5 Moderating Tips for Online Qual

Many of us have successfully transitioned our in-person qualitative approaches to online methods. State-of-the-art platforms designed for research have made it easy to engage with respondents, evaluate stimulus, and chat with clients in a virtual "back room." It's almost like being there in-person...but not quite.

As more online focus groups have been completed, we have adjusted our moderating techniques to accommodate the virtual approach and optimize the experience for clients and respondents.

TIP 1: *Build in Tech Time*

Allow some extra "tech time" for both respondents and observers. While most leading online qualitative platform providers have capable technicians who will start setting respondents up early, there always seems to be some unexpected troubleshooting, or a late-arriving respondent who needs help getting set up. To save yourself stress, add some up-front buffer time into your discussion guide, and let clients and stakeholders know what to expect.

TIP 2: *Raising Hands*

Use some old-fashioned hand-raising to integrate respondents. Especially as an online group begins, group members may be reluctant to jump in: voices are not yet easily identifiable, and lags in connectivity can make for awkward stops and starts. To avoid calling on respondents, ask them to raise their hand to speak, at least at first. This way, everyone knows who has the floor, and moderators can identify response patterns and start calling on the group members who volunteer less frequently.

TIP 3: *Round-Robin Questions*

Add some "round robin" questions. In an in-person group, moderators can use body language, gestures, and the natural flow of conversation to control dominant personalities and draw out quieter group members. In an online group, these go-to moderator strategies are more limited. To even out the discussion, build in some questions and go around the "room" to make sure each person responds. This may feel more formal than an in-person group, but it helps to keep everyone engaged and spreads the conversational load.

TIP 4: *Use Digital Tools*

Take advantage of digital tools. Compared to in-person groups, online sessions have some distinct advantages. It's easy to show stimulus, including video and images, and each group member can watch on his/her own screen. Polling and stimulus markup tools make it easy to gather quick responses to questions and allow observers to see instant results. Build these tools into your discussion to keep respondents and stakeholders engaged.

TIP 5: *Manage Layouts*

Make use of camera views and layouts. Each webcam platform allows moderators to toggle between different layouts of faces on the screen. During introductions and while showing stimulus, respondents' faces may be in smaller thumbnails. As soon as possible, bring the screen back to full-view as often as possible. Larger images of respondents' faces make it easier to engage. And while it can be tricky, look into the camera as much as possible; this lets you make "eye contact" with respondents. It takes some practice to use peripheral vision to see who's speaking, but it's worth it to make respondents feel seen and heard.

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