



Beyond the Focus Group:

Why Online Video-Based Qualitative Research Raises the Bar on Consumer Insights
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Imagine telling a 13-year-old that she has to find someone to take her to Borders so she can purchase the just-released album by her favorite boy band. She'd likely roll her eyes and pronounce, "WHATEVER," as she typed a few things into her laptop and within moments accessed the songs, including cover art, downloaded via the Internet.

Or, perhaps you tell a 25-year-old collector of video-game memorabilia that he has to scour weekend flea markets and the like to find old Nintendo game cartridges for his prized collection. He'd shrug you off, do a quick search on an online auction site, and find exactly what he was looking for in a matter of seconds. No driving or in-person searching involved.

Examples like this, of course, could go on for pages. Thanks to the power of the Internet, the way we live and work has changed drastically. Virtually every segment of our personal and business lives has been transformed. Regardless of how you feel about all the changes technology has brought, a few things are certain: The Internet allows for lightning-fast speeds, near-instant gratification, efficiencies once only dreamed of, reduced costs, and super-streamlined processes and activities.

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Like most industry segments, qualitative market research and its traditional focus group approach have not gone untouched in this Age of the Internet. Businesses and researchers have taken focus groups to the web in the form of blogs, communities, social forums and message boards. These outlets have streamlined the process of collecting insights and also made it more affordable.

But one has to ask: Are these web-based alternatives to focus groups perfect substitutes for the in-person variety? What happens when you lose the visual aspect of a candid, stream-of-consciousness response, body language and interpersonal connectivity? How much are you missing when you don't see those eye rolls, shrugs, or even tears?

For purely quantitative research, text-based applications can produce speedy and useful data. For qualitative research, however, they aren't going to stack up in the long run. The problem? Thoughts and opinions tapped out on a keyboard will never result in the kind of face-to-face, personal exchange researchers desire and hope to get from in-person focus groups – no matter how many emoticons are used. ;-)

The expressions, the emotions, the personal connections, the stream-of-consciousness thoughts – these are all critical for good, worthwhile qualitative research. These candid, face-to-face, truthful experiences are the core of the connections between brands and their consumers, forming the basis of great qualitative research. Unfortunately, today's online, text-based applications are inadequate for capturing this dynamic.

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Video-based online platforms, however, do capture these crucial non-verbal, emotive and candid insights. Moderator questions are sent via video to the participant, who responds with a webcam, simulating a face-to-face meeting. In fact, the platform can be set up so one participant can see and interact with other participants via video exchange. These things can't happen with only a keyboard and transcripts of conversations.

So let's take all this a step further. One can easily surmise that online qualitative is much less of a hassle than in-person focus groups, for both the researcher and the participant. Online means no travel, no cumbersome room set-up logistics or scheduling, no pizza to order, no ice-breaker exercises ... you get the idea. In addition, one can quickly conclude that online video-based research is both faster and less expensive (around 30 percent less than the cost of in-person focus groups).

However, if someone told you that online video-based qualitative research was actually better – that it produced some of the best research you have ever seen – would you believe him?

Below we examine four reasons why video-based online qualitative takes research to a whole new level. This asynchronous platform is not just an online version of a focus group: It creates unique dynamics for both the researcher and the participant that can result in remarkably deep levels of insight.

Traditional in-person focus groups can be hard on participants

ADVANTAGE #1: The Convenience Factor

Susie the Single Mom has signed up for a focus group to earn a little extra cash. The one for which she was selected pays enough to cover some of the weekly groceries, so she's happy about the prospect of participating. Plus, she's interested in the topic: children's toys.

Susie arranges to leave her 9-to-5 job a little early, so she can pick up her son at day care and drop him at home with her best friend, who's serving as babysitter. Susie quickly jumps back into the car and heads across town to an office park complex, 10 miles from her home. Fighting rush hour traffic, she's worried about her son (will her friend get him fed and in bed without any problems?); she's worried she's going to be late for the focus group (time is ticking away but the cars aren't moving); she's worried her boss is going to be miffed that she left work early. Worries in tow and a furrowed brow to prove it, Susie finally makes it to the sixth floor of Building D, irritated with this whole inconvenient process – and still worried about her son. Is the extra cash worth all this? These are her thoughts as the focus group moderator introduces himself and discusses the topics they'll cover over the next two hours.

Susie's is not an uncommon scenario. Traditional in-person focus groups can be hard on participants, as they juggle aspects of their normal lives to make room for an extra couple of hours, usually at the end of a long day. (Of course, these focus groups can be hard on the researchers and organizers as well; travel and scheduling can be a bear, especially with multi-location and international focus groups. But this is Susie's story.) Susie and others like her are at the mercy of the focus group organizers, and the locations of the sessions.

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Online video-based qualitative research, on the other hand, is participant-driven. Susie's time is respected and appreciated: She can respond to moderator questions via her webcam during a lunch break, after work from the comfort of her own home (son in tow!), or late at night after the house has quieted down. Participants respond at leisure, within the project timeline parameters, when they are relaxed, willing and ready to respond with their thoughts, attitudes and opinions in meaningful ways.

