

Technology & New Media are Important Partners for Research... But We Need to Keep Core Research Principles Still in Mind

By Yvette Quiazon

As research professionals, we operate in a time of great opportunity to improve and innovate our process through the use of technology and new media. However, to be effective, technology and new media must be incorporated while still keeping a solid foundation of core research principles and building blocks. If we break down the core stages of every project, one can see merits and demerits of incorporating technology and new media.

Recruiting

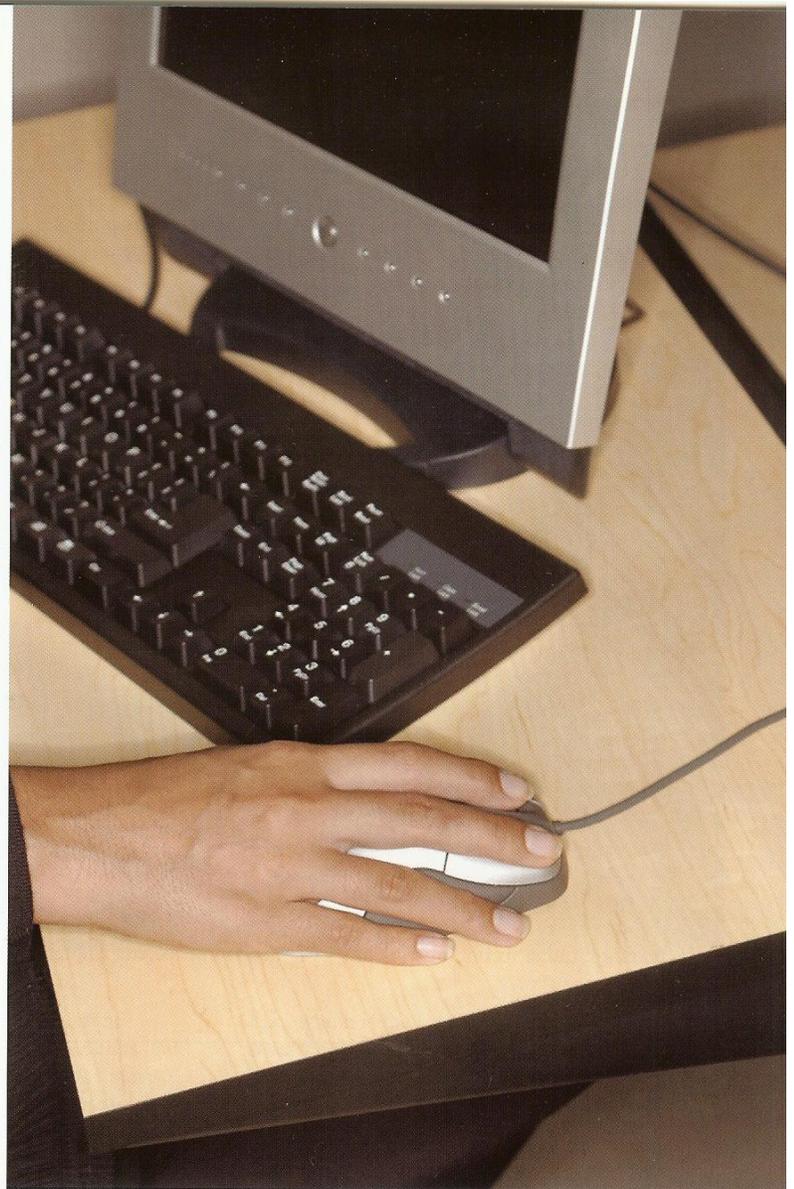
Technology and new media are often dangerously misused in the recruiting process. What is dangerous is that quality respondents directly impact the quality of a study. Many recruiters unfortunately practice using technology and new media incorrectly. For example, the popular method of

recruiting via Craigslist on the surface sounds practical and efficient, yet is full of flaws. On a very basic level, quality recruiting never should incorporate respondents finding recruiters. The best quality recruiters will find respondents that fit, who are “research virgins.” Potential respondents who sign themselves up via calling a recruiter and going on recruiters’ Web sites, for the most part, have already participated in some sort of research or are perhaps trying to make a career of participating in focus groups by going from company to company. These “professional respondents” keep learning tricks to make themselves appear fresh and learn how to qualify themselves just to ultimately receive their cash incentive. These same types of potential respondents are hip to the game that recruiters solicit respondents via sites like Craigslist.

