



Webcam or Chat Online Focus Groups?

Which One Will Work Best For You?

By Linda Stegeman

One of the most frequent questions we get asked from new moderators is whether to conduct an online focus group with webcams or with chat. Recently, one of our clients put the question to the test by conducting five online focus groups on the same topic, two with webcams and three as online chat focus groups. The groups with webcams had fewer participants (2) versus the chat online focus groups (3-4). Although the topic of the groups was the same, the online discussion guide for the chat



maintain the same level of interactivity that would be expected in a face to face environment.

What was the biggest difference between the two types of groups?

Using webcams added another dimension to the project in that we were able to “connect” with respondents on a personal level by seeing them and hearing their voices (and vice versa). Also, since respondents don’t need to type their answers, we get fuller, more spontaneous reactions. At the same time, webcam groups can be more challenging to manage due to technical issues (such as Internet connection speed, audio and video issues) and/or moderating issues (it can get a bit complicated when you have several respondents talking at the same time).

Author’s note: Mindshare recruited respondent’s with working webcams,

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group was much more detailed with each question included versus the webcam groups, where the questions were asked verbally. Vera Simplicio, Business Planner with Mindshare chatted with Linda Stegeman, President of Artafact Online Focus Groups about her experience with both types of groups.

Why did you conduct these groups online?

The project objectives were to gain a better understanding of social network usage in the UK. One of the key reasons we used this method was the fact that it allowed us to hold the discussion in the same “environment” as social networks themselves. Also, using online groups allowed us to recruit respondents from a range of regions across the UK, which is logistically much more difficult (and costly) than traditional face to face groups. We were able to show respondents links and page examples within the discussion forum, allowing us to

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but still encountered issues with microphones not working, etc., requiring the moderator to be flexible in allowing the group to go on with some respondents speaking and others typing their responses in the chat window.

Were there any differences in the findings between the two types of groups?

There was no difference in the findings between the two different types of groups. The webcam respondents had similar thoughts and feelings as the chat respondents. We were able to get more data from the online chat focus groups simply because the groups were larger and respondents were able to all talk at once using the chat window. The length of time to conduct each type of group varies. Webcam groups allow you to cover the same amount of material as you would be able to cover in an interview, while chat groups allow you to cover more material because of the chat format.

How do you decide which format to recommend to your clients?

For us, both traditional and webcam groups have a place in our roster of qualitative techniques. Target audiences, subject areas, budget and timeframe are just a few of the factors we take into account when deciding on the best technique.

What tips do you have for moderators new to online focus groups?

Don't be afraid to experiment. Because we've done different types of online focus groups, we are now much more comfortable explaining the differences in formats to our clients. Also, as a moderator, I find it very comfortable to be online with or without a webcam chatting with respondents about a variety of different topics. Online focus groups allow us to show respondents Web sites, videos, pictures and concept statements just as we would in a traditional face to face group. And the respondents love the format! We get very good feedback at the end of our groups about the convenience and fun of an online focus group.

Any other advice specific to webcam online focus groups?

Yes, you need to have specific equipment as a moderator such as a headset microphone and a good webcam on your computer. Also, expect the unexpected! The more technology you use in a group, the more technical issues you will have, and that can be a challenge. However, it is very interesting to meet respondents in their home environment and catch a glimpse of how they live.



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