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Virtual research exists, but how real is it?

by Margaret R. Roller

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The world has found a new way to communicate, and the burden is now on marketing researchers to understand its impact on respondent thinking.

After a painstakingly slow (by computer standards) evolution of technology the world increasingly is adopting on-line communication. While other less user-driven technologies, such as interactive television, remain relatively low on the evolutionary scale, more and more people rely on on-line communication, whether it be e-mail, the Web, or the on-line marketplace. Indeed, the Internet has become today's fastest growing communication vehicle.

This growth is not destined to be a short-lived fad. To the contrary, the fact that on-line technology and its use will continue to escalate over time is obvious in part by sales of Web browsers, the surge in capital investment in Internet-related companies, and the increasing integration of the Internet in the classroom, with AT&T's planned offer of free Net access to elementary and secondary schools in 1996 and universities' use of the Net to post course material.

It is no wonder that marketing researchers, as they strive to find increasingly efficient design solutions for their clients, are attempting to keep pace with on-line technology. These efforts have led to on-line focus groups and surveys as well as greater interest overall in research and idea generation.

On-line research provides the researcher with a solution that is sensitive to both budget and time con-

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straints. This is not trivial given that clients are rushing to keep up with tighter deadlines and squeezed budgets like never before. Probably at no other time has research been asked to do so much with fewer human and monetary resources.

However, the marketing researcher has several very large issues to address in weighing on-line designs. While on-line technology has presented sociologists with a multitude of societal issues, researchers and psychologists in particular have the specific burden of understanding the new communication process and how potential respondents think in reaction to and interaction with the electronic medium. It has been said that a new way of thinking will emerge from computer communication. If that is true, marketing researchers need to focus on how respondents think differently in this environment, and design as well as analyze their research accordingly.

Does a respondent become another self on-line? If so, who? Is the on-line focus group moderator really able to form a relationship with on-line discussant personalities? Are participants on their guard, projecting a false image that would be detected in a face-to-face group? Does cyberspace spur respondents to guard their words more carefully because they fear others are lurking, or do respondents assume anonymity and, therefore, blatantly reveal their true selves? Does the cyberenvironment hamper or stimulate respondents' thinking? Are, as some reports claim, respondents refreshed and attentive on-line, or are they drained and burdened by the process?

In other words, the marketing researcher exploring on-line designs might begin by asking, "What stream of thought are we tapping here?"

How real is the virtual respondent-researcher relationship? And what priority do we place on the respondent and the psychological implications of on-line research?" Although profound, these questions have yet to be given serious consideration. And until researchers are ready to redefine human psychology to fit the emerging high-tech design solutions, they must admit they do not understand the on-line stream of thought, personal construct, or neurotic styles of their respondents.

Without this understanding, they are left wanting clear analyses. While the man-relating-to-machine environment may be self-explanatory to the behaviorists among us, this simple stimulus-and-response assumption ignores the complex psychological world of the marketplace.

The real-world demand for fast and economical research deserves real research solutions. However, until researchers can claim knowledge of the on-line mentality, alternatives to on-line solutions should be considered. Fast, economical options are available but have been underused. These options include:

- ❑ **Developing an annual** research program and sticking to it as much as is practical.
- ❑ **Reducing the incidence** of costly ad hoc research and allowing adequate time to conduct research to reduce premium payments for the last-minute jobs.
- ❑ **Conducting smaller/mini** focus groups.
- ❑ **Reducing sample size** whenever possible.
- ❑ **Cutting down on research** services that are not being used or

appreciated fully, such as focus group transcripts that aren't read, and full reports when executive summaries are more appropriate.

❑ **Rethinking the client-supplier** relationship: for instance, asking suppliers to provide volume-discount pricing, using the supplier in a project director role.

❑ **Reevaluating the status of** research within the organization. Roller Marketing Research's 1993 white paper, "The Marketing Research Function Within Leading U.S. Telecommunications Companies," reveals that "the marketing research group is often at the mercy of higher-level management." By elevating researchers' prominence and by encouraging proactivity among research staff, organizations could benefit from more efficient, less costly design solutions.

Given the built-in bias and inherent demographic skew of on-line research—only 17% of the U.S./Canada population has direct or indirect access to the Net; two-thirds of the users are male, primarily upscale, educated professionals, according to Commerce Net/Nielsen Internet Demographics Study, 1995—the on-line research solution will have limited appeal. However, as the world's fascination and real applications increase, researchers should begin investigating now how on-line respondents think. And until viable measures are established, researchers and research users should take the opportunity to better define their priorities as well as the research function. ■

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