The Results are in: Social Media Techniques vs. Focus Groups for Qualitative Research

By Gina Woodall and Charles Colby

The social media revolution has changed the way people communicate. Many consumers and business professionals have retreated from traditional communications methods like telephone and e-mail and adopted social media to interact with their family, friends and business colleagues. This change in communications methods and style has profound implications for researchers, and many in the profession are already taking advantage of the benefits of social media for research.

**The Social Media Revolution**

Social media usage has experienced rapid growth in the past few years. In 2009, 46 percent of online American adults used a social networking site, up from eight percent in 2005, according to the Pew Internet and American Life Survey. Social media is not just for young consumers – 40 percent of online adults 30+ years old used a social networking site in 2009.

Social media sites, like Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter have changed the dynamics of communication, which explains their rise in popularity. Traditional methods of communication foster one-to-one communication, while social media allows users to share with many at once. What is the unique appeal of social media over one-on-one communication?

- **Satisfying an Impulse** – People can participate in social media whenever they are in the mood to socialize. They are not pulled into a conversation by someone else, but go to social networking sites anytime they desire interaction with others.
- **Excitement of Sharing** – People participate in social media because they want to share their experiences with others. They post status updates when they see a funny television episode or their favorite team wins a big game.
- **Craving Advice** – Users go to social media sites to get advice from members of their network who have experienced a similar situation. For example, frustrated parents ask for parenting tips, and consumers in the buying process for a new car ask advice from others who own the same vehicle.

**Sharing with Others Who Have Similar Interests** – Individuals participate in social media to interact with others who have similar interests. Migraine sufferers go to WebMD’s Health Exchange to commiserate with fellow sufferers, and Subaru owners participate in “Dear Subaru” to share experiences with their cars.

These unique aspects of social media conversations provide interesting implications for marketing researchers, especially given the decline in response rates the industry has experienced. Some researchers have explored the opportunity and found ways to incorporate the spirit of social media into their research studies.

**How Researchers Use Social Media**

Social media research comes in different forms and continually evolves, but its applications fall into three areas: data mining, online communities and social media interfaces. Our discussion is primarily about social media interfaces, but it is worthwhile to discuss the other applications.

**Data mining** takes advantage of the rich data already available in the form of posts on blogs and social networking sites. Solution providers mine this trove of social media chatter by scraping Web sites for comments and processing it with sophisticated models that look for patterns in the data. The result of data mining is sophisticated models that look for patterns in the data. The result of data mining is

**Online communities** mirror social media, but are developed specifically for research and development purposes. These communities exist in two forms: open communities that anyone online can view and participate in, and closed communities that are proprietary and allow participation on an invitation-only basis. Visitors generally cannot access a closed community without a log-in ID, while anyone can follow an open community.

Online communities are often used by companies to identify new product ideas, and are typically called “innovation communities.” A highly acclaimed example of an open innovation community is My Starbucks Idea™, which continually contributes to new ideas for the beverage chain. Any Starbucks fan can join this community and post an idea or vote on ideas offered by others, giving Starbucks an indication of how broad the appeal is. Starbucks’ own staff members are regularly involved in the site, writing blogs and posting responses to comments. The Web site also shares which ideas are being considered, in development or have arrived in stores.

Given the power of My Starbucks Idea™, why doesn’t every company have an open community to talk to its customers? While these communities can provide a wealth of information, they are expensive to develop and maintain. Some organizations are leery about having an open community because of the potential for people to broadcast negative feedback or concerns about what to do if the company cannot implement a popular idea.

**Social media interfaces** collect data through an online application that uses the elements and spirit of social media. As with online communities, research studies with social media interfaces can be used for innovation, or they can be used for any topic where qualitative data would be useful. Social media interfaces can be designed to be ongoing like an online community, but the respondents and
“Even though the spirit of social media dictates a free-flowing discussion, it is important to moderate the discussion when it is being used for research purposes. This keeps the discussion on topic and allows for probing.”

topics change rapidly. Researchers recruit respondents to participate in a discussion using a social media interface through traditional methods, such as a client email list or online forum.

