A critical comparison of offline focus groups, online focus groups and e-Delphi

Elisabeth Brüggen
Maastricht University
Pieter Willems
PWNEXT

The boom in online marketing research represents one of the fastest-growing segments of the research industry. Although the design and quality of online surveys has received widespread attention, little empirical research compares the effectiveness of online and offline qualitative research techniques. Therefore, this research compares offline focus groups, online focus groups and e-Delphi with respect to depth, breadth, efficiency, group dynamics, non-verbal impressions and attitudes of respondents. Results show that offline focus group results have the highest depth and breadth, and are most efficient, leading to high-quality outcomes. However, e-Delphi discussions provide very elaborate and relatively deep outcomes that give a good impression of respondents' feelings and attitudes. Results from online focus groups remain rather superficial, but experts value the spontaneous reactions and interactiveness, and consider online focus groups very efficient.

Introduction

The rapid growth of the internet has opened up new opportunities for collecting and disseminating research information worldwide. Online surveys are becoming increasingly popular and have been researched widely (e.g. Deutskens *et al.* 2004, 2006; Roster *et al.* 2004; Schillewaert & Meulemeester 2005). In contrast, little empirical research analyses online qualitative research techniques, though they offer various advantages, including lower costs, shorter project lead times, shorter field times,

Received (in revised form): 26 June 2008

DOI: 10.2501/S1470785309200608

greater access to busy professionals, and international reach (Gaiser 1997; Chase & Alvarez 2000; Scholl *et al.* 2002; Hopewell 2007; Richardson 2007). However, critics also assert that qualitative research via the internet is simply not the same as traditional, face-to-face research. The most common and important criticism argues that online methods miss essential information from non-verbal communication, and reactions between respondents and the discussion leader, which has a negative impact on the quality and depth of data (Greenbaum 1998; Buhsmer 2000). In addition, the anonymity on the internet means that researchers can never take for granted that the respondent really is who he or she claims to be (Greenbaum 1998; Forrest 1999; Silverman 2002).

The two most popular online qualitative techniques are online focus groups and email discussions. Online focus groups are interactive qualitative group discussions that bear a strong resemblance to traditional focus groups but take place on the internet. Email discussions, like online focus groups, are not bound by geographic location, which allows respondents to participate from the comfort of their own home or workplace. In addition, email discussions give respondents the freedom to participate and answer emails whenever it suits their agenda, which can be attractive especially for busy respondents. The e-Delphi method is comparable to email discussions, but the discussion leader aggregates and analyses the initial responses and returns a summary of the results to those respondents who initially reacted, thereby creating interaction between respondents.

The internet can be a suitable medium for quantitative market research (Deutskens *et al.* 2004); we posit this quality also holds for qualitative research, assuming it is used properly and with the right research questions. Therefore, this study critically compares offline focus groups, online focus groups and email discussions with respect to their depth, breadth, efficiency, group dynamics, non-verbal impressions and respondent attitudes. In addition, we add an important element to the email discussion – a feedback loop (e-Delphi) – that can strengthen this form of qualitative research.

The paper is structured as follows: We first describe in detail how online focus groups and e-Delphi discussions work, before we establish the criteria along which we compare the three different methods. Next, we present our data collection and analyses procedures, as well as a discussion of our results. We end with a useful overview of the properties of the different qualitative methods and the situations in which they can be used.

