

Qualitative Online Research

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With the growth of Internet penetration, the use of the Internet for market research purposes is growing steadily. Conventional ways of asking respondents such as face-to-face and telephone are increasingly being replaced by Web-based interviewing. The main reasons for this are cost-efficiency and speed. But there are other reasons too. One is the possibility to include multi-media content – such as text, image, sound, and video stimuli. Also, response rates are higher in surveys conducted by Internet than in conventional surveys. Finally, there is proof for the fact that Web-based interviews produce longer and more candid answers for open questions because respondents feel freer to express themselves while not being faced by a personal interviewer.

When dealing with online research, most authors concentrate on its *quantitative* aspects - pointing to the representativity problem, commenting sampling, panel management issues and questionnaire design. This paper only touches these problems slightly. Its main topic is a practical approach to *qualitative* online research. This article is based on personal experience. Therefore it does not contain footnotes. The only references made are some recommendations of practical software.

Market research

Market research can be done in a quantitative manner - the basis of such studies are samples of $n > 30$, and the results are expressed in percentages and absolute numbers. If research is done in a qualitative manner, samples tend to be small ($n < 30$), and results are given primarily in text form. They aim at explaining motives rather than determining percent distribution of opinions. Therefore psychological tests, projective methods, storytelling etc. are arrows in their methodological quiver.

Market research can be conducted with different types of interviews:

- Face-to-face interviews (CAPI - Computer Assisted Personal Interviews)
- Computer Assisted Telephone Interviews (CATI)
- Interviews executed personally with paper and pencil (PAPI)
- Interviews conducted online, mostly referred to as CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviews).

This paper deals primarily with practical aspects of qualitative online research

Online Research

As can be seen in the graph below, online research comprises two different applications:

1. Research *about* the Internet

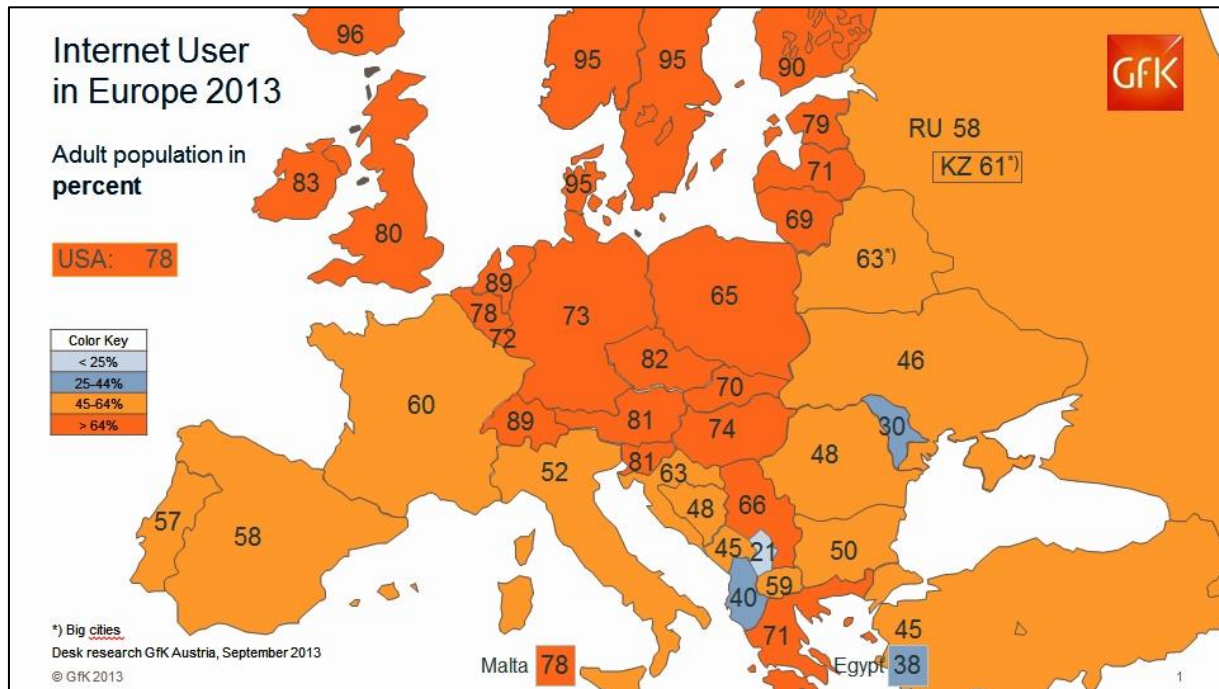
In this case the aim of surveys is to clarify facts about the Web. Examples are tests about Website performance („usability tests“) or surveys to define the number of visitors of a Website („Web audience size measurement“). A completely different approach to define audience size or user behavior is Web “metrics” - the use of log files for statistical purposes.

