

# Using An Asynchronous Discussion Board For Online Focus Groups: A Protocol And Lessons Learned

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examine the literature regarding online focus groups and their use in qualitative research, including their advantages and disadvantages, and then reports on a protocol and methodology for conducting online focus groups using an asynchronous discussion board. Finally, the results of an initial test are reported.

## Introduction

Focus groups are a widely used form of qualitative research in academia, but especially are used in market research (Chen & Hinton, 1999). Falling in the continuum of qualitative research between participant observation and in-depth interviews, focus groups consist of semi-structured question sessions in which responses propel the discussion forward, new topics emerge, and the researcher can ask probing follow-up questions of the participants (Rezabek, 2000, ¶ 6). A typical focus group consists of a moderator/facilitator guiding 3 to 10 people through a focused discussion of a specific topic (Reid & Reid, p. 132).

While the Internet is now well established for quantitative research, the same is not true of qualitative research (Sweet & Walkowski, 2000), on which, for example, market research spending is negligible (Wellner, 2003). Still, the Internet has engendered “new forms of focus groups” (Patton, 2002, p. 389), and “the acceptance of online focus groups by qualitative researchers has grown” (Zinchiak, 2001, ¶ 2). Writes David Bradford (2001, ¶ 2), “Recent academic research findings and conference case studies provide compelling evidence that results comparable to traditional methods can be achieved with proper online qualitative methods in appropriate applications.” Pertinent to the present study, online focus groups lend themselves especially well to topics related to the Internet itself (Heckman, 2000; Wellner, 2003; Zinchiak, 2001), supporting “distributed, reflective . . . interaction” (Jonasson, 2004, p. 422). “Research questions that explore an on-line phenomenon,” write Burton and Goldsmith (2002, p. 3), “are strengthened through the use of a method of research that closely mirrors the natural setting under investigation.” Through hyperlinks, online focus groups also can provide easy access to the Internet-based materials to be viewed by participants (Appendix A-7, n.d.).

Given that the topic under investigation in this study was online career portfolios for job-seekers, the online format was deemed appropriate to these focus groups. This paper explores the pros and cons of online focus groups and the relative merits of synchronous formats compared with asynchronous modalities. It then describes the protocol used in the online focus groups in this study and presents some methodological lessons learned from the research.

## Advantages of Online Focus Groups

It can be easier to recruit participants for online focus groups than face-to-face groups because they don't have to transport themselves to a physical site (Chen & Hinton, 1999; Mara, 2000; Rezabek, 2000; Online focus group, n.d.; Sweet & Walkowski, 2000; Underhill & Olmstead, 2003). Particularly for market researchers, online focus groups can be much less expensive than face-to-face groups because there is no expenditure for a physical venue, nor any travel expenses for moderators to get to distant locations (Chen & Hinton, 1999; Mara, 2000; Montoya-Weiss, Massey, & Clapper; 1998; Online focus group, n.d.; Underhill & Olmstead, 2003). Geographically dispersed individuals can easily participate in online focus groups (Chen & Hinton, 1999; Sweet & Walkowski, 2000;

Zinchiak, 2001). Zinchiak (2001) also points to the usefulness of online focus groups for participants with limited time, especially in business-to-business research.

In a study comparing face-to-face (FTF) focus groups with their online counterparts (which they refer to as computer-mediated communication or CMC), Underhill and Olmstead (2003) observed that both types of groups produced information that was similar in both quality and quantity. In a similar study, Reid and Reid, (2005) found that “more ideas and answers were generated in CMC than in FTF discussions” (p. 131); indeed, online participants in the Reids’ study generated new ideas “faster and more efficiently” (p. 158) than those in a face-to-face group, and the article, “Interactive PR: The ins and outs of shifting your focus (groups) to the Net,” (1999) quotes marketing executive Lee Smith as saying online focus groups yield “twice the transcribed feedback” (¶ 8) of face-to-face focus groups. Mindwave Research (n.d.) posits that the reason for more data is that “answers to every question are collected from every respondent” (¶ 8), which doesn’t usually occur in a face-to-face group. Rezabek (2000) credits the “incubation of ideas” (¶ 25) that can develop in the online format. Bradford (2001) cites still another study, this one by Maritza DiSciullo, in which online and face-to-face focus-group results were “nearly identical” (¶ 7). Zinchiak (2001) advises that online focus groups should not be thought of as a substitute for other methods or an “equivalent method,” but as “another tool” (¶ 4) available to researchers.