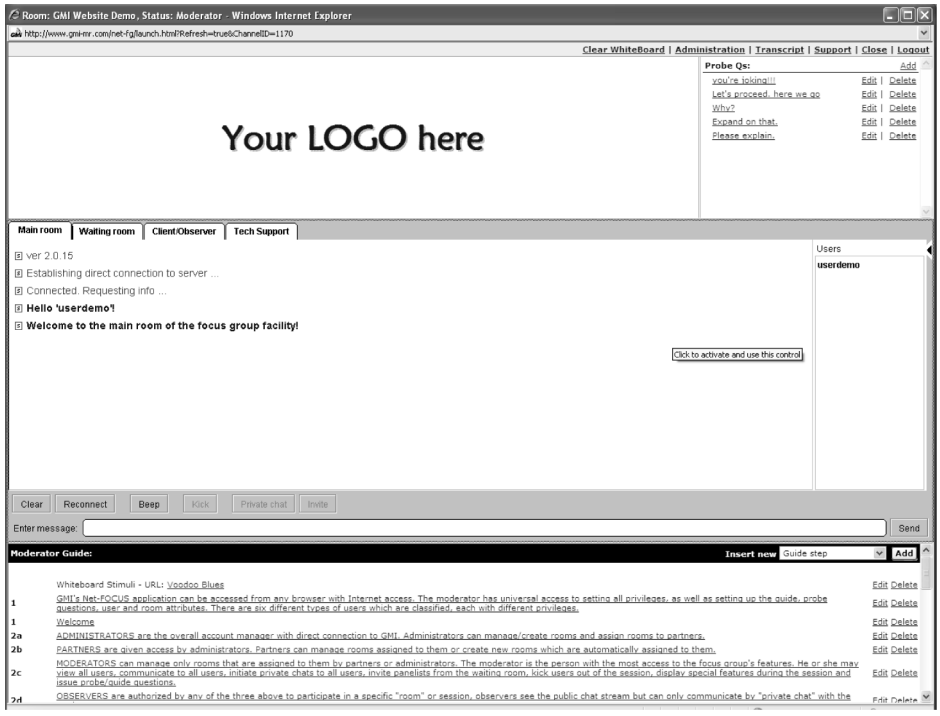
Two qualitative online research methods

Online focus groups

Discussions in an online focus group take place in a virtual discussion room, where all respondents can view and react to the comments of the moderator and their fellow participants. All respondents are online at the same time, which allows for direct interactions and a synchronous group discussion. The moderator, similar to those in traditional focus groups, plays an important role by leading discussions, asking questions, clarifying ambiguities, summarising the discussion and ensuring that all important aspects of the research question are discussed. Special online focus group software gives the researcher plenty of opportunities to guide the group discussion. Respondents do not need any special software – a computer and internet connection are sufficient. The software supports sending invitations and reminders to respondents, including the link to the site, a log-in name and a password. The software also enables the researcher to prepare a discussion guide with the most important questions – 'Why?', 'Could you explain this more thoroughly?' or 'Is everything clear?' – in advance. The discussion leader may simply click on these questions during the discussion, which reduces typing efforts significantly. Stimuli such as logos, pictures of product concepts, packaging or commercials can be uploaded in a separate window on top of the screen so that respondents can look at the stimuli and provide their comments at the same time. Furthermore, the client or other observers can follow the discussion and send direct remarks to the discussion leader. The records of the group discussions automatically get saved for subsequent analyses. Moreover, the software enables the discussion leader to talk to a respondent privately – for example, to stimulate him or her to be more active or ask someone to follow the established rules of conduct. Figure 1 shows how the screen may be divided using special online focus group software.

From email discussions to e-Delphi

An email discussion entails an asynchronous research method during which a discussion leader emails several open questions to a group of respondents. A regular email discussion consists of only one round of questions. With e-Delphi, the discussion leader aggregates and analyses the initial responses and returns a summary of the results to those respondents who initially reacted. This overview contains the central themes of the results, and the most interesting and polarising statements. Each respondent then has the



Source: http://gmi-mr.com/

Figure 1 Example of a screen in an online focus group

opportunity to react to these remarks, whether to confirm them or add nuance to them. This procedure creates a sort of (indirect) interaction, even if respondents are not online at the same time. During subsequent rounds, the discussion leader also can ask new questions derived from the results of the initial email, which provides relatively deep information about the opinions and attitudes of respondents. By adding interactions between respondents and the researcher, e-Delphi goes a step further than just qualitatively summarising the opinions of a small group of people. Stimuli can be emailed as an attachment or in the body of the email. Figure 2 shows an example of an e-Delphi discussion.

Criteria for evaluating the quality of qualitative research

The central question for this research is whether the results of online qualitative research can be considered high quality. Our general guideline posits that a research method delivers high-quality data if the researcher can provide a thorough answer to the research question at hand on the

Dear **********,

Thank you for your reactions to the first email from this email discussion on mobile phoning. You stated that you perceive a telephone to be a handy, luxurious product, but that you could also live without one. Only six other participants have the same opinion. Even if it would take some time to get used to it, life without a mobile phone would not create big structural problems.

In the last email, we also asked you about the future of mobile phones. Summarising shortly, more or less everyone expects that in 10 years, it will be possible to do almost everything with a mobile phone. Mobile phones will be smaller, more advanced with computer functions, a route planner, a colour display, and even picture phoning. The expectation is also that the use of the internet and email will spread even more due to increasing use of mobile phones.

QUESTION 1:
Assume that a lot of these developments really happen within the next 10 years. Do you expect that the role of the mobile phones in your life will change within the next years? How would it change? Do you think that you then could still live without a mobile phone?

We would appreciate if you could formulate an answer of at least 2 to 4 lines.
Your answer to question 1:

PSRT 2: Network operators
In the next section, we would like to focus on the suppliers of mobile telephony in the Netherlands. Below are pictures of logos from several suppliers (see attachment: suppliers. jpg). Please have a look at them.

