

Many voices in one place

Research - specifically the process of collecting and analyzing feedback - has undergone a rapid and dramatic transformation over the past several years, driven by multiple factors such as changing regulations, emerging technologies and the evolving behavior of consumers. Response rates have fallen precipitously and many traditional survey techniques have been adversely affected by a convergence of circumstances. But the emerging phenomenon of online communities may be the catalyst that creates an exciting new period of research.

While traditional survey methods fell from favor, the Internet has emerged as a convenient, cost-effective and ubiquitous platform for online research. In 2001, 10 percent of surveys were managed through the Internet. That number now exceeds 60 percent and continues to rise. There are numerous survey tools on the market, and register receipts from stores ranging from big-box retailers to coffee shops now contain Web site URLs inviting customers to take online surveys.

But broad adoption of online research has not solved many of the basic problems that researchers have faced for years. Response rates still are often very low and hard-to-reach demographics are equally reluctant to participate online. The wide adoption of online research has introduced new problems - such as poorly-designed, confusing surveys and over-surveying - which have further depressed response rates.

While many associate the term "online communities" with social networking sites, organizations are increasingly building online communities of interest consisting of key stakeholders such as customers, constituents, employees and partners. Such communities represent an opportunity for conducting meaningful, consistent and timely online research by engaging community

members in deliberate, regular feedback. Best of all, these online communities represent a perpetual, standing focus group of the people your organization needs to hear from the most.

The best way to leverage these communities is to build respondent panels that align with the charter of the community and the research the organization wishes to perform. Based on these factors, organizations can opt to build broad panels and use profiles to do more targeted research, or build multiple panels that represent specific areas of interest. Panel members are asked to double opt-in to ensure they have a clear understanding that they will be asked to participate in feedback activities. The result is a statistically reliable sample of the much larger stakeholder



By Dean Wiltse

Using communities for online research

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population. Specific demographic and interest sets can be recruited as necessary, and careful management of survey frequency should eliminate survey fatigue and eliminate dropouts.

Developing respondent panels from communities of interest also helps these communities grow and flourish by building advocacy. One important element needed for a feedback-oriented online community - as opposed to social network online communities - to thrive is the shared sense of presence and influence. This is achieved when the community understands the collective impact they have on shaping the direction of the company. When community members see real evidence that the community has influence, it deepens their commitment to the feedback process and encourages involvement, while building advocacy for the company.

Rapid insight

The advantages of building feedback-oriented online communities are many:

Agility. Once an online community is established, companies can engage these standing respondent panels in real time to obtain rapid insight on critical issues. Results can be seen in 24 to 48 hours instead of days or weeks. This speed is crucial to creating the competitive advantage, when faced with short project lead times, to react to rapidly evolving market conditions and to shorten product development cycles.

Consistency and continuity. The advantage of building a feedback-oriented online community is that the organization can gather regular and consistent feedback. This keeps the organization current with the thoughts and concerns of the community and lets it spot trends and changes in attitude that drive different purchasing behavior. By analyzing data from panels over time, you can more easily see these important shifts in sentiment before behavior change has happened - in time to be able to capitalize on that opportunity. While point-in-time surveys are valuable, regular feedback across a particular life cycle provide a whole new depth of insights.

Cost-effectiveness. Harnessing feedback-oriented online communi-

ties is cost-effective because once the initial start-up process is complete the cost associated with each incremental survey is low, compared to fielding periodic primary research, which must repeat sampling, recruiting and incenting to yield valid feedback.

Quantitative and qualitative. Online communities of this type also let companies execute both qualitative and quantitative research. Unlike traditional one-touch surveys that collect normalized quantitative data alongside open-ended verbatim responses, online communities can go far beyond. Organizations can exploit the collaborative functions commonly found in communities such as forums, blogs and wikis to listen to the natural dialogue of customers interacting with other customers.