This convenience factor leads to better, richer, more thoughtful research. The participant is not feeling harried from cross-town travel or the like. She feels respected, she knows participating online is a huge timesaver, and she can concentrate on the task at hand: providing those critical, valued "behind-the-glass" insights researchers crave.

ADVANTAGE #2: The Significance of Setting

Let's take another look at the Susie Scenario.

During her in-person focus group, Susie is stuck in an unfamiliar, staid environment on the sixth floor of Building D. There are buzzing fluorescent lights, the air is set to 65 degrees (Susie's sweater forgotten), cold-cut sandwiches are presented with pride, and one entire wall is one-way glass, giving Susie the impression she has been led into a fishbowl for the research. It is in this setting that Susie and the other participants are expected to share candid, deep thoughts. Susie just wants to be back at home with her son, and she is in no frame of mind to provide insightful comments about "Print Ad A" versus "Print Ad B."

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With an online video platform, Susie can skip the cold-cut sandwiches and deliver candid, open and insightful thoughts on why as a single mom, she thinks one of the ads is actually much, much better than the others. Susie's thoughts are shared from the setting in which she'll actually interact with the print ad in People magazine, and with her son playing on the floor nearby. Through this participant-driven video-based method, the researcher gets candor that can only be gathered in this comfortable, relaxed setting – candor crucial to steer campaigns, product development or brand creation (and everything in between).

Mobile “wireless” webcams allow for even deeper beyond-the-glass consumer insights. For example, a researcher could ask a participant to take the webcam with him through his kitchen, pointing out the most-used and most-loved cooking gadgets. In a conference room, the researcher would never be able to have access to this level of depth.

ADVANTAGE #3: The Absence of Peer Pressure

Susie walks into the office park conference room and is immediately nervous. She's never been one for public speaking. (And, yes, the six other people in the room, including the moderator, count as “public.”) She's wondering why in the world she ever signed up for this stupid focus group.

Luckily, she doesn't have to say too much during the ice breaker, and Green Shirt Alpha Male and Brunette Type A Lady are carrying the conversation with no problem. Wow, do they have a lot to say! Susie has a few thoughts she'd like to share, because she definitely disagrees with

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the brunette, but what's the point? She's too self-conscious, and her voice would be overshadowed anyway. Maybe she could slip the moderator a note, writing down what she thinks about that last print ad?

Thankfully, online video-based qualitative allows for a situation that is utterly void of alpha males and females. With the online video platform, the participant can have a one-on-one, intimate "conversation" with the moderator. The moderator's questions are pre-recorded and delivered straight to the consumer, virtually face-to-face. Peer pressure is certainly not a factor, allowing for completely open responses from each participant. Researchers are able to gather insights from every member of the group, wallflowers included.

ADVANTAGE #4: The Height of Content Intensity

Related to the above, in-person focus groups often result in quite low content intensity. (Content intensity is defined as the amount of insightful data generated by each person in the qualitative research session.) Peer pressure, of course, is a factor here. As noted, Susie is uncomfortable speaking in front of groups of people. Also, Susie and the other participants know that there is a whole other group of people watching and listening closely, just behind that big mirror there. In the end, Susie the Single Mom managed to offer just a few quick thoughts about the toy maker's new ad campaign. Yikes! Susie's voice is important, and might have had just the type of insight the researcher is looking for.

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An online video application allows the participant to share with no limits, so the researcher gets candid, hard-hitting, stream-of-consciousness input from the consumer that is not clouded by time constraints or peer pressure. This drives particular “value per respondent” dynamics, ensuring optimal cost-efficiency for each project.

A participant using the online video platform offers nearly four (uninterrupted) minutes of feedback per question. If a moderator asks seven questions per project, that can equal around 25 to 28 minutes of direct content from each participant. Compare this type of insight to Susie’s handful of hurried, nervous thoughts. Which one would you want?

Also, because of the nature of online applications, a project can be replicated across a number of locations, and adjustments can easily and quickly be made. For example, questions can be updated or added on the fly to optimize feedback. Finally, projects can be implemented with much more frequency than in-person focus groups due to cost savings and the inherent scalability of web-based platforms.

As beneficial as it can be to bring clients and participants together in a controlled environment – AKA, the in-person focus group – the inconvenience, unnatural setting, “group think,” inequity in response input, and brevity of feedback are all challenges. The online video-based platform remediates each of these challenges, raising the bar on collecting consumer insights.

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Simply put, online video-based qualitative research combines the magic of face-to-face and behind-the-glass observation with a cutting-edge method that is not only faster and cost-effective, but that also produces better, richer, deeper consumer insights.

- Convenient for participants and researchers alike? Check.
- Conducted in a setting that ensures relaxed participants and candor? Check.
- Peer-pressure-free? Check.
- High content intensity – “golden nugget” richness from every participant? Check.

Seeing is believing.

About QualVu, Inc.

QualVu is the leading innovator of online video-based qualitative research solutions. QualVu delivers a pioneering platform to businesses, researchers and agencies that enables them to gain rich insights into the opinions, views and attitudes of their customers and other consumer and business targets. Empowering businesses to make more informed and accurate decisions, QualVu's VideoDiary solution provides a faster, more scalable, more cost-effective method to gain face-to-face, voice-of-the-consumer insights.



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