[LOGOS OF COMPANIES VISIBLE HERE]

QUESTION 1:
Describe per logo your spontaneous reactions and which logo and supplier is most appealing to you.
Your spontaneous thoughts and opinions on [company name 1]:
Your spontaneous thoughts and opinions on [company name 2]:
Your spontaneous thoughts and opinions on [company name 3]:
Your spontaneous thoughts and opinions on [company name 4]:
Your spontaneous thoughts and opinions on [company name 5]:

QUESTION 2:
Finally, we are interested in who the clients of the different suppliers are. Can you describe your opinions on how the customers look that buy a mobile phone from a specific supplier? Please describe a fictitious customer for each client. Describe how the

Figure 2 Example of an e-Delphi email

customer would look, his/her age, type of work or study, family situation, type of car, hobbies, favourite sport, etc.

The description of a customer of [company name 1]:
The description of a customer of [company name 2]:
The description of a customer of [company name 3]:
The description of a customer of [company name 4]:
The description of a customer of [company name 5]:

This is the end of the second part of this email discussion. Thank you very much for your input. We are interested in your responses. It is very important for this research that we receive the responses as soon as possible, preferably before tomorrow (June 20), 1pm. On Friday, June 21, you will receive a third and last email from this email discussion.

With kind regards

XXX
Researchers [name marketing research agency]
internetdiscussion@…

Figure 2 Example of an e-Delphi email (continued)

basis of the information collected from the respondents. Thus, the crucial criteria in evaluating online qualitative research are depth, breadth, efficiency, group dynamics, non-verbal impression and respondents.

Depth

Information is deep when the moderator obtains not only shallow ideas of the answer to the research question but also the fundamental reasoning behind it (Groenland 2002). No consensus in the literature clarifies the depth of different qualitative research methods. On the one hand, online qualitative research methods may deliver less in-depth information than a traditional focus group because there is no visual contact between the respondent and discussion leader, so non-verbal information is missing (Scholl *et al.* 2002). On the other hand, online communication is more anonymous, which may stimulate respondents to be more outspoken and honest in their answers. This characteristic can be very beneficial for research into sensitive topics that often suffer from social desirability biases (Mehta & Sivida 1995; Montoya-Weiss *et al.* 1998; Chase & Alvarez 2000).

Breadth

Breadth refers to the degree to which all aspects of the research question have been addressed (Groenland 2002). Because the optimal time frame of online and offline methods differs[1] and written communication takes more time than verbal communication, online focus groups likely cover fewer aspects of the research question than their offline equivalents (Scholl *et al.* 2002). However, Groenland (2002) indicates that information from an online asynchronous group discussion is broader than information from online and offline synchronous group discussions. In contrast, Poynter and Quigley (2001) state that asynchronous group discussions provide deep information but at the expense of breadth. Thus, existing literature disagrees about the breadth of different qualitative research methods, which offers a reason to examine breadth more closely in this study.

Efficiency

Information is efficient if the obtained research data are relevant, the remarks and reactions really contribute to achieving the research objective, and hardly any information is unnecessary (Groenland 2002). The discussion leader thus has a crucial role, because he or she can control the flow of the discussion and interfere if respondents provide irrelevant information. Thus, we expect that synchronous group discussions, such as online and offline focus groups, generate more efficient information than does the asynchronous e-Delphi method.

Group dynamics

The interaction between the respondent and the discussion leader may lead to group cohesion, which results in more spontaneous reactions, more candid answers and fewer inhibitions. Thus, more ideas and richer information are generated, which improves the quality of the research results (Fern 1982). The fast written form of communication between respondents in online focus groups and the set-up of e-Delphi dictate that there is no or little interaction among respondents and therefore no group dynamic (Greenbaum 1998; Burke *et al.* 1999).

[1] Traditional focus groups usually last two hours, whereas online focus groups should last one hour at most to obtain optimal results; e-Delphi is conducted across several discussion rounds.

Non-verbal impressions

Non-verbal behaviour can help the moderator interpret answers and place them in the proper context, because it provides additional insight into what the respondent thinks and feels (Mason & Davis 2007). Clothes, behaviour, posture, facial expressions or tone of voice can provide clues for interpreting a respondent's answers (Ayland & Dolan 1999; Scholl *et al.* 2002). Scholl *et al.* (2002) also aver that the underlying motives and attitudes of participants do not become as clear in online qualitative research. However, the anonymous setting of the internet may make respondents more outspoken and stimulate them to share more of themselves, not just give socially desirable answers (Bradford 2007). In turn, the researcher gains a more truthful picture of the opinions and ideas of respondents (Montoya-Weiss *et al.* 1998). Therefore, we attempt to evaluate the impressions that researchers receive from the different qualitative research techniques.

