



Focus groups without walls - or borders

With the Internet, the world is at our fingertips - literally. With the click of a button, international communication, and thus international research, is a reality. Imagine reaching across cultures and borders to tap into a wealth of business-to-business clients or consumers. Imagine doing it in real time. Imagine doing it at a reasonable price.

Online focus groups need not be limited to the Ireland. International online focus groups are a natural extension of online research, with several key benefits, most notably, a substantial cost savings. In addition, Internet technology levels the field and the price for participating countries, allowing the opportunity to gain insights from countries and regions that are normally not pursued in traditional focus group situations.

For example, research can involve countries like Bulgaria and Portugal in addition to oft-researched nations like Germany, France and UK. In addition to being cost-effective, other key benefits of international online focus groups include availability of immediate transcripts and a tightening of the entire research process - results are seen faster.

While online focus groups may not be suitable for all international research, it may be an attractive and viable alternative in certain situations.

Online Focus Group Considerations

There are several factors to consider when deciding to conduct online focus groups locally and internationally.



- The target audience must be represented in an online environment.
- Similar to traditional online focus groups, it is important to consider the research objective and whether it is straightforward enough to translate online. In other words, the more creative, “out of the box” focus groups are still best conducted in person.
- Online penetration continues to be sporadic in many foreign countries. Business-to-business applications offer the best representation in most countries. International consumer online focus groups need to be considered carefully, based on in-country internet penetration.
- International online focus groups seem to work best for telecoms, technology and other ‘high tech’ businesses because most respondents speak one common language - English. Common communication remains an important qualification for these groups, whether that be English or another language.
- Research involving international Web site feedback or improvement can be particularly applicable for both businesses and consumers. Online focus groups can provide an environment where participants can review the current site or react to new sites, all while providing immediate feedback to the researcher.

For example, recent international online focus groups were conducted among Telecom providers. The study was modeled after similar American online research and was very successful due in part to the research objectives and target audience meeting the necessary qualifications.

Telecom providers around the globe commonly speak and communicate in English, thus providing a common language.



Additionally, the online medium was not only representative of the 'high tech' population, but also offered a natural environment for them to articulate, interact and provide insights into their experiences and opinions.

Key considerations

Once you decide to boldly go into the arena of international online focus groups, keep in mind several key considerations.

- To conduct an efficient group, the participants need proper Internet access and their computers must meet certain specifications for bandwidth and speed of connections. It is best to address this during the participant screening process.
- If conducting the group in English, don't take for granted that every participant knows English or will understand certain language patterns, although the official language of computer and IT specialists is most commonly English. Be sure to craft questions carefully to ensure comprehension and be aware of slang terms and heavy industry jargon or acronyms.
- It is possible and easy to conduct groups in other languages. The focus group would just be limited to one language. For example, groups can be conducted in French, limiting participants to a French-speaking moderator and French-speaking respondents.
- Do some homework! Be wary of cultural differences to avoid potential misunderstandings and misinterpretations of data.



For example, Japan remains a country that communicates very formally. Simply recruiting participants through uninvited e-mails (regardless of your companies relationship with them) may prove fruitless with e-mails going unanswered. Instead, potential participants might prefer a phone call introducing the concept, followed by an informational e-mail.

- Choose appropriate incentives for participants. This can be difficult in an international setting because some cultures are affronted by monetary payment. Incentives that have worked well in the past include Amazon.com gift certificates (Amazon.com offers a European version of its gift certificates). The incentives should be discussed during recruiting and the participants should be offered a choice of incentives.
- It is difficult to choose convenient times because of the various time zones, especially if the Asia-Pacific regions are included. Evening times still tend to work the best.
- There is a concern about the quality of information with this new application of online research. However, initial groups conducted by our firm yielded lengthy transcripts, consistent with American focus group transcripts.
- Exercise caution when conducting international online focus groups to ensure the customer base is represented in an online environment. Again, technology and computer industries have the deepest online penetration internationally.
- Many of the business sectors in different countries are quickly embracing the Internet and e-mail communication.



With English being the international language of business, more areas should be capable of communicating freely.

Save time and money

Online focus groups can dramatically reduce research timelines and costs. High airline prices and hotel costs are erased. Time spent traveling is eliminated, shortening the research timeline. Transcripts can be provided almost instantaneously which provide a quick review of the groups to the entire research team as opposed to videotapes or transcripts from in-person groups which may take days or weeks to arrive. Transcripts also can aid the moderator in producing reports in a quicker timeframe while still offering plenty of verbatim examples for reference.

International online focus groups, if done correctly, can produce valuable data for business-to-business and selected consumer research projects. At the same time it can provide a quick link to international customers often overlooked due to high research costs.