When using a social media interface the discussion usually includes five to seven featured topics with lead-ins to pique respondents’ interest. Respondents are invited to post a comment on a topic, respond directly to others’ comments, and vote on comments (e.g., similar to the like/dislike function on Facebook). In the spirit of social media, it is important to always include an undefined topic on the subject, so respondents can discuss what is of interest to them personally. This also helps uncover issues and ideas not yet considered.

Even though the spirit of social media dictates a free-flowing discussion, it is important to moderate the discussion when it is being used for research purposes. This keeps the discussion on topic and allows for probing. A unique benefit of social media is that clients can choose their level of participation, either observing passively or taking a more active role.

Analyzing the data from a social media research project is similar to traditional qualitative efforts, but can be more challenging. Typically, there are more participants in a research project using a social media interface, so there is more data. Text mining software can be useful in this case. Keep in mind though that more participants lead to more confidence in the data, particularly given the ability to use polling and voting features in the interface.

Using Social Media Interfaces
Social media interfaces offer advantages not possible with traditional qualitative methods such as focus groups. A major benefit is that respondents can share their opinions when they are in the mood to talk and are thinking about your brand. The timing may be precisely when a consumer is experiencing the brand, making it top of mind. This is not much different from what happens on Facebook when a person chooses to post a status update because they are in a mood to share with others. In contrast, many methods of marketing research such as focus groups require participation at a time convenient to the researcher or their client.

As an example of the power of getting feedback NOW, Rockbridge intercepted and invited online shoppers of an apparel Web site to a forum immediately after they submitted their order. Because the experience was fresh, shoppers were able to provide many ideas that would make it easier for them to decide if an article of clothing was right for them when shopping online. The ideas were never uncovered in a host of in-person focus groups conducted across the country during the same time period.

Another advantage of using a social media interface for research is that it is enjoyable. People can interact and see others acknowledge their ideas, mirroring the changing ways consumers communicate in their daily lives. Social media interfaces are generally stimulating to a lot of people.

Other benefits and drawbacks of social media interfaces depend on whether the forum is open or closed. Open online communities, though expensive to maintain, have the advantage of helping to build a brand by demonstrating that the company listens to customers. An open community supports a process of continuing innovation, constantly providing new ideas as the market changes. Open communities are easier to recruit since members will find it online on their own. Finally, there is less need to incentivize consumers because they joined to share ideas.

Closed communities have their own unique advantages, one of the most important being a more representative sample. Because participants are not “self-selected,” they are not as likely to be extremely engaged users. The researcher controls the recruiting and determines who is invited, using incentives as a way of encouraging response. Compared to focus groups, a closed social media forum can be implemented faster and for a portion of the cost. A social media forum also provides a richness of data not possible in focus group discussions.

Despite the many benefits, research with social media interfaces has limitations. A lot of work is required to engage respondents. Our staff must continually monitor comments, add new topics and content to make the discussion interesting, and devise creative ways to incentivize continued participation. Like any online research methodology, the social media format is a virtual experience; it is not possible to observe body language or facial expressions, although there will be other cues such as “liking” comments and “LOLs.” Another issue for some projects is that some respondents will be new to social media or will not be comfortable interacting in this venue.

When to Use Social Media Interfaces for Research
Social media interfaces can be used for a range of issues, some of them particularly well-suited for this medium. The venue is ideal for product ideation, but is also well suited for conducting “deep dives” on topics during tracking studies when issues can be being explored in detail as they unfold in the numbers. Another interesting area with great potential is to use social media research interfaces to study and simulate strategies for engaging with customers as part of the social media marketing mix. Social media is a great way to engage customers any time you want to reach out to your audience and start a candid, open-ended conversation. Social media is changing the way people around the world communicate with each other. Marketing researchers need to be aware of the trend and adapt our data collection methods to take advantage of it. Social media engages and excites users, and it can do the same for the research industry if we think creatively.

Gina Woodall is senior vice president and Charles Colby is founder and president of Rockbridge Associates, Inc.