Respondents

Because the attitude of participants towards different research methods largely determines whether they are willing to participate, we examine whether different target groups may have a preference for a particular research technique. We expect that busy people, such as professionals, executives or doctors, are easier to target with online qualitative techniques, because they can participate from their workplace or home, and do not have to travel to the research location (Yoffie & Anzalone 1995). This argument actually favours asynchronous e-Delphi discussions, for which respondents to a large extent determine when they will participate. Furthermore, we are interested in respondents' perceptions during their participation in online qualitative research methods. We expect a positive impact of pleasure experienced during the research process on the quality of information (Nevid & Sta. Maria 1999).

A critical comparison of offline and online focus groups and e-Delphi

We undertake a real-life experiment in which we conduct traditional focus groups, online focus groups and an e-Delphi discussion with the same research questions, to make a realistic comparison of all three methods on the basis of these criteria.

Methodology

The central research question for all three methods involves examining the expectations and attitudes of the target groups with respect to mobile phones and mobile internet via general packet radio service (GPRS). All three methods include two different types of respondent, recruited from an existing internet panel according to demographic requirements, as shown in Table 1.

The two traditional focus groups were conducted by a large Dutch market research agency in a typical manner. Both group discussions included eight participants and lasted two hours. The discussion leader played an active role in the discussion, making sure that all topics were covered by using a discussion guide and keeping the discussion going if it lagged.

The two online focus groups initially were planned with five respondents each, because the optimal number of people in an online focus group is between three and five (Groenland 2002; Scholl *et al.* 2002). However, technical problems on the respondent side prevented two respondents from Group 1 from participating, so Group 1 consists of only three participants. The sessions were moderated by two discussion leaders who were sitting next to each other in a conference room, enabling discussion between them. One of the discussion leaders concentrated on the remarks and reactions of respondents, while the other maintained responsibility for ensuring the discussion proceeded in a structured way and focused on the stimuli and timing. The discussion leaders also made use of a pre-programmed discussion guide with the research questions, probing questions, and product pictures and logos, comparable to traditional focus groups (Stevens 2007).

Finally, the e-Delphi discussion took place during one week and consisted of three emails respondents had to answer. Answering the questions took

Table 1 Demographic profiles of the two respondent groups

Group 1: Young professionals	Group 2: Professional with mobile jobs
• Internet and email use: has an internet connection, relatively intense user of internet and uses email	• Internet and email use: has an internet connection, relatively intense user of internet and uses email
• Age: 24–35 years	• Age: 30–50 years
• Social class: social class A/B with higher than average salary	• Social class: social class A/B with higher than average salary
• Mobile phone use: frequent user with a mobile phone contract for private use	• Mobile phone use: frequent user with a mobile phone contract for business use
• Career: ambitious young professional	• Career: 'mobile' job, i.e. lots of travelling for work

about 15 minutes per round, so that respondents spent about 45 minutes overall engaging in the e-Delphi discussion. Both groups consisted of 15 participants, and the e-Delphi procedure was as described above (in the section entitled 'From email discussions to e-Delphi'). The discussion leader formulated the first email on the basis of the discussion guide used for both the online and offline focus groups. All 30 participants responded after the first round, for an initial response rate of 100%. To increase personal interaction, the responses were divided into two groups, such that people with similar attitudes appeared together for the second round of questions. The response rate in the second round was 80% in Group 1 (12 respondents) and 86% in Group 2 (13 respondents).

Analyses

Measures

To analyse the data, we use the records of the discussions, which, for the online focus groups and the e-Delphi method, are readily available. The traditional focus group discussion was transcribed using videotapes. We evaluate the records both subjectively and objectively in terms of the quality criteria outlined above. The subjective evaluation is single-blind, such that four experts in the area of qualitative research analyse and compare the records of the three research methods according to our research criteria. To avoid any influence on the experts by their own possible positive or negative attitudes towards the different research methods, we standardise them as far as possible. The researchers received three records that they had to evaluate; they did not know which record applied to which research method. The objective evaluation relies on unbiased counts. We correct all objective measures for the varying length of the three research methods.

For the *depth* criteria, we rely on the number of words spoken or written, which gives insights into the amount of information gathered by the three different qualitative methods. A verbatim comment may contain a lot of meaningless words, so we also count the number of substantive arguments by each respondent. Substantive arguments include comments that actively contribute to finding an answer to the research question. Two judges count substantive arguments independently; they reach an interrater reliability of 80% and resolve any points of disagreement through discussion. Finally, we also ask the four experts to give their opinion about the depth of the different records.

The four experts also evaluate the three records in terms of how many topics and research aspects they addressed and which record they find most complete, which serves as our measure of *breadth*.

We measure *efficiency* by relating the number of words per respondent to the number of substantive arguments. For example, if a research method delivers many words but few important, content-related comments, it is inefficient. In addition, the four experts evaluate the efficiency of the three records.

