

What can Web do for you?

Use these five Web-based approaches to shrink your research timelines, costs

Did you hear the news? The world has shrunk. Actually, it's been shrinking for centuries, as new forms of transportation have made formerly-inaccessible places more, well, accessible. It goes without saying that a trip from Philadelphia to New York, let alone to New Delhi, is faster and easier today than it was just 100 years ago. What is less apparent, perhaps, is that the advent of the Internet has essentially brought all of us even closer together, as geographical distances have become less meaningful than ever before. At the same time, high-speed Internet connections, smartphones, Twitter feeds and the like are transforming the world of market research. To put it bluntly, the rules of the game have changed completely.

Imagine for a moment that your client is planning to launch a new pharmaceutical agent designed for patients with an extremely rare disease. The client would like you to interview physicians who treat it, regarding their experiences with existing therapies and their reactions to print advertising concepts. Perhaps there are 300 specialists scattered across the United States who treat this disease. Recruiting even six or seven of these physicians for in-person research at a local focus group facility would be difficult, if not impossible.

Let's imagine that your client also wants to learn about the experiences of the patients themselves. Finding patients with this disease might be feasible, but many of these patients may be too ill to leave home and come into a focus group facility.

What to do? Just because you want to talk to these hard-to-reach populations, are you out of luck? Do you need to give up all hope of having something resembling an in-person research session with your client's customers?

The answer is, emphatically, no. To quote from a certain TV show, we have the technology. The benefits of using Internet technology include:

- Cost savings: no travel expenses for moderator, client or respondent and no field agency expenses.
- Time savings: no travel time and (often) faster recruiting.
- Reliability: no delays or rescheduling due to weather.
- Versatility: no need to limit your sample to local/large-metro-area respondents.

Let's take a look at some of the

snapshot

This article outlines the pros and cons of a handful of online research techniques, from text-message-based surveys to Web-assisted phone interviews.



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	Advantages	Disadvantages
Web-Assisted Telephone Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruiting is faster and easier than with in-person research Moderator can probe participant Stimuli can be presented on secure, password-protected Web site 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participant must be at a computer, and on the phone No visual/facial communication between moderator and participant
Online Focus Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highly interactive Moderator can probe participants Stimuli can be presented on secure, password-protected Web site 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants must be at a computer, and on the phone Participants must "meet" at agreed-upon date and time
Online Bulletin Boards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants can respond when they wish to, 24/7 Private, yet somewhat interactive: others' responses are visible and dialogue is encouraged Participants can post text, audio, images, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not as interactive as a focus group session Participants must be at a computer (or other Web-accessing device) No real-time Q&A
Text-message/Twitter-based research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participant only needs a cell phone, not a computer Participant can respond from any location, as long as they have their phone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited number of characters allowed in each text message No interaction between participants No visual/facial communication between participants
Online Journaling/Blogging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants can provide data when they wish, 24/7 Participants can post text, audio, images, etc. Privacy is provided to each participant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Requires additional analysis time No interaction between participants No Q&A component

research methodologies that are now available in our brave new cyber-world, many of which may be suitable for your research needs. In this article, we'll examine five methodologies in particular: Web-assisted telephone interviews; online focus groups; online bulletin boards; text-message/Twitter-based research; online journaling/blogging. (The accompanying chart collects some of the pros and cons of these five approaches.)

Web-assisted telephone interviews

One of the first research techniques to exploit the power of the Internet, the Web-assisted phone interview allows researchers to conduct one-on-one in-depth phone interviews (TDIs) with respondents around the country and to display stimuli to each of the participants. Via the Internet, you can show visual concepts, positioning statements, magazine advertisements and other materials to respondents who are thousands of miles away. With the appropriate platform, moreover, the interviewer can control the duration of exposure to each stimulus.

Most software platforms used for this purpose have built-in safeguards to prevent participants from downloading or printing the stimuli that are posted, thereby minimizing security/confidentiality concerns.

There are essentially two types of platforms that are used to assist in phone interviews.

- A Webconferencing program that allows the moderator/interviewer

to post materials in real time onto a screen that the respondent is viewing. This type of program gives the interviewer direct control over what the respondent is looking at throughout the interview. Webconferencing programs require each participant to go to a specific Web site and log in with a username and password that has been provided by the interviewer.

- A hosting site that is specifically set up to walk the respondent through a series of stimuli and (usually) to collect simple data from them (such as ratings or rankings) as the interview progresses. The Web site programmer can later correlate the responses and provide the researcher/client with a summary of the data, along with basic statistical information.

Whichever approach is chosen, Web-assisted TDIs can offer significant advantages over the plain-vanilla phone interview. For the research project discussed earlier, for example, you could opt to interview the physicians (and patients) by telephone and obtain their reactions to advertisements that you post online.

Online focus groups

Have you ever imagined what it would be like to bring in respondents from various regions of the United States, or even the globe, into a single focus-group room? The online group is, arguably, the next best thing to being there. Thanks to Webcams and high-

speed Internet connections, you can now conduct a face-to-face focus group with respondents from the remotest corners of the country.

