

# Online in-depth proves its promise

There is a point in the evolution of a field when a critical mass of new possibilities is reached and the field makes a big leap forward. We watched it happen with the Internet. After decades of advances in networking and information retrieval technology, the early '90s saw a flurry of activity, highlighted by the creation of the graphical browser and the World Wide Web. Soon most companies had a page on the Web, but it was only a static page - essentially an online brochure. The tipping point came when other technologies such as databases were linked to the Web. All of a sudden a company Web page went from being an online brochure to being a full-fledged storefront. The era of e-commerce had begun.

Qualitative research is undergoing a similar transformation. We have a new set of electronic tools to conduct our research, such as digital cameras and online communication technologies like e-mail, bulletin boards, and more recently, blogs. With most American consumers now online, many with broadband connections<sup>1</sup> we are fast approaching a critical mass of interrelated technologies that will usher in a new era in qualitative research.

At present, online qualitative research is at a stage similar to online brochures. While we're already doing focus groups online, gathering more in-depth information online is still a new frontier.

To see how far we could push the envelope, we recently designed and executed an online in-depth qualitative research project.

Specifically, we wanted to learn:

- Could we expand the online qualitative research format beyond bulletin-board discussion and chat-based focus groups? Would participants be willing to engage for longer periods of time?
- Could we get better in-depth data by mixing methodologies?

Could we successfully use individual, group and contextual techniques within the same study?

- How deeply could we engage participants? Would they disclose emotional details? Would they enjoy the experience?

To test these ideas, we created the Parenthood Project, a research effort that sought to learn how values and lives change when people become parents. The topic is deeply personal, so we felt this would be a good test of our participants' willingness to share their emotions and viewpoints online. It also lent itself nicely to studying two



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Respondents stay active, engaged

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perspectives on the same experience of parenthood. We gathered data separately from both new moms and new dads in the same family and then compared the results.

### **Designing and executing the project**

For the Parenthood Project, we recruited four couples in each of three markets (New York, San Francisco and Houston). Each couple had children between the ages of 1 and 4. Since one of our research goals was to see whether we could gather two different perspectives on the issue from within one family, we screened for participants within a family who were able to participate separately (at different e-mail addresses). We also screened for ownership of a digital camera, because we wanted to experiment with the use of images to provide us with more context about the lives of our participants.

During phase one, each participant was given a private blog where they could create their own online journals for the project. Over the course of five days, we presented participants with a set of images and a set of questions to engage their thinking on various aspects of their lives relating to parenthood. We then asked them to share their reactions to what we presented and record their thoughts in their online journals. We also created a photo exercise in which participants took photos representing aspects of their lives before and after becoming parents and posted them in their online journals. The photo exercise added a visual window into participants' lives and thinking.

Phase two featured group discussion using a bulletin-board format with a facilitated discussion, which took place over two days immediately following the first phase. The discussion topics were fueled by our analysis of the journaling exercises from phase one.

To execute this project design, we needed an online research platform that would support private and group journaling and/or blogging, group discussions, online in-depth interviews, customizable profiles, and a customizable look and feel. We were unable to find a ready-made platform that met our specifications, so we created a platform with these features specifically for this project. As a result of this successful proof-of-concept, we are moving forward in using the platform, called KDA/Revelation, in our new online in-depth research service.

The research findings from the Parenthood Project gave us deep insight into our topic. However, since our fundamental goal was to learn about the methodology, we will focus here on those results.

### **Results of the new methodology**

After the two research phases, we conducted a post-project survey to learn about the experiences of our participants and to help us assess the success of our system and method.

By carefully designing the study and clearly communicating the study requirements to participants, we were able to keep participants engaged over the course of seven days, and the results of our post-project survey suggest that longer and even deeper engagements are realistic possibilities.

Our participants contributed an average of two hours of their time over the course of the week-long project. Several participants spent three and four hours. Keeping in mind that these were new parents, this is a substantial investment. None of the participants said they considered their investment of time to be too large. Most respondents said the amount of work required was just right, and several said they would have liked to contribute more time.

As a point of comparison with

traditional qualitative methods, consider that some research has shown the average length of speaking or air time for a focus group participant to be 10 to 12 minutes<sup>2</sup>.

We were pleased with our ability to engage our participants deeply. Participants shared intimate details of their lives regarding their relationships with their spouses, their children and other aspects of their lives as parents. All of our participants said they enjoyed the experience. Many of them said they appreciated the opportunity to reflect on the issues, and that they had learned something from the experience.

The online format was popular with our participants. In the post-project survey, our participants told us that they found it easy to use the online format (two-thirds said very easy, one-third said somewhat easy). All of them said that the study tasks were clear to them and that it was clear how to execute the tasks. The use of images worked very well, both as a technique to elicit responses and in terms of logistics. Our participants had no trouble taking digital photographs and posting them to their online journals.

Mixing individual journaling with group discussion worked well. The follow-up discussion gave us another layer of insight into the topic, and allowed us to test new hypotheses that arose during the course of the project. We learned a lot about how the views of new parents change in areas such as work and money, relationships and self-image (our pre-determined topics). But we also learned about new avenues for exploration from the content of the online journals of our participants. As an example, one of the themes that emerged from the online journals was a sense of vulnerability on the part of many new parents. Our online methodology gave us the flexibility to explore this newly surfaced issue in Phase Two.

This ability to build and test hypotheses on the fly is a significant benefit. It's widely recognized that one of the most common outcomes of research is the need for more research, yet most research budgets don't expand as quickly and easily as a client's information needs. Online in-depth allows us to build on what we learn within the course of one project. This squeezes a tremendous amount of value out of one research investment.

#### **Ways to improve**

Naturally, our pilot project showed us some ways we can improve. For example, one thing we would do differently in future projects of a similar nature would be to build in a bit more time between the journaling phase and the discussion. The

journals we're so rich in information that we had to rush the initial analysis to keep up with our project schedule. As we apply online in-depth, we expect to find additional ways to improve the process.

Online in-depth is not, of course, suitable for every project. One clear limitation is that there are some populations not yet online or not yet comfortable online. We expect this limitation to decrease over time as Internet adoption rates continue to climb.

Online in-depth offers researchers the ability to employ multiple methods, develop and test hypotheses on the fly, and stay engaged with participants over longer periods of time. The more time we as researchers can stay engaged with participants, and the

more we can integrate our inquiry into the day-to-day lives of the people we study, the better our opportunities to develop a deeper and richer understanding of customer attitudes and behaviors.

By making it easy for participants to give of their time, and cost-effective for researchers to deliver actionable insight, online in-depth provides a promising new way for researchers to learn more from participants and maximize the value of every study. | Q

#### References

<sup>1</sup> According to the most recently available Pew Internet survey ([www.pewinternet.org](http://www.pewinternet.org)), roughly 65 percent of Americans are now online. Of these, 55 percent have broadband access at work and 39 percent have broadband at home.

<sup>2</sup> Gerald Zaltman, *How Customers Think*, p. 123.