To evaluate the *group dynamic*, we consider the total number of interactions per respondent. If a respondent clearly reacted to a comment provided by another participant, we count it as an interaction. Similar to the procedure for counting the number of substantive arguments, two judges count the number of interactions. Because in the e-Delphi method, the participants only interact indirectly by answering the feedback questions, with a great deal of influence from the moderator, who develops those feedback questions, we do not count interactions for the output of the e-Delphi group. We again ask the experts about their opinions regarding the potential differences in group dynamics in the three records.

The four experts judge *non-verbal impressions* in the three records by considering how much they learned about the respondents.

Finally, we measure the *preferences* of respondents by analysing how many research invitations we had to send to obtain the required number of participants. For the perceptions of the actual respondents, we ask participants to answer several questions about their participation in the online qualitative techniques. For example, participants in the e-Delphi and online focus group indicate their satisfaction, comfort, ease of use, enjoyment or group characteristics associated with the research method.

Key findings

As Table 2 reveals, the highest numbers of words appear with the e-Delphi method. Asynchronous discussions allow more respondents to participate, leading to more information. However, even if corrected for the number of respondents, e-Delphi still delivers the highest number of words per respondent, followed by traditional focus groups. In online focus groups, respondents use an average of 113 fewer words per respondent than in their traditional counterparts.

Furthermore, Table 2 shows that participants in the online focus groups average the highest number of substantive arguments per respondent, which implies that online focus groups deliver the deepest information, a finding

Table 2 Number of words, substantive arguments, and interactions per research method

	Total number of words	Average number of words per respondent	Average number of substantive arguments per respondent	Number of interactions per respondent
e-Delphi	247,094	673	48	–
Traditional focus group	3,919	555	51	7
Online focus group	1,510	442	62	6

modified by the subjective evaluation. That is, the four experts all consider the findings from the traditional focus groups to be the most profound, followed by the e-Delphi method. The experts classify the answers obtained from the traditional focus groups as personal, spontaneous, relevant and well argued, so that these records give a good impression of the attitudes and opinions of respondents. They also evaluate the responses to e-Delphi as extensive and well argued, whereas they consider the information from the online focus group spontaneous but superficial, mainly due to the short, keyword-like answers. How can online focus groups deliver the highest number of substantive arguments but still get evaluated as shallow by the experts? A possible explanation lies in the number of written/spoken words per research method. As Table 2 shows, respondents in the online focus groups use fewer words than do participants in other research methods. Therefore, in general, less information is available, which has an impact on the depth of the information. The quickly written online communication probably makes it difficult for respondents to type their answers while following the discussion at the same time. Therefore, responses are short and to the point, which may explain the high number of substantive arguments.

The asynchronous character of the e-Delphi method likely explains its decent depth. That is, it allows respondents to think about their opinions and answers and provide extensive, well-thought-out responses, whenever doing so fits in their agenda. Experts also note positively that in e-Delphi, all respondents answer all questions, which leads to a strong and profound impression of the attitudes and opinions of the entire groups, in contrast with online focus groups, which one expert criticised because, 'in this record only one respondent answers the questions, and that even is very short, so that I missed information on the attitudes and perceptions of the entire group'. Figure 3 provides an example of the differences in the answers gathered from e-Delphi, online and traditional focus groups.

Next, the experts unanimously declare that the record of the traditional focus groups covers the most aspects of the research question, followed

Discussion Leader: Which value does the mobile phone have for you? What does a day without a mobile phone look like?
Traditional focus group: '… in the beginning, I just had it with me. But now I realise that I am lost if my mobile phone is broken. If I walk around, I have the feeling that I miss something.'
Online focus group: 'I can't imagine living without, but it would be quieter.'
E-Delphi: 'It would be awkward rather than insuperable. The carpooling situation that I explained above would be more difficult. Then I would have to call from work. But if I get caught in a traffic jam or held up by a colleague, I would be late. Or I would have to go inside the company to pick up my car-pooling partner, but first of all, it would cost quite some time, and second of all, I would drive the receptionist of this company crazy because she would have to call my friend to say that I am there (I am not allowed to just go to him in the building; it is not allowed). Furthermore, I could also never call from the train or car if I am late, etc. I mean, before I had a mobile phone, it also worked somehow. But the mobile phone made life much easier. Long ago, it was also fine without a washing machine, but I cannot image life without one! The mobile phone almost has the same status in my life.'

Figure 3 Different answers from e-Delphi, online and traditional focus groups

by online focus groups and e-Delphi. We thus see that the depth of an email discussion comes at the expense of the breadth of information it provides.

