



Are you embracing the increase in consumers willing to participate in MROCs?

| By Alex Osbaldeston

As it becomes more difficult to gain detailed insight via traditional survey methods, companies are looking at new ways of reaching and engaging with market research participants. The key to this is understanding how global attitudes and behaviors are changing and using these trends to help brands develop a deeper understanding of their target consumers.

According to research by research firm GfK, there are signs that people are becoming increasingly collaborative and open to community participation. Its Consumer Life study, a global survey that tracks changes in 50 values and guiding principles that people consider most significant, suggests that values such as helpfulness, open-mindedness, creativity and knowledge have all increased in importance over the last five years. The same is true for people's sense of social responsibility – they now place a lower value on individuality. All of this points to a greater interest in, and desire for, a sense of community.

People's online behavior also tends to support the idea of a shift toward community feeling. The popularity of social media, for example, could be viewed partly as our need to feel connected and to engage with other like-minded people – many of whom we may not have met in person. At the same time people are increasingly inclined to read and contribute to community-type sites such as Wikipedia.

Another example is found in the increasing number of people who write online reviews so that others can benefit from their experiences. A Pew Internet [study](#) suggests that even in 2010, 24 percent of American adults were posting comments or online reviews about their purchases. When it comes to making purchasing decisions, a Google [study reveals](#) that 67.7 percent of online consumers consider online reviews.

Value in online engagement

There's evidence to suggest that people tend to value online engagement almost as highly as face-to-face connections. Studies have shown, for example, that the brains of Twitter users interpret tweeting as if they were directly interacting with people they cared about or had empathy for. Engaging in online communities could potentially be as rewarding as face-to-face engagement.

What does this mean for researchers? People are more inclined to participate in market research online communities (MROCs) which, along with traditional surveys, give researchers an opportunity to encourage organic feedback from consumers through forum discussions, blogs and blog comments. Monitoring peer-to-peer conversations such as these can help generate new qualitative insights.

If you're setting up an MROC, how can you capitalize on people's willingness to be part of a community and encourage greater participation? Here are five considerations:

1. Start with an annual interaction plan. Develop a detailed interaction plan, looking at least 12 months ahead. Include the key topic areas you will focus on and the types of interaction (quick poll, article comments, forum discussions, in-depth surveys, etc.). Research and incorporate themes and topics that members are already passionate about to help get them into the habit of participating.

It's essential to regularly preview and flag the topics and content that are coming up. This gives members plenty of advance notice and gets them primed to interact. Begin with quick, easy engagement types – a short poll or a blog comment – to lead people into the topic and then encourage deeper interaction using more detailed surveys or qualitative discussions.

2. Personalize notifications to drive participation around members' known interests. Instead of sending out generic calls to action to all MROC members, personalize your notifications based on consumer interest data. Polls or blogs should be targeted to those members who have already shown an interest in a specific topic or theme. You will drive faster engagement and create group momentum because members are more inclined to participate in discussions that have already attracted a high level of attention.

3. Reward highly-engaged members with greater recognition. Member points or ratings are a good way of allowing community members to show their appreciation of the most helpful or active members (or alert you to those who might be breaking community rules). Highly active members can be motivated to attain fancy titles, such as power member, that are added to their profiles. While ratings or points could be used to grant active members eligibility for special product offers or discounts from the brand, research by GfK indicates that only 11 percent of community members redeem points for merchandise in this way. It's very likely their participation is due to a desire to be publicly recognized on their profiles for their activity.

4. Gamify interaction. Gamification may be an industry buzzword but it offers another way of driving up participation. The essence of using gamification in this setting is to re-think the design of surveys or discussions to maximize the interactive and visual potential of the online environment. The aim is to drive more completions and to make interactions more enjoyable and absorbing so that members are more inclined to participate. You need to pay close attention to the user experience to ensure that gamified elements are adding value and not distracting members from the topics they're meant to be focusing on.

5. Consider member anonymity and privacy. While members may have a craving for greater personal recognition, in some instances people are more comfortable participating if they're given an option to remain anonymous. It's worth considering whether this might help drive greater participation in your MROC. Similarly, give careful thought to the data you request from community members when they initially sign up, as well as what information members will be able to see about each other. You don't want to put people off of joining and actively participating.

Market researchers need to make the most of people's greater willingness to participate and desire to feel part of a community. Regardless of this trend, careful consideration and planning needs to be given to how members can be encouraged to continually engage. It's essential for the community manager or team to constantly review the site design, topics and methodologies with the aim of maintaining high engagement levels if you want to continue to gain benefits from your community.

Editor's note: Alex Osbaldeston is client services director at information technology firm Questback, London.