



Qual Col

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Wanted: online moderators

It seems that the current economic difficulties might just be the impetus required to increase demand for online qualitative.

Our own Cam Davis feels that the growth of online qualitative should parallel the growth of online qualitative: "With today's litany of travel challenges, I am amazed there aren't more online focus groups." And Jeff Walkowski, online qual guru and co-author of *Qualitative Research Online*, writes that "marketing research buyers are being forced to stretch their budgets, and, if they've not already done so, they are beginning to embrace online as one cost-cutting measure."

Face-to-face moderators who want to work online will need to adapt to the requirements of online research. Based on recent experience accompanying a qualitative researcher on her first online qual project, I have gathered some thoughts on how face-to-face moderators can best prepare themselves for the opportunities that will come knocking when clients ask them to bid on and execute a virtual qualitative project.

1. Invest in infrastructure. You need a decent computer and high-speed Internet access. Go ahead, do some stimulus spending! (And don't throw out the old computer: redundancy is one key to success for online qualitative.)

2. Investigate: Online qualitative has been around for some time but has tended to attract and retain only aficionados. You will be surprised at the various features that online facilities now offer, features that can open up all sorts of methodological possibilities. Suppliers such as Itracks, Channel M2, and 20/20 Research will be delighted to give you a free walkthrough or let you attend a webinar.

3. Take a course on virtual qualitative. The best-known is probably that offered by pioneers Jeff Walkowski and Casey Sweet (www.onlinemoderator.com), a one-week course offered via online facility and teleconference, covering everything from the differences between text-based and multimedia to moderating an online chat with real consumers.

4. Budget adequately when asked to quote on an online qualitative project. The savings to the client derive primarily from doing fewer sessions in different cities and from traveling virtually. But direct costs (recruiting, incentives and facilities) in the virtual world are roughly comparable to those in the real.

5. Budget adequately for your preparation time, too. Unless you have clerical staff available, you will be adding participants to the facility roster, sending out invita-

tions to them, and cutting-and-pasting the discussion guide into the facility.

6. Budget adequately for your analysis if you are conducting an online bulletin board. You will be both overjoyed and dismayed at the depth and quantity of information that participants will share with you using that methodology.

7. Consider hooking up with a more experienced online researcher who can provide a safety net from the beginning to the end of your first online qualitative project. Facilities will be happy to put you in touch with helpful sidekicks.

8. The least of your concerns is the actual moderating. You will find that your real-world moderating skills translate amazingly well to the online world, whether real-time or asynchronous.

9. If the project and your client allow it, try to include both an online and a real-world component in your project. This will allow you to validate the online experience and to contrast the different lessons from each mode.

10. Move on this now; others are already doing so. Joel Schmaltz at Itracks reports that so far in 2009 the company has seen "a 25 per cent increase in the use of its online qualitative research tool set."

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>.