Table 2 also illustrates the number of written/spoken words in relation to the number of substantive interactions. Participants in the e-Delphi method use an average of 673 words to make 48 substantive arguments, whereas members of the online focus group write 230 fewer words but make 30% more substantive arguments. This finding indicates that e-Delphi and traditional focus groups deliver more irrelevant information than do online focus groups. As expected, the lack of direct interaction in the e-Delphi explains this level of inefficiency. E-Delphi respondents tend to depart from the given research question and elaborate on issues that are not relevant for the research (see Figure 3 for a typical example). This tangent cannot be corrected by the discussion leader.

In contrast to findings from Greenbaum (1998) and Burke *et al.* (1999), we find approximately as many interactions in the online focus group (six) as in the traditional equivalent (seven). However, we only measure verbal/written interaction and do not count non-verbal interactions in the traditional focus group. Our research shows that the experts appreciate the direct interaction and direct feedback possibilities in the online and

traditional focus group, which allows the discussion leader to intervene and perhaps ask spontaneous questions. Some experts also mention that the interaction between the discussion leader and the respondents, as well as among respondents, resulted in spontaneous, humorous reactions, whereas the answers in the e-Delphi method seemed individualistic and 'dry' because of the lack of indirect interaction.

In line with Scholl *et al.* (2002), the experts find it more difficult to gain impressions about the personal characteristics of respondents in the online focus group compared with the other two methods, because of the short and superficial answers in the online focus group. In the e-Delphi methods, respondents are very informative and share a lot about themselves, making it easier to interpret their responses. The traditional group discussion continues to be a good source for deriving personal impressions of respondents; as one expert noted, 'this record gives a good impression of respondents. This is due to the informal way of answering questions and the way in which they react to comments by others. This gives the researcher insights into the attitude and character of the respondent.'

With regard to the respondents' preferences, we note that to recruit one participant for Group 1, which consists of young professionals, we had to send 2.4 invitations for the e-Delphi and 2.8 invitations for the online focus groups. Although small, this difference implies that respondents have a slight preference for e-Delphi. In all three research methods, we needed to send more invitations to attract respondents for Group 2, which consists of people who are very busy and travel a lot for their job, which in general makes them more difficult to recruit. We sent 3.8 and 4.6 invitations to recruit a respondent for the online focus group and e-Delphi method, respectively, which shows that these busy respondents prefer the synchronous research method, in contrast to our expectations.

The results of the short questionnaire that we administered to respondents at the end of the group discussions show that the majority of participants in the online focus group and e-Delphi method are satisfied with their participation. They find the discussion nice, pleasant, entertaining and interesting. However, the e-Delphi participants generally are slightly less enthusiastic than participants in the online focus group. Several respondents note they do not like the fact that the expected length for every question was indicated, which might explain the minor difference in satisfaction.

Participants in the e-Delphi methods mention that they especially like the indirect interaction. Respondents in the online focus group find participation easy and convenient but also relatively strenuous. The e-Delphi discussion is spread over a week, and respondents had to answer

three emails. However, these three emails might seem longer than a single, one-hour discussion, which might explain the preference among busy respondents for the synchronous online focus group.

Usage situations for traditional focus groups, online focus groups, and e-Delphi

The results from our study show that online and offline focus groups and e-Delphi methods differ greatly in terms of their results. All three have their own unique characteristics that influence their degree of suitability for handling specific research situations.

Traditional focus groups may be viewed as the true, all-around research method. The information derived from this method offers enough depth into all aspects of the research question. Furthermore, the flexibility in terms of asking questions leads to a more efficient discussion, and group interactions create good impressions among respondents. However, this method also has its disadvantages, especially the requirement that participants travel to the research centre, which makes traditional focus groups more expensive, increases the difficulty of recruiting busy respondents and imposes geographic limitations. In addition, the lead time of such group discussions is much longer than those of the online methods, for which the fieldwork can be planned and conducted within a week. These limitations of traditional focus groups are exactly what make online qualitative research so interesting. The results of this study further show that, in addition to their practical advantages, both online methods have some strengths with regard to content.

The power of online focus groups, despite their limited depth, stems from their ability to provide the fast and spontaneous reaction of respondents to different aspects of the research question. The flexibility in terms of answering questions also makes it a very efficient research method. Our research further shows that busy respondents prefer synchronous online group discussions over e-Delphi. Online focus groups are well suited to a fast check, a quick scan, or the first reaction of respondents to, say, a new product, concept or commercial. As Scholl *et al.* (2002) declare, online focus groups are extremely useful for international testing and comparisons of results obtained from a local, traditional focus group.