Since most of the recruiters’ listings on sites like Craigslist mostly reveal the study topic, it is easy for these people to call up and make themselves fit the study. In addition, while Craigslist is popular, it still only attracts a certain type of person, and therefore cannot possibly offer a natural sample.

The best quality recruiters will find respondents who have never participated in research before, but genuinely fit the required specs. The best recruiters will use technology and social media to problem solve and take effort to find the right respondents even if that means finding a list of skate parks on the Internet and then sitting in a skateboard

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park all day to find teens who wear a particular skateboard shoe. Or using Facebook or other social networking sites as one of many ways to verify if a respondent is truly into skateboard culture by looking at his or her profile.

Methodology and Fielding

Researchers have definitely embraced technology and new media into their process. Research companies, as well as their clients eager to incorporate anything that sounds different or new. Touting everything from “Blognography,” “Virtual Ethnographies,” “Group Bulletin Boarding,” to “Cell Phone Diaries”—companies and clients are seduced by the idea of incorporating technology to try and dig deeper. While many of these methods can be effective, it should not be forgotten that the efficacy of such methodologies correlates to the strength of the thinking behind the implementation. On a basic level, experience and understanding of the fundamentals cannot be replaced by technology; rather technology should

serve as an enhancement. Unfortunately, new companies have sprouted up based on their grasp of technology and menu of respondent friendly new media research tools rather than their

templates and questions without customizing them to best align with project objectives can lead to superficial results that do not fulfill objectives. As such, great qualitative research – whether

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experience, credentials and background in brand strategy and research fundamentals.

Who is implementing technology research tools needs to be considered. The strategic thinking and planning of a project still needs to be strong in order to achieve quality insights. To produce rich results, the project still needs to be planned well and the right questions need to be asked. Implementing stock

using technology tools or not – still needs a high level of thinking and planning around it to generate actionable results. Having a mindset of customization for every project is key to ensuring the qualitative project is producing useful results.

A skilled, experienced, moderator cannot be replaced by even the best technology tools. For example, conducting an online group means you



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need a highly skilled moderator just as you would with traditional groups. Even more so, an experienced moderator will be able to work around the loss of human contact, interpretation of body language and emotion when conducting online groups.

In the case of ethnography, the pure method of the researcher physically immersing himself or herself into someone's world cannot be replaced or replicated using technology, but it can certainly enhance the process. The value of pure ethnography is observing and sharing the respondent's environment. In a fiscally challenged environment, when most research budgets are tight, it seems obvious to try and replace potentially costly ethnographic studies with an online fielded or self-administered version. Self-administered studies where respondents send and upload videos, submit blog entries, digital photos and diaries, are all great methods for certain objectives, but they can never replace the richness of pure ethnography.

Collecting and generating respondent feedback through multi-faceted plat-

forms to create a closed online community between researchers and respondents does have some merit when speed and logistics are major factors. These platforms can help overcome some of the cost and logistical barriers involved in conducting global studies. Their speed and ability to cover a large geographical area simultaneously can also be valuable in some circumstances. However, the research community should be clear that these can never replace the depth achieved with human interaction and observa-

tion, which is the base of qualitative research, and how it differs from quantitative research.

Reporting

On the reporting end, experienced and skill qualitative professionals are still needed to analyze and interpret the

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results. If anything, it is even more critical to have someone very experienced so they are not only able to provide high-quality interpretation, but also gauge if the method and use of technology might be skewing or taint-

results "living" after they have been presented. Password protected sites are an effective, efficient and inexpensive way to share research results, presentation, video excerpts or even raw inputs from respondents. In the past, we were

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ing the results. Reporting fundamentals and analysis still need to be incorporated into the process to synthesis any project's output whether technology is incorporated or not.

If implemented correctly, using technology to report results can be a productive way to maximize the value of the research. Technology can be used to share qualitative results to a broader audience and help keep the

often limited by needing a physical audience in attendance to deliver results and/or the use of hard copy reports. Technology is a monumental tool in allowing research to keep living and disseminate over a larger audience within a client's company at present or for future archival purposes.

Overall, qualitative research that incorporates new technologies and new media must still incorporate the human

element to truly achieve projective results. Technology and new media will never replace the need to always incorporate experienced research professionals who can build from the fundamentals and mine actionable insights. Multi-faceted platforms that create closed online communities to generate research can successfully be used and incorporated, but only if their limitations are understood and accounted for and recognized.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are solely of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions or positions of MRA.



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