Qualitative Research Goes Virtual
How to make this new technology work for your next research project

By Scott Woodward, KS&R Senior Research Manager

Focus groups and in-depth interviews (IDIs) are cornerstones of qualitative research, valued because of their ability to generate in-depth insight and rich ideas.

But both approaches have limitations. When it comes to focus groups, it's often challenging to recruit participants, particularly if the research involves:

- high-level executives (it can be difficult to gather these targeted stakeholders in a single location)

- geographically diverse participants

The time and cost of travelling to different focus group locations can also be problematic if the research budget is limited and/or there is an accelerated timeframe to complete a study.

IDIs conducted over the phone can solve some of these flexibility issues, but there are also drawbacks:

- The moderator loses the ability to read non-verbal cues such as facial expressions and body language.

- The types of activities and tools the moderator can employ are more limited. For example, it's difficult to have participants evaluate stimuli or concepts.

A new solution to these financial, timing, geographic and rapport-building constraints is the **webcam focus group**, or **webcam IDI**. Using webcam and video-conference technology, participants contribute to a "virtual" discussion led by an experienced moderator in the same way a
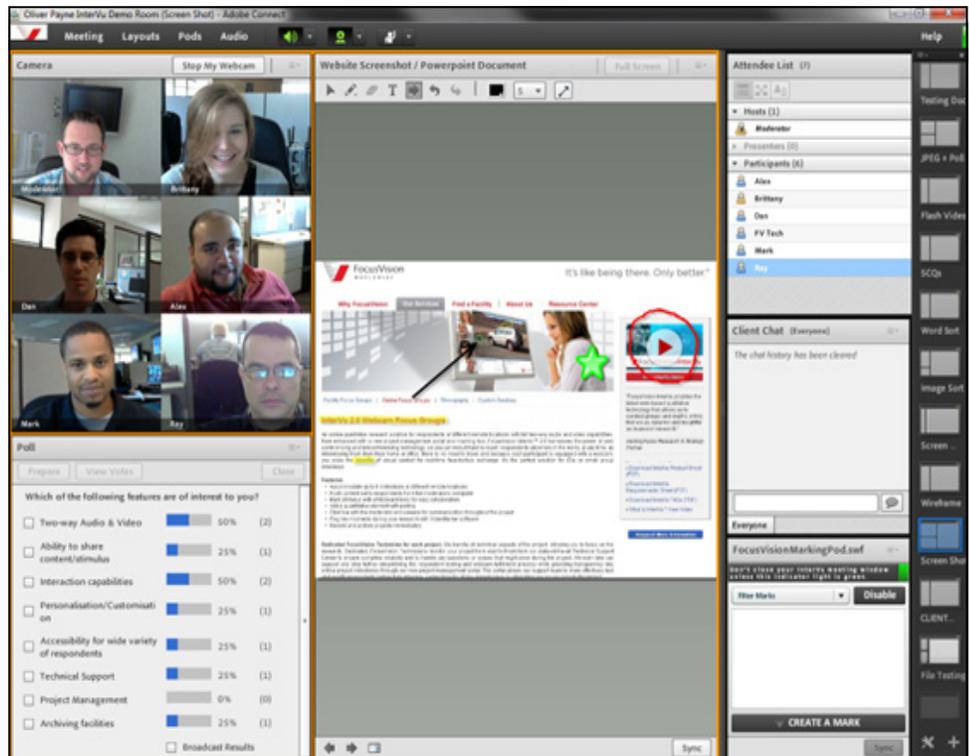
Sample screenshot from a webcam focus group, showing polling and mark-up capabilities.

traditional, in-person discussion would be carried out.

At first glance, a webcam focus group or IDI isn't too dissimilar from a video conference call. However, the major the difference is the wide variety of web-based, interactive tools that the moderator can implement, like instant polling, and having participants view, discuss or mark-up written materials during the conversation.

When to Consider Webcam Focus Groups and IDIs

Webcam focus groups and IDIs can be used for B2B or B2C research. They're

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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best when:

- **You need to open up recruiting to a broad audience**. With webcam groups, you are not restricted to recruiting within the radius of a central location. This approach enables you to reach a greater variety of respondents, including people in smaller, third-tier markets, and rural areas.

- **You have an audience that's geographically diverse or has time constraints**, such as physicians or IT decision makers. In addition to saving your participants' time, you'll also recognize significant savings in travel costs and time spent travelling between different locations.

- **You are conducting ad or concept testing**. Using the interactive tools, you get real-time responses that you can capture digitally.

- **You're evaluating website usability**. The moderator can share his/her computer screen with respondents and ask them to navigate websites. Navigation can be seen by moderator and clients and is recorded for later review during analysis.

- **You want an easy-to-use record of participant comments**. All participants in the focus groups are recorded, and the digitized videos can be referred to as often as needed.

- **You need more "lively" outputs/deliverables**. Many of our clients end up adding a whole new dimension to reports by incorporating visuals from the webcam sessions, including video clips of respondents reacting to concepts, marked-up concepts, and real-time results from polling questions.

Best Practices for Webcam Focus Groups and IDIs

If you think that virtual focus groups are an option for your research project, take a quick look at these best practices. We've found that the best virtual focus groups have many common elements:

- **Groups are limited to three to five participants**. At that level, the interaction becomes a valuable part of the process as participants interact and bounce ideas off one another. More than that, and the conversation can become difficult to control, and there's less room on the interface to show other visual stimulus.

- **Participants know each other**. This format works well for projects that call for affinity groups, where people know each other in advance, such as friends, family or business colleagues (e.g. joint decision makers).

- **Participants have a quiet place to join in**. A busy office or a home-based webcam with family in the background aren't ideal. When possible, participants should take part without distractions in a quiet environment.

- **Moderator builds a good rapport with the participants**. This can be slightly more challenging in a virtual setting versus an in-person focus group, but the better and more experienced a moderator is in engaging with the virtual participants, the better the session.

- **Guidelines are set at the outset**. Just as with in-person focus groups, moderators who set a purpose and specify respondent expectations get the best results.

- **Moderator is experienced with the technology**. In advance of the session, the moderator is well rehearsed and has queued up various layouts and exercises, taking full advantage of the technology's interactive tools.

- **Learning curves are planned for**. Even if the participants have been pre-screened for their familiarity with conferencing and online technologies, there's sometimes a learning curve during a session. Building in time to explain and show participants how to use the technology, particularly for B2C respondents, makes the group discussion or one-on-one interview flow much more smoothly.

Next time you need to conduct a focus group or IDI, think about whether using webcam technology might work. It's the closest you can get to in-person interaction, providing you with face-to-face conversations as well as the dynamics and body language you can read in a live group. The additional advantages – the cost savings, the flexibility and the interactive tools – may make the experience perfect for your next research project.

Is a webcam focus group or IDI the right technique for your company?