Finally, e-Delphi provides relatively profound and extensive information about the attitudes, opinions and impressions of a larger group of respondents. These deep qualitative impressions can be substantiated with numbers by counting, for example, certain attitudes. Thus, e-Delphi

discussions can produce both qualitative and qualitative findings. However, the larger size of the group and the indirect interaction make this method less efficient and require more time for analysing the data. Nevertheless, it is a very accessible research method, due to its use of email, and research can be started or expanded rapidly. Similar to online focus groups, e-Delphi is useful for international research; moreover, it is suitable for profound public opinion polls, brainstorming sessions and idea generation.

In addition to the methods analysed herein, another online approach to qualitative research that has emerged in the market research industry recently is quickly gaining interest, namely online discussion boards or forums. In this method, respondents can reply to one or more questions or statements displayed on a specific website. Respondents are invited to visit the discussion board multiple times and can choose the time of each visit freely. A moderator frequently accesses the discussion board to summarise recent feedback and ask follow-up questions. In various ways, the discussion board is a logical successor to e-Delphi, because it comprises an asynchronous, moderated online qualitative data collection instrument. We strongly recommend including discussion boards in a comparison study with the same evaluation criteria.

Table 3 summarises the most important and best possibilities for applying the three different methods.

We thus conclude that though online qualitative research methods can never totally replace traditional research, the lack of non-verbal information in online variants of qualitative research can largely be compensated for by the specific content and practical performance of these techniques. Therefore, they rightly deserve a place in today's market research portfolio.

Table 3 Properties of traditional focus groups, online focus groups and e-Delphi

Traditional focus groups:
• Standard research method
• Visual interaction among respondents
• Profound impressions about the opinions and attitudes of respondents
• Flexibility in asking questions
Research situations suited for traditional focus groups:
• Extensive research with many different research aspects
• Complex research problems
• Brand-identity research
• Product functionality research
• Positioning research
• Stimuli that cannot be experienced from pictures, such as products that a person has to smell, taste, feel, or hold.

Table 3 (continued)

Online focus groups: • Fast and relatively inexpensive research • Interaction between respondents (per definition, not 'face to face') • Fast impression about the attitudes and opinions of respondents • Cannot provide deep answers about motivations or backgrounds • Flexible research, direct opportunities for the researcher to ask additional questions or provide feedback
Research situations suited for online focus groups: • Quick scan (give visual examples!) • Pre- or ex post research phases • International checks • Brand-identity research • Positioning research • Busy respondents in the target group • Respondents with an internet connection, preferable via cable or high-speed connection
e-Delphi: • Interaction less important to answer the research question • Fast, relatively inexpensive research method • In-depth • Information about backgrounds, motives, but also numbers or repetitions • Larger number of respondents • Indirect feedback options
Research situations suited for e-Delphi: • Overlapping qualitative/quantitative research • Opinion polls (numbers, repetitions) • Brainstorming, idea generation • In-depth expert analyses • Busy respondents • Respondents that have at least an analogue internet connection

References

Ayland, C. & Dolan, A. (1999) Analysis on trial. *Proceedings of the Annual ESOMAR Qualitative Research Conference*, Athens, 30 November.

Bradford, D.P. (2007) Is the emotion missing? Retrieved from www.quirks.com/articles/2007/20070103.aspx?searchID=14336729&sort=5&pg=1. Accessed 19 June 2008.

Buhsmer, K. (2000) Tele-internet focus groups, an alternative to traditional focus groups. Retrieved from www.quirks.com/articles/a2000/20000106.aspx?searchID=26909320. Accessed 5 March 2002.

Burke, R.R., Rangaswamy, A. & Gupta, S. (1999) Rethinking marketing research in the digital world. Retrieved from www.smeal.psu.edu/cdt/ebrcpubs/res_papers/1999_01.pdf. Accessed 25 March 2002.

Chase, L. & Alvarez, J. (2000) Internet research: the role of the focus group. *Library & Information Science Research*, **22**, 4, pp. 357–396.

Deutskens, E.C., de Ruyter, K. & Wetzels, M.G.M. (2006) An assessment of equivalence between online and mail surveys in service research. *Journal of Service Research*, **8**, 4, pp. 346–355.

Deutskens, E.C., de Ruyter, K., Wetzels, M.G.M. & Oosterveld, P. (2004) Response rate and response quality of internet-based surveys: an experimental study. *Marketing Letters*, **15**, 1, pp. 21–36.

Fern, E.F. (1982) The use of focus groups for idea generation: the effects of group size, group type, acquaintanceship and the moderator on response quantity and quality. *Journal of Marketing Research*, **19**, 1, pp. 1–13.

Forrest, E. (1999) *Internet Marketing Research, Resources and Techniques*. Sydney: Irwin/McGraw-Hill.

Gaiser, T.J. (1997) Conducting on-line focus groups: a methodological discussion. *Social Science Computer Review*, **15**, 2, pp. 135–144.

