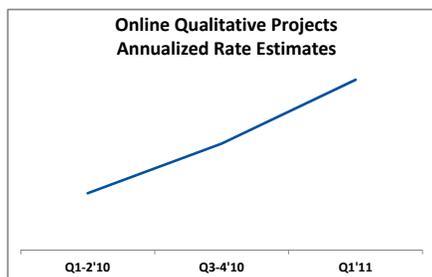# The Six Most Common Misunderstandings About Marketing Research Online Communities

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It's been all online communities all the time at C+R for the last year. We've seen a triple-digit, year-over-year rate of growth in our online qualitative business.

Online Qualitative Projects Annualized Rate Estimates

Q1-2'10	Q3-4'10	Q1'11

Scaling up our online qualitative practice has been a thrilling experience. Of course, it's wonderful to watch something grow; but it's also energizing to work with a team that's facing new challenges and constantly making new discoveries.

Along the way, we've encountered lot of misunderstandings about doing qualitative online. Sometimes we hear these from clients; sometimes we discover that our own preconceptions were wrong. You've probably heard some of the same things and developed some of the same misconceptions yourself.

#1—To enjoy the benefit of a marketing research online community, a brand has to recruit and maintain a large, ongoing community of customers.

This is the most frequent misunderstanding we've found, and it's huge. Although we manage large, permanent online communities for clients, and we have our own community, ParentSpeak, that clients can share, most of the online communities we've handled last no more than a few weeks and involve no more than about 50 people.

There is absolutely no need for a large, permanent brand community in order for a client to harvest the benefits of MROC research. We can recruit an ample community from online sources—sample panels and a customer list if there is one and it's appropriate—and do an astounding amount of research before dissolving the community a month later.

#2—Unless a brand conducts a large number of online projects annually,

research using online communities isn't cost-effective.

In fact, for clients that need to do just a few interrelated research projects, using a temporary online community for qualitative research is amazingly cost-effective. Of course, there's the elimination of travel costs—everyone has heard that one. But the fact is that over the course of two or three weeks, a client can compress up to six months of research.

This takes some planning and effort: the client research and brand teams have to keep up with the work that the community is doing and the results that are coming out, respond, develop the materials for the next stage of the project, and then feed them back into the community. Absorb the feedback, repeat as needed. It takes real dedication, but our largest, most successful online community client says they can regularly achieve the equivalent of three or more traditional projects within a single project.

#3—The principal value of an online community is the opportunity to watch and listen as your customers spontaneously interact with the sponsoring brand and with each other.

Watching and listening are great, and they can provide real insight and discovery that it's hard to imagine gaining any other way. But an online community provides the opportunity to have many two-way conversations going at once and in each one, we can probe and explore the areas we're interested in.

We find we moderate online communities as much or more than we'd moderate traditional qualitative. Listening answers questions you didn't know you had; active interviewing provides answers to questions that you need to make decisions today.

#4—People skilled in moderating focus groups will feel at home interacting with

online community members; the biggest hurdle will be getting comfortable with the technology.

As we scaled up, we drew more of our moderators and ethnographers into the online sphere. And, as we expected, they generally took readily to talking with community members, probing issues, and socializing. But even smallish, short-lived communities generate a tremendous amount of data—questions and answers, conversations, photos, videos, collages, and often short survey or poll results, to boot.

Handling all of this data requires a team of people with quantitative and qualitative skills: data managers, high-level coders and text analysts, plus questionnaire writers and survey scripters for online screeners. Community teams include people with both traditional quantitative and qualitative skill sets, but with a real interest in the complexity of qualitative data. The traditional distinctions between qualitative and quantitative research don't apply.

#5—Brand managers will be able to stay in touch with what's going on in a community by browsing through posts every day or so.

A lot goes on in a community, and anyone hoping to benefit and learn from the research needs to be prepared to spend time getting immersed in the community. One very common thing we encounter with communities and similar forms of online qualitative is observers that underestimate the amount of time and attention required to listen to and digest the community's output. This is the price communities exact for compressing months of work into weeks.

At C+R, we clear the schedules of the people we assign to monitor a community, and we go to great lengths to help clients who can't ignore their other work while the community is up. Assigning someone

to follow and report on just one or two community members is a great way to lighten the load and bring an observer team together.

We sometimes get out daily newsletters and community updates for the team, and find that we're relying more and more on journalistic practices to break through the clutter of over-scheduling and bring the community to life for the team members.

#6—A marketing research online community is a technique, just like focus groups or ethnographies. They all fit more-or-less the same mold.

A marketing research online community is a community of people, brought together online, in order to conduct a marketing research project. What we ask those people to do and participate in can vary immensely. A new school of techniques—derived ultimately from the interactive possibilities of social networking sites—is being developed to leverage these communities.

Just like traditional forms of research, communities can take many shapes and forms—they can be permanent or short-lived; they can be large or small; they can include many types of exercises or just one. To get the most out of online communities, it's essential to think thoroughly through your research and learning objectives and tailor your community to meet those goals.

By avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach, you'll end up learning more and saving money and time in the process.

Community-based research is, without a doubt, the fastest growing segment of our practice, and the buzz about it is all over the web, MR newsletters and magazines, and the conference circuit. This is an exciting time for the industry as a whole and for C+R in particular.

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