Moving my three markets of in-person focus groups to a roughly one-week-long online bulletin board (OLBB) was something I knew how to do, but the difficulty of bringing my clients up to speed was quite surprising. I’m sharing these “lessons learned” to help my fellow QRCA’ers successfully navigate a similar methodological transition.

Discuss these topics with clients who are unfamiliar with online research:

1. **An in-person guide is not the same as an online bulletin board guide.** All of you who have performed OLBBs know that the discussion guides between these methodologies vary greatly – it is not as simple as allocating a focus group discussion guide over three days of online activities. For my project, the discussion guide went from three to 29 pages, because every exercise has to be spelled out with the proper introductions (ones that we may take for granted in in-person research).

2. **Online research is not as iterative as in-person research.** With my project, the client couldn’t grasp the importance of confirming the stimuli a few days before the OLBB went live (so I could program it in) and couldn’t understand the need for limited follow-up probes. They made changes to the stimuli after each day of the OLBB and expected all changes to be added to the board prior to the beginning of the next day, which meant super-late nights for me. Nor did they realize the implications of those changes on the follow-up questions; all had to be modified each time the stimuli changed. As much as I tried to coach them, their behavior remained unchanged.

3. **In-person activities do not necessarily translate to online activities.** While some activities are great in person, they just don’t work as well online – and vice-versa. For example, while online is a great medium to capture reactions to stimuli by generating heat maps, too many open-ended (follow-up) probes will tire the respondent out (and the researcher, too: you’ll need to analyze all of those open-ends!) You’ll need to get creative with the types of questions you ask and the exercises you post online. But the goal remains: keeping respondents engaged and capturing the desired insights, while building in features online that will facilitate your analysis on the back end. In my project, I planned to use the flip chart
throughout each session to keep the respondents engaged, but online, I could only include it once. This is just one example of the challenges inherent in devising new, exciting and effective ways to move an in-person discussion online.

Was it all worth it? Of course, it was! The research was a success, the client is happy and travel budgets are intact. Who knows? They may even want to do more online research in the future?!

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