Greenbaum, T. (1998) Internet focus groups are not focus groups – so don't call them that. Retrieved from www.quirks.com/articles/a1998/19980708.aspx?searchID=26909466. Accessed 26 February 2002.

Groenland, E.A.G. (2002) Online Kwalitatief Marketing Onderzoek. In A.E. Bronner, P. Dekker, A.J. Olivier, W.F. Van Raaij, M. Wedel & B Wierenga (eds) *Jaarboek 2000 MarktOnderzoekAssociatie: Onwtikkelingen in het Marktonderzoek*. Haarlem: Uitgeverij De Vrieseborch, pp. 41–68.

Hopewell, N. (2007) Online group messaging: a technological spin on qualitative research. *Marketing News*, **41**, 14, p. 22.

Mason, P.R. & Davis, B.H. (2007) More than the words: using stance-shift analysis to identify crucial opinions and attitudes in online focus groups. *Journal of Advertising Research*, **47**, 4, pp. 496–506.

Mehta, R. & Sivida, E. (1995) Comparing response rates and response content in mail versus electronic mail surveys. *Journal of the Market Research Society*, **37**, 4, pp. 429–439.

Montoya-Weiss, M.M., Massey, A.P. & Clapper, D.L. (1998) On-line focus groups: conceptual issues and a research tool. *European Journal of Marketing*, **32**, 7/8, pp. 713–723.

Nevid, J.S. & Sta. Maria, N.L. (1999) Multicultural issues in qualitative research. *Psychology & Marketing*, **16**, 4, pp. 305–325.

Poynter, R. & Quigley, P. (2001) Qualitative research and the internet, enhancing skills and breaching boundaries. *Proceedings of the Annual ESOMAR Qualitative Research Conference*, Budapest, 28–30 October.

Richardson, S. (2007) Old methods, new approaches. Retrieved from www.quirks.com/articles/2008/20080504.aspx?searchID=14336804&sort=5&pg=1. Accessed 19 June 2008.

Roster, C.A., Rogers, R.D., Albaum, G. & Klein, D. (2004) A comparison of response characteristic from web and telephone surveys. *International Journal of Market Research*, **46**, 3, pp. 359–373.

Schillewaert, N. & Meulemeester, P. (2005) Comparing response distributions of offline and online data collection methods. *International Journal of Market Research*, **47**, 2, pp. 163–178.

Scholl, N., Mulders, S. & Drent, R. (2002) On-line qualitative market research: interviewing the world at a finger tip. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, **5**, 3, pp. 210–223.

Silverman, G. (2002) Online vs face-to-face vs. telephone groups. Retrieved from www.mnav.com/online.htm. Accessed 20 March 2002.

Stevens, B. (2007) Best practices for online qualitative research. Retrieved from www.quirks.com/articles/2007/20070505.aspx?searchID=14336729&sort=5&pg=1&msg=3. Accessed 19 June 2008.

Yoffie, A.J. & Anzalone, N.J.M. (1995) In defence of on-line focus groups. Retrieved from www.quirks.com/articles/a1995/19950606.aspx?searchID=26909596. Accessed 5 March 2002.

About the authors

Dr Elisabeth Brüggen née Deutskens received her PhD from Maastricht University in January 2006, where she now works as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Marketing. Her dissertation was titled 'From pen-and-paper to screen-and-keyboard: studies on the effectiveness of internet-based marketing research'. She was a finalist of the SAP-PIM Marketing Science Prize 2007 for one of the three best dissertations in marketing in the Netherlands in 2006 and was nominated for the NOBEM dissertation of the year prize in 2007. Her research interests are in the area of internet-based marketing research. Elisabeth has presented at several international conferences, and her work has been published in *Marketing Letters* and the *Journal of Service Research*.

Dr Pieter Willems is a marketing strategy director at PWNEXT. PWNEXT works on converging marketing and market research projects by initiating online dialogues between brands and consumers. These dialogues create positive brand perceptions while at the same time provide actionable insights into consumer's preferences and expectations. Previously, Pieter headed the digital technology development group at Millward Brown, a globally operating market research company that is part of WPP. Pieter's primary interest lies at developing innovative technologies and processes for analysing consumer's interests while they engage with brands or products. In 1998, he obtained a PhD in consumer decision analysis at the University of Amsterdam. Pieter has given presentations on research technology innovations at ESOMAR's Neteffects and has been a member of ESOMAR's programme committee of Technovate. Pieter has published several international articles on market research methodology and innovation, in publications including *Marketing Research*.

Address correspondence to: Dr Elisabeth Brüggen, Department of Marketing and Supply Chain Management, Maastricht University School of Business and Economics, PO Box 616, 6200 MD Maastricht, the Netherlands.

Email: e.bruggen@maastrichtuniversity.nl