Rather than meeting in an actual room, online focus group participants are in a virtual room in cyberspace that is being videostreamed live over the Internet. Because all the participants are visible on the computer screen, the moderator can see their facial expressions and body language; the participants can see the moderator as well. The client can watch the focus group on their computer screen, just as if they were in the back room behind a one-way mirror. As in a traditional focus group setting, participants are informed that the client is watching but they cannot actually see the client.

This is an approach that lends itself well to situations where you have very few respondents who would qualify for the research, such as the aforementioned project with hard-to-find physician specialists. If you wish to obtain the reactions of such audiences to various materials (such as advertisements), the online focus group allows you to post the materials on the computer screen, for all the respondents to examine and react to, just as they would in an in-person focus group.

With the online focus group approach, the expense, hassle and even the carbon footprint of traveling is eliminated for the moderator, client and respondents. If you want to assemble a group of respondents from around the country (or around the world) or if you want a mix of urban, suburban and rural participants, an online focus group may be just the solution that you're looking for.

Online bulletin boards

Let's imagine that the aforementioned health condition for which your client has developed a new product is not only rare, but potentially embarrassing for patients. Your client is interested in understanding the day-to-day experiences of these patients as they use the product over the course of a week. Because it's a sensitive topic, online focus groups may not be the best solution, as participants might find it awkward to

candidly share their experiences with others, even if those others are suffering from the same disorder.

Online bulletin boards may be a better solution. By hiding faces and keeping responses anonymous, online bulletin boards provide a means by which participants can openly share their experiences without feeling like others are watching. Despite the anonymity, the research process is interactive: participants see the feedback that others have provided and then react to and comment on this feedback themselves. These conversations are available for you and your client to view at any time.

The online bulletin board methodology has other advantages as well. Instead of a one-time session, feedback is collected from respondents over time: participants in online bulletin boards typically report their thoughts and experiences on multiple occasions over the course of a week rather than at a single point in time. Respondents can use other media besides the printed word to express themselves; for example, they can post audio recordings, photographs and even video files to the bulletin board.

Recruiting participants for online bulletin boards is much easier than recruiting for in-person research: as with online focus groups, anyone, anywhere can participate in a given online bulletin board research project if they 1) meet the recruiting criteria and 2) have regular access to the Internet. Additionally, a larger number of participants can interact than is practical in a focus group setting; indeed, 30 participants is not uncommon for this type of project.

Text-message/Twitter-based research

The research community, ever alert to new and different ways to obtain information from target audiences, has recognized that Twitter and other forms of text messaging have research potential. One advantage to these activities, from a research perspective, is that the respondent does not have to be at a computer to engage in them; instead, they simply have to have a cell phone with them.

A typical text-message-based research platform allows researchers to send out text-message questions to participants at specific times of the day, over the course of several days or even weeks. A soft-drink company, for example, might text participants at meal-times to find out what beverage they are consuming with their meal, how much (or not) they are enjoying it and what their plans are for their beverage choice later that day. Respondents can text their answers back immediately, thereby providing an experiential, real-time response that is arguably more accurate than one provided after the event (e.g., the meal or the trip to the grocery store or the television program) has concluded.

Questions can be qualitative (i.e., "How do you feel about the product selection in aisle four?") or quantitative (i.e., "On a 1-7 scale, how would you rate the flavor of the coffee you are drinking?"). Text-message research allows the researcher to follow up with specific respondents, based upon their response to the initial text-message query. Transcripts of the questions and answers, sorted by question and also by respondent, are automatically generated for the researcher and the client.

One attractive aspect of text-based research is that a large sample of respondents can be invited to participate; often, these studies involve 50 or more participants. Because the cell phone has become so ubiquitous, people from virtually all walks of life usually own the technology necessary to participate.

Online journaling/blogging

Humans are funny creatures. Although we may shut the shades to keep our daily activities hidden from our next-door neighbor, many of us also are increasingly sharing our daily lives, online, with the rest of the world and often in excruciating detail. Blogging has become a popular activity among young and (to a lesser extent) old. It seems that the impulse to reveal can be as strong as the impulse to conceal.

Because blogging can provide an up-close, unvarnished account of people's thoughts and day-to-day lives, many researchers are now incorporating blogging into their research armamentarium. Participants in blog-research projects are often given assignments or topics to write about. These assignments may be provided online on the project home page. Once a blog assignment is completed, a transcript is sent to the researcher/client. Depending upon the nature of the research, blog-research projects can be in-field for as little as a week or for several months or more.

As an example, an automobile company may loan selected individuals a car to test drive for a week and have them provide online written descriptions of their experiences each time they drive it. Participants can include photos, video clips and other media to supplement their written accounts. Unlike typical online blogs, however, the research blogs are semi-private, accessible only to the researcher and the client.

As already mentioned, blogging and other online research methodologies enable the recruitment of participants who live in remote regions of the country and/or who meet very specific criteria for participation. Blog research is also relatively inexpensive; a typical project may involve over 100 participants who are paid a relatively modest sum to participate. Because of the relatively free-form nature of this research, individuals recruited for these studies usually report that they enjoyed participating. (Of course, the analysis of this data is often more complex and time-consuming.)

Many new vistas

Regardless of which methodology is utilized, today's Internet technology opens up many new vistas for the market researcher. By exploiting the Internet's ubiquity, researchers can provide more efficient and economical solutions to their clients, without necessarily sacrificing the versatility and richness of in-person research. | Q