Reid and Reid (2005, p. 132) refer to the “visual anonymity” of an online focus group – the fact that participants don’t see each other – and the “psychological distance” of the Internet” as possible stimuli for group participation. Montoya-Weiss, Massey, and Clapper (1998) assert that this anonymity results in reduced inhibitions as well as honest responses, and in fact, a positive group climate depends, in part, on this anonymity (similarly, Sweet & Walkowski, 2000). Writing in 1994, approximately the year online focus groups are said to have first been used (Bradford, 2001), Rosen quotes market researcher Craig Jolley as expressing amazement at what people will say in online focus groups “that they probably wouldn’t say in a formal focus group setting” (p. 33). Zinchiak (2001) notes that participants in online groups tend to have a higher comfort level with giving negative feedback, as we observed in the current study with respondents who, for example, had strongly negative opinions about using photos in portfolios (Comments included: “I dislike the photos!” and “No photos. I think it looks cheesy and goofy.”)

Anonymity can also benefit individuals who experience communication apprehension and who might feel in a face-to-face focus group that they were conspicuous and the subject of too much attention, write Montoya-Weiss, Massey, and Clapper (1998). Anonymity is not just visual in these online groups. “It can be advantageous to not know how people in your group look, sounds, or even smell,” write Belisle, Humphreys, and McNeish (n.d., ¶ 16).

While Montoya-Weiss, Massey, and Clapper (1998, ¶ 2) suggest that group dynamics can be a positive aspect of face-to-face focus groups, lending them “spontaneity and synergy,” the “lean media” aspect (¶ 10) (with or without visual anonymity) of online focus groups can also mean that individual participants will not be as influenced by the group majority as those in a face-to-face group might be. (“Lean media,” the authors say, tends to “strip away non-verbal cues and information available in a face-to-face situation” [¶ 10]). In addition, Reid and Reid (2005) write that unlike in a face-to-face focus group, participants in an online group don’t have to wait for their turn to speak; nor does the group become dominated by a single member (p. 133), providing greater equality in participation (Esipova et al, 2000).

With an online focus group, a transcript is immediately available since the moderator has already typed the questions and participants have typed their responses (Appendix A-7, n.d.; Chen & Hinton, 1999; Online focus group, n.d.; Sweet & Walkowski, 2000; Underhill & Olmstead, 2003); whereas, in a face-to-face focus group, the discussion must be transcribed, a time-consuming process (Burton and Goldsmith [2002] note that the transcription time needed is “extraordinary” [p. 10]). Indeed, Hammer and Wildavsky (1989) estimate that for each hour of tape, nine hours of transcription are required.

### **Disadvantages of Online Focus Groups**

Participants, of course, need reasonable keyboarding skills and access to the Internet to participate in online focus groups, and those who are technophobic may feel uncomfortable in an online group (Rezabek, 2000). Zinchiak (2001) points out that participants also need to be skilled in “express[ing] themselves in words” (¶ 44).

Reid and Reid (2005, p. 155) found a lack of interaction among participants in the online focus group in their study, noting that the session was “more of a ‘question-answer’ session” (p. 156).

