

Qualitative fieldwork in a digital world...

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The digital revolution is transforming market research in new and surprising ways but digital recruitment for qualitative research methodologies has been behind the curve, says Lisa Boughton from fieldwork agency Angelfish .

A quick glance at the hot topics setting tongues wagging on market research forums suggest that while researchers are discussing how to harness the power of big data or maximise the utility of online communities, few are talking about the benefits of using digital and social media to recruit respondents for focus groups and other qualitative research methodologies.

Robust recruitment is the bedrock of market research, so it may come as no surprise that there has been significant resistance to the use of digital technologies in recruitment. Clients are concerned about quality control, about the importance of the personal touch and about the need to comply with rules on good practice. Despite these issues the potential for digital recruitment in qualitative fieldwork has advanced in leaps and bounds over the past few years, with innovations that are starting to challenge conventional thinking that could directly improve the quality of the market research we carry out.

At Angelfish, we specialise in digital recruitment for focus groups so we know what a powerful tool it can be but we also draw on a rich heritage of conventional market research practice to create a powerful combination of the old and the new. For example, a "killer argument" for digital recruitment is the ability to reach and recruit fresh respondents "the lifeblood of good quality market research" through channels such as Google, Facebook and Twitter. Used effectively, digital recruitment can create a steady stream of new respondents that would not be financially feasible through proactive street recruitment or a print campaign. Digital channels can also be highly targeted, allowing the quick recruitment of respondents in any location or among those with an interest in a specific topic area which may be otherwise inaccessible via street or telephone recruitment.

Critics of digital recruitment rightly point out that the use of digital channels alone removes the personal touch. Without the ability to engage and motivate potential respondents, there is always the danger of a high dropout rate.

One answer is a hybrid of digital and traditional approaches. This involves using digital channels, such as pre recruited panels, social media and approaching forums to reach out to potential respondents and providing an online screener to register interest, thereby removing any recruiter bias and boosting quality. The next step is to follow up with a phone call to validate a respondent's answers and ensure accuracy, countering the danger that respondents may be more likely to provide false answers online. Crucially, this call also helps to build a personal rapport which helps to ensure levels of over-recruitment are no different to traditional methods. By contacting every respondent personally, this approach enables deeper attitudinal profiling and also adds a new level of robustness to the validation of recruited respondents.

A key benefit of digital recruitment is the ability to use the power of social media in a highly targeted way, to focus only on the target demographic. With the right in-house knowledge and infrastructure, social media can be targeted at those in a specific age range, gender, geographical location and interest level of the topic in question with excellent response rates. Facebook and Twitter have massive potential, with many posts reaching up to 20,000 eyeballs overnight and bringing in excellent response rates across all manner of topics.

Speed is often cited as a key benefit of using digital technologies, and recruitment is no different. In establishing the feasibility of a study, panels and social communities can be polled very quickly to find out vital information. In live projects too, it is possible to identify issues with a screener within as little as 24 hours, allowing time for changes to the screening criteria before it's too late to recruit new respondents. Volume here is vital too as larger screened sample sizes deliver greater confidence in the data. Where responses from street recruitment may be quite small and can be slow to materialise, digital recruitment can deliver 300+ people applying for a project overnight with a detailed analysis of screened out respondents by the following day.

Social media also has the potential to become a live recruitment and interviewing platform itself. Twitter is being used in increasingly sophisticated ways for live research. For example, in a recent project conducted by Angelfish, live complaints to businesses via Twitter were intercepted and the customer contacted at the moment of discontent to better understand their feelings and reaction to their poor customer experience. This research would not normally have been possible without access to customer service call centres to access the live complaints.

Whilst digital methods offer many advantages for successful recruitment of market research respondents, the key to success is to use a combination of old and new approaches depending on the target group required. Not everyone resides in this purely digital world and there is major scope for using technology to support existing recruitment

techniques to make them more effective. For example, using online screeners during street recruitment can increase the speed of data return. Another method is using Linked In to identify business professionals in a particular industry and then posting a good old fashioned letter to their desks, avoiding the email fatigue and social media overload that can hamper a busy professional life.

In conclusion, it's critical to build a recruitment campaign that suits the required target and gives the best chance of reaching them quickly and effectively. There is, however, no doubt that the additional use of digital recruitment methods, correctly combined with traditional techniques, hugely increases the range of available weapons in the qualitative recruiter's arsenal. In the on-going fight against reducing timelines and budgets in the fast paced world of MR, this can only be a good thing for researchers and field managers.