



Qual Col

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The wide world of webcam research

VIDEO FOCUS GROUPS MAY NOT BE THE SILVER BULLET, BUT THERE ARE SITUATIONS WHERE THEY REALLY SHINE.

For focus groups, travel is not as much fun as it might once have been. Rising travel costs (in time and money), delays, and security concerns probably have many moderators and clients wishing for *Star Trek* transporters, those devices that James T. Kirk and the crew of the *Enterprise* used to teleport themselves to their selected destinations.

Today's transporter is the webcam, the small but functional and easily installed video capture device on many home computers. These are devices that can teleport researchers, observers, and respondents to specialized online interviewing facilities.

At least two of these transporter terminals exist: ChannelM2 (channelm2.com/, since 2004) and QualMeeting (qualmeeting.com/, since 2008). They host and support real-time virtual interviews or focus groups, using full-motion video and audio. Both QualMeeting and ChannelM2 offer rental of the virtual facility, moderator training, participant recruiting, webcam fulfillment (for participants who do not have a webcam), and incentive payment.

Both facilities use the Adobe Connect platform, which offers such features as desktop sharing, polling, chat windows, and whiteboards, where movies, text, im-

ages, or PowerPoint slides can be displayed. All of these components, including the webcam windows, are infinitely configurable and able to meet the demands of almost any project.

Projects that are particularly well-suited to webcam research will include those where one or more of the following are true.

- Users of broadband Internet constitute a suitable approximation of the participant target group, typically not an issue in North America, where there is almost 80 per cent penetration of high-speed Internet.
- The research is best conducted with a real-time design rather than using an asynchronous approach.
- The research will benefit from talking and listening, rather than writing and reading, as in chat groups.
- Incidence is low and participants are geographically dispersed so that face-to-face research is difficult without extensive travel. (Medical or other specialists, B2B researchers, sufferers of uncommon medical conditions, and users of low-incidence products are some of the likely respondents for webcam research.)
- The research will benefit from observation of facial expressions and body language. (Evaluation of commercials or storyboards, packaging research, and website usability testing are all good candidates for webcam research.)

One recent convert to webcam research is Jay Zaltzman (jay@bureauwest.com). Originally a proponent of telephone interviews and groups for real-time research, Jay feels that webcam research has finally hit its stride after overcoming some technical hurdles, and includes among its benefits an appreciable increase in participant interaction and involvement. Jay typically designs projects that combine webcam research and more traditional approaches, a bricolage that helps validate webcam research.

Proponents suggest that the webcam also fosters emerging research designs for

- reconvened groups, including panels of users reconvened quarterly to discuss changes in their product usage
- behaviour-based research on topics such as shaving, makeup application, and showering
- unattended, automatic recordings of behaviour, for example, a study of midnight snacking using a kitchen-cam
- ethnography-light projects, using wireless webcams for refrigerator tours or pantry checks.

Webcam transporters let us conduct real-time research without the hassles of physical travel. They will make it possible for us to boldly go where no researchers have gone before.

Beam us up, Scotty.

Our profession has attracted and developed, and continues to profit from, a creative class.

Pierre Bélisle is a seasoned qualitative researcher with a special interest in online qualitative. You can find more on webcam research, including videos of actual interviews, at his blog, virtual qualitative, at <http://pbelisle.blogspot.com>.