The inability for researchers to observe nonverbal communication, such as tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language, is an obvious disadvantage of online focus groups (Chen & Hinton, 1999; Heckman, 2000; Mara, 2000; Rezabek, 2000; Sweet & Walkowski, 2000), although some online focus-group applications have features that enable participants to replicate non-verbals, such as eye-rolling (Heckman, 2000). As Zinchiak (2001) points out, research in which facial expressions and body language are vital, as well as studies requiring touch, taste, or a high degree of confidentiality, may preclude online focus groups as the best choice. She also notes that research remains deficient on how the lack of nonverbal feedback affects qualitative findings.

### **Additional Features of Online Focus Groups**

Although people can talk faster than they can type, Reid and Reid (2005, p. 132) speculate that online focus-group participants might compensate for the productivity lost through typing time by “being more concise in their communication” (p. 133), and their experiment supported this speculation. “Comments are more often thoughtful and useful when participants are required to put them in writing,” states Appendix A-7 (n.d., ¶ 11) of a “Summary of process for conducting an online focus group.” Belisle, Humphreys, and McNeish (n.d.) further observe that “online participants type their answers and do so carefully, forcefully, and honestly” and that they may be “inherently more expressive”(¶ 11). Another explanation may be that, for online participants, writing promotes better communication of concepts (Belisle, Humphreys, & McNeish, n.d.). Similarly, Heckman (2000), quoting marketing executive Vince Talbert, notes that the necessity to write their responses makes participants more articulate.

Disagreement and criticism are more common in online groups than in face-to-face, Reid and Reid (2005) note, citing the body of literature, but they observe that research has also shown that, up to a certain point, conflict can spark idea generation (p. 134).

Accountability can be a factor in degree of participation in online focus groups, Reid and Reid point out (2005, p. 156). Where there is a participant perception of anonymity, the authors note, participants may respond more freely than they would if they physically discussing the topic. However, the online participants in the Reids’ study were known to the facilitators, so they may have felt just as accountable as face-to-face participants would.

Good moderation skills are needed for both kinds of focus group, and most skills are easily transferable from one format to the other, including ability to recognize which questions should be asked, how to word them, and “when and how to probe” (Belisle, Humphreys, & McNeish, n.d., ¶ 14).

Ultimately, according to Esipova et al (2000), it is not the format of the focus group that matters as much as the individual participants.

### **Protocol and Methodology**

“We suggest that the key to successful use of on-line focus groups is to properly match the available technology to the research situation and objectives,” write Montoya-Weiss, Massey, and Clapper (1998, ¶ 14). The online interface most commonly mentioned in the literature for online focus groups is the synchronous chat room, in which all participants interact simultaneously. Other formats mentioned include asynchronous chat rooms (Burton and Goldsmith, 2002), customized software (Miller & Dickson, 2001) e-mail, and e-mail listserv/discussion groups (asynchronous).

Asynchronous online methods are useful when participants are in multiple time zones as it can be difficult to coordinate a time when geographically far-flung participants can participate synchronously.

The interface chosen for the focus groups in this study was an asynchronous discussion board, which aligns closely with a model used in market research. As Alison Wellner writes (2003, ¶ 26), “Companies are finding that online bulletin boards, where a moderator posts a question and consumers respond when they want – and are thus able to give their responses more thought – are useful...”

Indeed, the technological interface that market researchers refer to as a “bulletin board” (Bradford, 2000) is essentially the same as the discussion board used in the present study, in which participants “log on, read messages, and post them at their convenience” (Belisle, Humphreys, & McNeish, n.d., ¶ 18). Bradford, whose company, iTracks, uses Bulletin Board Focus Groups, notes that this interface is “technically forgiving” and doesn’t require the fast typing skills essential for a live [synchronous] chat-based group (2000, ¶ 10). The Bulletin Board Focus Groups that iTracks employs are not only asynchronous, but they take place over multiple days. Belisle, Humphreys, and McNeish (n.d.) of iTracks refer to them as “extended time frame” [groups] (¶ 9), sometimes with much larger numbers of participants than a face-to-face or synchronous online focus group could accommodate. Typical iTracks configurations have included 40-person Bulletin Board Focus Groups conducted over two weeks and 60-person groups conducted over five days (Bradford, 2000). Zinchiak (2001), who cites a more common number of 15-20 in these groups, notes that in Bulletin Board Focus Groups, “respondents can respond at their leisure and take more time to compose their answers – often generating lengthy transcripts. Probing by a moderator can also be longer and more in-depth” (¶ 12).

