

My cell phone, my life

Today's youth population, the so-called Net Generation born between 1980 and 1996, is undoubtedly of great interest to the consumer electronics industry. They are the first generation to grow up in the digital world, with the proliferation of the Internet and the introduction of such consumer technologies as wireless phones and DVDs.

Since this population segment represents the first tech-savvy generation to enter the consumer buying population it is of great interest to companies involved in the consumer technologies industries. In particular, the Consumer Electronics Association

(CEA), a trade association promoting growth in the consumer technology industry, is very interested in gaining insight into the Net Generation. Among CEA's unanswered questions surrounding this generational group are their attitudes, behaviors and interests with regard to wireless phones.

Consumer Electronics Association uses online qualitative to get the 411 on kids and their phones

Editor's note: Tara Hutton is senior research analyst for the Consumer Electronics Association, Arlington, Va. She can be reached at thutton@ce.org.



In the spring of 2005 CEA's market research department set out to answer those questions by designing a study of the youth population with the following research objectives:

- Understand usage behaviors among young wireless users, including time devoted to wireless activities, types of activities, and environment (i.e., location and social circumstance).
- Explore the attitudes, behaviors and desires around various phone features such as text messaging, Web access, mobile instant messaging, photos, or other features.
- Define the attitudes, behaviors and desires around wireless phone personalization such as skins, ring tones and custom personalizations (i.e., glitter).
- Develop insight into behaviors and preferences regarding trans-

porting wireless phones.

How do phones fit?

Instead of using traditional research methodologies such as surveys or focus groups to meet its research objectives, CEA wanted to find a methodology that could engage geographically dispersed youth participants over the course of a week and also provide a rich qualitative picture of how wireless phones fit into their day-to-day lives. For the study, CEA partnered with San Francisco-based KDA Research, which has developed an in-depth qualitative online research tool called KDA Revelation that enables researchers to collect and organize in-depth interviews, group discussions and contextual research data via blogs, bulletin boards, and real-time chats.

CEA decided to use this new

methodology rather than any other quantitative or qualitative research methodology for several reasons: the online research medium appeals to tech-savvy youth; it collects both text and image data; and it allows for a deep view into the lives of today's young wireless users by interacting with them for an extended period of time.

A total of 36 youths between the ages of 10 and 19 who owned wireless phones were invited to record their phone usage and related experiences over the course of seven days (May 18 to May 25, 2005) in online journals (blogs) that were set up specifically for them. The study's participants consisted of both girls and boys across the U.S., from a mix of urban, suburban and rural environments, and from a mix of household income levels. In addition to recording



their daily phone usage – which included the type of phone activities they were engaging in (voice calls, text messaging, game playing, etc.); the duration of those activities; who they were interacting with; where those activities took place and the total minutes used – they were also asked about phone personalization, transportation and accessories.

Additionally, the project required participants to spend one day without the use of their wireless phone. Three “cheats” were permitted during the “no phone day” and at the end of the day participants were asked to share their feelings and impressions, as well as how their cheats were used.

Great appeal

The methodology and subject matter of the study seemed to have great appeal to the respondents. Throughout the seven days of the project, they enthusiastically reported on their own personal usage, attitudes and behaviors and about what their peers were doing as well. They seemed very excited to be the “voice” of their peers and to be able to participate in a research project centered on how wireless phones were impacting their lives. The fact that they were contributing via an online tool certainly added to their excitement over the project. Many participants were verbose and creative in their postings. One participant in particular showed his creativity by putting his thoughts about the “no phone day” into a poem:

*Silence may be golden
yet - I am beholden
to my phone.*

*No text
What a mess
I'm all alone, missing my phone.*

No cheats - can't compete.

*No ring tone
I long
to hear the Jedi voice
I will rejoice!*

*I can't wait
to communicate
Like Star Wars without the Jedi
I rely and stand by my phone
All alone*

*Another day, will come my way...
My phone,
is kind.
On Wednesday ALL mine!*

From both a client and researcher's perspective, participant excitement is a good sign since it often leads to greater participation and, more importantly, truthful data. If a participant is excited about their participation in a project they will want it to be successful and contribute to the best of their ability.

In this online methodology, the data collected is not limited to text input. Over the course of the project, participants could and did post photos to support the text they entered into their blogs, which really added value to the project. Participants posted pictures of their phones and how they were personalized by glitter, stickers, face plates, etc.; the social situations in which they used their phones (e.g., one participant took a photo of him and his father fishing and others took pictures of their friends) and the accessories they used such as phone chargers and protective cases. As the saying goes, “A picture is worth a thousand words.”

Clear view

Another valuable aspect of using this new methodology is that it gave the CEA a clear view of youths' lives. Wireless phones are cemented into the day-to-day activities of many young people, and in the course of reporting their wireless phone habits throughout

the week, participants also revealed what was happening in their lives. In addition to the everyday school, work and family activities, their journaling also chronicled social activities with friends and significant others, special school events such as final exams, graduations, and even college acceptance letters for some older participants. Even private emotional events were noted, such as a funeral and a family health emergency which brought one participant to the hospital. This is information that cannot be unobtrusively gained through other research methodologies.

Too much is a good thing

Overall, the project proved extremely successful. It met CEA's research objectives and exceeded the CEA market research department's expectations of the methodology. “This study is an invaluable directional guide for youth wireless phone behaviors,” says Joseph Bates, CEA's director of research. “Through [this methodology], we were able to find that wireless phones are the center of life for many teens today, providing a sense of security and freedom, as well as entertainment and a social resource.”

The core challenge with using an in-depth qualitative online research methodology is the immense amount of data gathered. CEA's youth phone project involved 36 participants over a period of seven days and it was difficult to absorb the 679 specific wireless phone uses reported by the participants. However, for a market researcher, if there ever is a good problem to have it is having too much data. The key to overcoming this challenge is having an analysis plan and knowing from the start of the project how you will organize the data as it comes streaming in. | Q