So are there disadvantages? There is debate in the research industry that online panels may introduce bias through the recruitment process and therefore are not representative of the broader population. There also is a concern that the profile process eliminates true anonymity and therefore raises potential doubt over the honesty of the responses. These are certainly valid concerns, but even in the face of such concerns the benefits of online communities make them a worthwhile form of research.

Setting expectations

Successfully engaging an online community, promoting participation and reducing attrition starts with the proper setting of expectations with the panelists, which is critical to creating an open, long-term dialogue. The first step occurs during recruitment, where the benefits of participating in the online community and "required" investment of time associated with participation must be clearly stated to the prospect. In return, the candidate should understand that policies have been created to protect the time they do spend providing feedback. Once expectations are set, the prospect can become part of the feedback-oriented online community by actively electing to participate. To ensure the candidate fully understands what they are agreeing to, a double opt-in process is recommended.

Once a respondent opts in, the

next step is to build deep profiles of demographics, needs, attitudes, behaviors and - if available - past purchase or employment history. The profiling process is an essential element that benefits both the organization and the panelist. For the organization, the profile process allows the conducting of targeted research and provides critical contextual data. For the panelist, the profiles represent a long-term benefit of saving them time: they will not be asked to participate in surveys for which they are not a demographic fit and would therefore be eventually disqualified and are saved from having to re-enter demographic data every time they take a survey. This show of respect for each individual's time is key to reducing attrition and encouraging participation.

After the respondent is engaged and profiled, steps should be taken to provide visibility into the feedback process. Studies have shown that 50 percent of respondents feel properly incented to participate in surveys in exchange for being able to view the results. A user interface that shows a summary of each member's completed surveys, along with the aggregate results of all members that completed each, provides a view into the process - and a form of incentive for participation, just like online polls. If incentives are used to drive participation, a respondent also should be able to view their earned incentives and consume them as appropriate from the same portal.

At this point the research process can begin in earnest. To engage the community successfully, it is imperative that care be taken to write surveys that are concise, well-constructed and use advanced functionality to enhance the respondent experience. It also is important to remember that a benefit of community panels is that the survey process is ongoing - there is no need to extract everything the panelists know in one survey. Each survey should focus on a specific theme with a specific set of information to be gathered. A series of short, well-designed surveys will prove to be far more successful than fewer, longer surveys. And as with all research, best practices should be applied to ensure that questions are well-constructed

and potential answers are free of confusion, bias and ambiguity.

Many truths

Performing research using feedback-oriented online communities will provide many truths in the form of real information and insights. Benefits are realized when these discovered truths are not simply recognized but are put into action and made available to the people and systems that can impact important business indicators such as customer satisfaction and loyalty.

On the people side of the equation, the information gained through the research process must become a reusable asset that is shared across the organization. This means that executives should have easy access to results, with the information put into insight-revealing report formats. Knowledge workers should be made aware of the surveys being done and the available results so they can apply the information to their specific

work. Companies that take a deliberate and structured approach to survey initiatives can compare and merge information across the enterprise as a result of the consistency of the applied research methodology.

Taking action

Keeping communities engaged and turnover low requires a continuous process of presenting new ways of demonstrating to the community that their voice is not only heard but that the organization is also taking action based on their feedback. This truly reinforces the sense of influence and ensures that the community members know their time providing feedback is time well spent. Organizations need to take this into consideration when making business decisions and not miss the chance to tell the community that their feedback helped drive and shape such decisions. Nurture the dialogue between the organization and the communities and make

information gained from the research process available to the communities. A community with a shared sense of influence will remain engaged in the feedback process and the feeling that the community voice is heard will incent new people to participate.

Important component

As online research gains prominence, online communities are emerging as an important component, representing a source of feedback from customers, employees, partners and other stakeholders. Such feedback-oriented online communities can provide organizations deliberate, consistent and regular feedback that can have a dramatic effect on business decisions. Best of all, these online communities represent a perpetual, standing focus group of your stakeholders - making the feedback your business demands immediate and extremely cost-effective compared to the traditional method of sourcing primary research. | Q