In the contrasting real-time realm of synchronous groups, all participants may be responding to a question at the same time, resulting in what Reid and Reid call “lost contributions” (p. 160), in which “participants may have failed to submit a typed response because it had been covered in the time taken to write it” (p. 160). In her weblog (blog), Apophenia, Danah Boyd (2004) describes an online focus group in which she participated using the synchronous format of instant messaging (AOL’s AIM), noting great confusion over who was speaking and frustration with having to keep up with a rapidly moving discussion.

As a counterpoint to Boyd’s frustration with the fast-moving synchronous focus group, Burton and Goldsmith observed in their 2002 focus-group study that in an asynchronous format, “participants may not feel pressed for time and are able to respond at greater length to discussion group questions, and therefore may provide more detailed responses than those reported in synchronous online focus groups” (p. 9).

We chose ezboard (<http://ezboard.com/>) as the asynchronous online interface for the focus group because we had worked with it before and found it relatively easy to set up and manipulate. It is also relatively inexpensive – \$30 for six months at the premium service level. While the registration process on ezboard requires a number of steps, we felt that if we offered clear instructions to participants, having them go through the registration process would demonstrate their commitment to participating in the focus group. Asking them to register and perform a test log-in would also provide an early indicator of anyone who might have technical trouble with the interface and not be able to use it, which was, in fact, the case with one would-be participant. The board also enables password protection, so the focus group could offer a degree of security and confidentiality. Had we had any participants who were inappropriate or dominating (which we didn’t), ezboard gave us features that would have enabled us to send the offender a private message, block the person from participating, or delete his or her postings.

The literature (e.g., Appendix A-7, n.d.; Montoya-Weiss, Massey, & Clapper, 1998) suggests that 8-12 people is the ideal number for an online focus group, but that there is a high rate of attrition from those who express interest to those who participate; of prospective participants who are recruited into an online focus group, only 10 percent actually participate (Appendix A-7, n.d.). Focus-group guru David Bradford notes that participants who opt into online focus groups via e-mail are 50 percent likely to actually participate (Andrus, 2000), and in his own article, Bradford (2001) recommends “over-recruiting” (¶ 14). Zinchiak (2001) cites a similar 2:1 ratio of those who commit to those who actually participate. Montoya-Weiss, Massey, and Clapper (1998) add that recruiting online focus group participants is “a rigorous task” (¶ 27). Andrus (2000) points out that since many people participate in online focus groups from home, the focus group competes with such activities as watching television. Thus, we knew we would need to recruit as many participants as possible, with the idea that a smaller subset of those would actually participate.

Our initial research objective was use the focus groups to obtain input from recruiters, hiring managers, and human-resources professionals about the concept of online career portfolios for job-seekers. Zinchiak (2001) prescribes a recruiting protocol of contact, screen, invite, and confirm.

We contacted participants by placing a notice in the newsletter we publish for job-seekers and career professionals, QuintZine, which has a circulation of about 6,700. We placed a notice in the newsletter of Career Masters Institute, which goes to about 500 members, and on Electronic Recruiting Exchange, a message board that its Web site says reaches “thousands of staffing and HR professionals.” We contacted a few recruiters and human-resources people with whom we were personally acquainted. In the foregoing methods of invitation, prospective participants were contacted using opt-in communications they would be receiving anyway, so that the invitations were not obtrusive. While Zinchiak (2001) advises against inviting individuals that have not given their permission to be e-mailed, difficulty in enlisting recruiters motivated us to ask the owner of Oya’s Recruiter Directory, an online directory of recruiting firms, to distribute our announcement to recruiters. We also went through listings in several categories of Oya’s Recruiter Directory and sent e-mail announcements to the general-contact addresses of 114 recruiting firms.

