterprise Feedback Management module starts at \$24,995 plus \$1,500 for each portal user

PROS

- Standardise and co-ordinate surveys, questions and measurements across all a company's survey activities
- Requires no web programming or HTML skills for the most part
- Platform independent – Windows, Mac or Linux with any modern browser
- Integrates with Oracle CRM and a range of industry standard CRM systems

CONS

- No built-in incentive or reward management
- Can only execute surveys created in the Vovici EFM survey module
- Relatively expensive

FURTHER INFO

Vovici.com

research data comprehensible to Business Objects.

The beauty of this is that any reporting can be a composite of hard commercial data alongside softer attitudinal and intentional survey data. Questions too can be analysed across different surveys. By smashing through the old silo approach, Vovici is also working towards delivering true benchmark capabilities. The idea is that any question can be reused across any survey, and once the same question has been reused, all responses to it can be used to provide a benchmark, or by filtering that benchmark to provide sector-specific comparisons.

Enterprise Feedback Management providers like Vovici are probably

THIS IS A VAST SYSTEM WITH MASSIVE POTENTIAL, WHICH IN ITS VERY DESIGN REVEALS SOME RESEARCH-LITERATE MINDS WERE BEHIND IT. USERS I SPOKE TO REPORT THAT FUNCTIONALITY IS STABLE

more aware than most MR software suppliers that their products will appeal to both the corporate user wishing to do their own research, and the research agency – and the platform lends itself to collaborative working between client and supplier. For example, the community portal and interfaces with corporate data sources could all be under the responsibility of the corporate client, while the creation of actual surveys and the preparation and publishing of results can be contracted out to one or more research suppliers, using the same platform.

This is a vast system with massive potential, which in its very design reveals some research-literate minds were behind it. Users I spoke to report that that the community functionality is stable, reliable and relatively easy to learn, and has enabled users to standardise and systematise their research and harmonise measures across very large enterprises. Perhaps the product's greatest strength is in its ability to integrate with CRM systems and other business intelligence sources, making research more relevant and mainstream within the corporate enterprise.