

*digital*

The Journey

from Access Panels to Communities

The past decade has been marked by two revolutions in market research and both are associated with the internet. The first is the move to online research, especially to access panels. Access panels are collections of people who have volunteered to take our surveys. Access panels have allowed us to provide speedy, cost effective research, using the compelling, visual medium of the internet.

The second is the growth of social media. Consumers are no longer passive. They are empowered; they socialise online; they get instant information about brands, often over their mobile. In this new social world the key question is who owns the brand? Brand owners are now part of a real time conversation where

customers' experiences and a brand's performance are transparent for all to see. These new social media tools are moving us from access panels to increasingly socialised panels and to research based around communities, and they are one of the easiest ways for brands to converse with consumers.

Socialised panels are usually large scale. They are often built for our clients. You might think of them as proprietary access panels, but with a veneer of community that is added by using one or more online community tools such as forums, blogs, video and photo uploads, tag clouds, RSS feeds, wikis, profiles etc. But once we start to use these social media tools together we may create market research online communities (MROCs). What defines an MROC is a sense of a shared

respondent presence and purpose. The big difference reflects the new world of social networks. In the traditional access panel model, only the panel owner knows that an individual is a member of the panel. In an MROC the identity of the respondents may be known to the other respondents due to the use of user names and



through the building of reputations. This creates a shared presence in which relationships can be established between any of the participants, be they respondents, researchers, or clients, as they interact with each other.

One of the great benefits of creating an MROC is that we can allow the data to emerge. We are setting the research agenda but the respondents, clients and researchers are co-creating the flow of data, reacting to the unexpected from wherever it comes, and this can lead to unexpected and interesting insights emerging.

For example we built a short term MROC for the UK Office of Fair Trading to explore the future. In the published report the OFT wrote “It is fair to say that the exercise has exceeded all our expectations ... the consultation has been enormously valuable to us.” This was in no small part due to the creative interactions of our community members and the rich diversity of comments and suggestions that the community generated.

This is the power of research communities; they allow collaboration, co-creation, and most importantly conversation. At their heart is the reality of the brand holding open and creative conversations with its customers.



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