We offered our participants an honorarium consisting of a choice between a \$15 Amazon.com gift certificate and a \$15 donation to a favorite charity, incentives that align with suggestions in the literature (e.g., Mara, 2000), although market-research firms seem to offer an average of \$40 to participants (Zinchiak, 2001).

While some recruiters expressed interest in the focus group, a number of career professionals (such as resume writers, career counselors, and career coaches) also expressed interest. Deciding that input from this group also would be valuable, we decided to hold two focus groups, one for recruiters, hiring managers, and human-resources professionals, and one for career professionals. This decision led to the screening segment of Zinchiak’s (2001) protocol. To clarify which interested individuals belonged to each group, we sent a brief e-mail survey to all those who expressed interest, along with an explanation of our decision to hold two groups, and a schedule of what the next steps would be in the focus-group process. Entering the invitation and confirmation phases of Zinchiak’s method (2001), we placed each prospective participant into one of the two groups, set the dates for the focus groups, and invited and confirmed participation in e-mails with the following sequence of content:

- Exact dates for their focus group with an attachment containing instructions for registering on ezboard, along with a preferred deadline for their registration, which was three days before their focus group was to begin.
- A reminder sent on the preferred registration day that participants should register that day and asking them to post a message on the “check-in” forum set up for that purpose once they had successfully registered on ezboard. This check-in forum was the equivalent of the recommended pre-meeting at the focus-group site that Andrus (2000) describes in his article. We asked them to register and check in on this preferred day so that, if fewer participants than expected checked in, we had time to recruit additional participants.
- A list, also sent on the preferred registration day, of links to the online career portfolios we wanted participants to review during the focus group.
- A plea to those who still had not registered on ezboard by the day before the focus group was to begin.
- An announcement sent out at the exact moment the focus group was opened up for discussion reminding participants to join the discussion.

All told, 26 people expressed interest in participating in the focus groups, with 16 actually participating. Seven participated in the first focus group, which was for recruiters and those with extensive hiring experience. An eighth person attempted to participate but was not able to successfully register on ezboard. Nine people participated in the second focus group, for career professionals. A tenth person got as far as checking into the check-in forum but never participated in any of the question forums.

In addition to the check-in forum, another forum contained a welcome message from the researchers and instructions on how to participate. A handout was offered in this forum as an attachment to anyone who needed more detailed instructions on how to participate, which no one requested. A third forum contained links to sample online portfolios that we wanted the participants to review, evaluate, and discuss. The remaining seven forums each contained one of the focus-group questions. Participants could view the questions when they checked in at the check-in forum before the focus groups began, but the forums were “locked” so they could not respond to any questions until the focus groups were officially opened up.

The focus groups were each scheduled over a 48-hour period, and participants could log in and comment at their convenience during that time. They had been told in advance that their total participation over the 48 hours would

probably not exceed 2-3 hours, and in fact, no one spent more than about an hour actually responding to the questions. Participants were told that they could respond to the questions in any order, and they were not required to answer all seven questions.

Both researchers served as moderators. In the first focus group, we initially divided the questions with the idea of each moderating a set of questions. It became apparent, however, that each question did not require its own exclusive moderator, and we ultimately both moderated all the questions. For the second focus group, we made no attempt to similarly divide the moderating duties.

While three of the questions were the same for each group, the other four were similar but adjusted slightly to accommodate differences in the two study populations.

Some respondents visited the board once, answered the questions, and did not return to interact with others or the moderators. In some cases, moderator questions asking for elaboration or clarification were posed to specific individuals who never answered because they did not return to the board. Other participants clearly returned and responded to questions and comments that had been posted since their last visit. The ezboard interface displayed which participants were logged on, and no more than three including moderators, were ever logged on at the same time. For both focus groups, discussion was fairly lively during the first 24 hours but dropped off dramatically during the second day. In the first focus group, one of the respondents participated only on the first day, and a different respondent participated only on the second day. After the first day, an e-mail was sent to all participants thanking them for the first day and encouraging them to come back the second day. Participants were told they would receive information on how to claim their honoraria toward the end of the second day, at which time, a discussion forum was set up with honoraria instructions and thanking them once again. Finally, about three days after each focus group, participants received an e-mail message with thanks and honoraria instructions.

