Online Research Communities

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Putting the Customer at the Heart of Your Marketing Strategy

Market research has long been considered counter-cyclical; when times are tough, it makes sense to fully evaluate new initiatives prior to launch and dissect the performance of past campaigns. However, 2009's business outlook is forcing us to challenge such conventional beliefs. When talking to many clients over recent months, I've noted two core themes.

Firstly, our uncertain business world – volatile, complex and ambiguous – is characterised by cuts in discretionary activities such as research, 'thinking outside the box and inside the budget'[1] and more strategically, the concept that market research (MR) can guide organisations out of crisis.

Secondly, the explosion in social media has been forcing marketing and research professionals to figure out how to exploit the power of social media for insight advantage. How can we engage the stakeholder in meaningful, contextual dialogue? Blogs, reviews and wikis provide opinion, but we know little or nothing about the people creating such content.

As a response to these challenges, many companies are turning to online research communities for decision-making advantage; harnessing the power of communities but applying them to the research process.

The true 'end-to-end' community allows meaningful dialogue between organisation and participant via an engaging member website, participant management tool to build up member portraits and multiple dialogue channels – surveys, discussion forums and member content creation. Examples include blogs, wikis, instant chat, personal/VIP areas and member-created polls. Importantly, there should be an explicit research objective communicated to the participant.

What's in it for the brands?

Brand advocacy: identify your best or most loyal customers and get them involved in decision-making around new products, services and initiatives. Condé Nast, publisher of Vogue, Glamour and GQ – and a Toluna client – created title-specific research communities to select magazine covers, brainstorm article ideas and shortlist editorial topics. Why? To drive editorial satisfaction and brand relationship, with the ultimate goals of increasing reader retention, circulation and advertising revenue.

Co-creation research communities have been deployed by Unilever, LEGO®, Dell and Starbucks – and all tapped into the reality that consumers are much less passive since the advent of the internet and need an outlet for their ideas. By giving the respondent a seat at the decision-making table, you can build strong and long lasting relationships that may not have been possible through offline media.

Debenhams, a Toluna client, cited the following further benefits of their employee and customer panels:

• striking a balance between outsourcing complex research to agencies and focusing in-house on quick turnaround projects
• facilitating real-time dialogue between marketing and customers:
  • a high level of engagement (more than 50 per cent response rates to surveys or discussions)
  • an extremely high quality of open text responses
• empowering employees:
  • give ready-made internal advocates tangible input into decision-making – in retail, employees are often among the best customers
  • increase staff satisfaction and retention
  • provide a channel to relay customer feedback captured on the shop floor
• reacting rapidly to internal demands for information
• sense-checking ideas
• raising research's internal profile – when insight is relevant and timely, it will be used more to drive change
• profiling context – enhance discussion threads and survey responses with demographics, attitudinal and purchasing behaviours.

What's in it for the agencies?

Media planning, advertising, PR, digital and MR agencies are embracing research communities – which can be white-labelled rather than branded and built around a general sample of the population or defined segments, such as early adopters or opinion formers.

Motivations for adoption include winning new clients by supporting the pitch process and offering clients access to the community for follow-up work. The community model allows agencies to move beyond the project-by-project cycle and when times are hard, adding value and another revenue stream by providing custom research figures highly. Agencies are also finding that research communities internalise research fieldwork costs and increase margins, while allowing creativity and idea generation to flourish; the fruits of the creative process can be evaluated quickly by an external audience.

What's in it for the respondents?

We can categorise people into two groups: participants and non-participants. Until the internet empowered every individual to publish their thoughts, reviews and opinions worldwide, the former far out-weighed the latter. But this empowerment has given the community member a seat at the table alongside the brand owner and the researcher. Make sure that newfound status is respected.

• Engagement: is the topic interesting and relevant?
• Impact of participation: share results and findings from previous surveys and discussions and show changes resulting from member feedback.
• Recognition: offer socially visible rewards and recognition, such as VIP areas and member ratings; create personal areas and encourage member-to-member interaction; and provide financial incentives that are appropriate to the commitment required.

Caution Advised!

Co-creation may be desirable but don't use it to replace research expertise. Inform your community that their ideas could be used; beware anodyne solutions resulting from many voices (remember Henry Ford and his 'faster horse'); and don't take member opinions as gospel.

Consider your company culture. Do you feel comfortable sharing information with customers? Do you have the resource, expertise and senior buy-in? And bear in mind the benefits of in- vs. out-sourcing – gain more by being close to the participants.

Never forget the community members who are giving you their time, expertise and loyalty – provide appropriate social, financial or informational rewards.

Establish clear objectives for the research community beyond pure dialogue. Quantifiable objectives such as those employed by Condé Nast and Debenhams keep the bigger picture in mind.

Final Thought

Implement projects where brands and agencies listen and don't project. We are offered a huge opportunity by listening to our customers and placing them at the heart of our marketing strategy – and online panel communities offer an effective way to do this. I'll sign off with a quote from Andy Sernovitz, CEO of GasPedal and author of the damniwish.com blog:

"Companies that focus on earning love will thrive during hard times, and kick ass when good times return."

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(1) Virtual Surveys customer research 2009