### **Lessons Learned**

Recruitment was a somewhat weak area in this study. Zinchiak (2001) notes that people don't always check their e-mail daily, and some won't open e-mails from unknown senders, which is why a combination of e-mail and phone recruitment can be effective. We did not use the phone in recruitment. We also might have succeeded in recruiting more participants if we had set definite dates for the focus groups at the time we initially starting recruiting. Appendix A-7 (n.d.) notes that recruitment is more successful when a definite day is announced. We initially told prospective participants that we expected the focus group to be held early in a given month, but the groups actually were held in the middle and latter part of that month.

We may not have chosen the best days to hold the focus groups. Focus-group expert David Bradford suggests Monday through Wednesday as the best days for focus groups (Andrus, 2000); we scheduled our groups for Thursday and Friday.

The registration process and "check-in" forum were useful for gauging how many people would actually participate in the focus groups; only one person who registered and checked in failed to participate.

E-mailing participants pre-focus-group links to the online portfolios we wanted them to review, as well as making these links available for viewing when participants checked in at the check-in forum, seemed effective in light of Zinchiak's (2001) caution that if participants are clicking on links during the focus group itself, they may drift away from the discussion. Of course, our participants also may have been viewing the portfolios during the focus groups themselves.

While Rezabek (2000) had his participants introduce themselves in his focus-group study, we did not specifically request that our participants do so; however, some did so in the check-in forum.

The ezboard interface provided emoticons, as well as typographic variations – boldface, italics, colored type, all uppercase letters – which could have provided participants with ways to express nonverbal behaviors (or what Massey, and Clapper call "paraverbal expression" [1998, ¶]). We did not point these out to participants, nor tell them how to use them, although some participants used them nonetheless, particularly the emoticons.

Although some interaction among participants (as opposed to mere responses to moderator questions) took place in the focus groups, we would have liked to see more. Burton and Goldsmith (2002) note that they had encouraged participants to “respond directly to comments posted by other participants without input from the moderator” (p. 7). Each question forum in our focus groups stated, “You are encouraged to return to this forum later to join in the discussion with other participants,” but we perhaps could have been more explicit about our hopes that they would interact with each other. It’s also a good idea to remind participants to reload/refresh their browsers so they can see when new discussion activity takes place on the board.

Zinchiak (2001) offers several suggestions for boosting participant enthusiasm and interaction, including ensuring participant interest in the topic, use of humor, deployment of typographic variations and punctuation, warm-up exercises, and “the pace and tone established by the moderator” (¶ 80), including asking probing questions several times each day of the focus group. She also advises encouraging participants to read and respond to the postings of others and ensuring that they know they are expected to interact with each other. Techniques to foster interaction with each other’s postings include sending e-mails to alert participants to a particular post, ensuring lively topics, keeping the discussion open longer than the originally stated hours for those who want to go back and comment on the postings of others, and avoiding language that suggests the close of discussion. Zinchiak also points to researchers who pay participants an extra incentive (example: \$20) for each day of participation, but such a technique was beyond the scope and means of this study.

Strengths in our study were participant interest in the topic and moderator skill and techniques; using some of Zinchiak’s other methods might have elevated the level of interaction.

## **Conclusion**

The potential for using online focus groups in academic research is significant, and the purpose of this paper was to review the literature and test one specific type of online focus-group methodology. The researchers found that using an asynchronous discussion board for online focus groups shows promise as a tool to gather qualitative data, especially when participants are geographically dispersed. Finally, some limitations of the study – and the process – are discussed.

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