2. Research *via* the Internet

This is the use of the Internet for all kinds of surveys whose subject is not the Web but phenomena of the *offline* world: awareness and acceptance of products or services, social behavior, political opinion, media use, etc.

Types of Practical Online Research		
	orange = offline studies	light blue = online studies
	About the Web	Via the Web
qual	„Qualitative Webtest“ Focus Group Online Focus Group Online Bulletin Board	One-to-one Interview Online Focus Group Online Bulletin Board Online Diary (Blog)
quant	Internet Monitor Pop up-Test Quantitative Webtest Web Audience Size Survey	„Market Scout“ (n~200) Ad-hoc Online Survey (n>500) Tracking Study Community Project

Internet Penetration in Europe



As can be seen in the map above, as of fall 2013, Europe can be divided into two zones of Internet penetration: countries in the North and the Center of Europe (70% and over), as opposed to the South Western European and the Eastern European countries (both about 50% plus)

Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Research

Most - not all - types of surveys which have traditionally been conducted face-to-face, by telephone or by mail, can today be done online. Of course, results may (slightly) differ from data gained in „conventional” research. Likewise, when telephone interviewing was introduced, results tended to differ from those gained by face-to-face. Nevertheless, on a different measurement level, patterns and distributions are very similar.

Reasons for different results can be:

- Different universes („onliners” vs. „nonliners”)
- Different levels of education
- The character of the online interview (self-completion)
- Topics that relate to Internet or the use of it (information technology topics etc.)
- Different return rates

Advantages of Online Research

- Quick fieldwork and evaluation (in extreme cases down to 24 hours)
- Cost efficiency (no interviewer and/or telephone cost, no cost for location)
- No geographical boundaries: multi-nation surveys easily possible

- No interviewer training necessary
- No interviewer bias (self-completion!)
- All types of multi-media content can be tested
- „Sensitive” topics are easier to ask - respondent is alone (anonymity!)
- Higher response rates than in telephone or face-to-face
- Candid answers (no social pressure)

- No erroneous transcription of answers to open-ended questions possible
- Report/graphs can be generated in real-time and delivered quickly
- Format may impress customers as the most modern type of market research

Disadvantages of Online Research

- Internet does not reach 100% of the population
- Hardly any possibility to explain details
- Not applicable when topic is related to Internet and Internet use/high tech topics
- Especially in qualitative research: no body language to observe
- No possibility to test products by mouth, nose or hand
- Results may be skewed due to different degrees of familiarity with computers

Dealing with Disadvantages of Online Research

- Conducting surveys in „mixed” or „multi” mode: supplementing online interviews with the necessary number of interviews with „nonliners” („hybrid” surveys)
- Making online questionnaires self-explanatory
- Delivering product samples to households for testing
- Careful panel management (offline-recruiting instead of convenience samples)

Note: There will always be applications of market research which must be conducted in the conventional "offline" way. Institutes today generally offer both forms.

Online Address Pools („Access Panels“)

A well-recruited and well-managed online pool („access panel“) is the heart of professional online research. Recruitment practices are crucial for creating representative samples. Careful panel maintenance and a practical incentive system are decisive for high response rates.

Offline recruiting

The highest quality level for pool recruiting is doing it offline. By this is meant collecting

addresses of Internet users willing to participate in online surveys via *telephone* or *face-to-face studies*. Of course, this method is expensive and open only to research institutes which conduct a large number of representative telephone and/or face-to-face interviews. The best way to secure ongoing respondent cooperation is by incentive points. Incentives for panelists are mostly paid out in the form of vouchers which can be used for shopping at selected businesses. The second best method to make panelists cooperate is to offer them lotteries with attractive prizes. Two other but not so effective methods for raising panel loyalty are to provide participating respondents with the results of the respective surveys or to donate a certain amount per completed interview to a charity project.

Note: In a carefully controlled way it is possible to find new respondents by way of “snowballing.” In this method panel members receive incentives for new recruits.

Online recruiting

In many cases *offline* recruiting will not be sufficient to build a panel of reasonable size. The alternative is *online* recruiting by banners or buttons on popular Websites. There is also the possibility of purchasing e-mail addresses from external vendors.

Note: One must be careful in online recruiting not to collect addresses of „incentive hunters“ or „multi-panelists“ who are more often than not „routine answerers“ or „straight liners“ (persons filling in matrix questions without thinking and in a straight line down).

Mobile Online Research

The rapid spreading of mobile phones, smartphones, tablets and other hand-held mobile telecommunication devices all over the world raises the question of market research via a mobile device. While asking a person to answer questions over a conventional mobile phone is not strictly online research, the use of a smartphone (a mobile phone with access to the Internet), a netbook (a small laptop computer with Internet access) or a tablet (a flat hand-held computer with Internet access) offers the possibility to invite people to answer questionnaires via Internet on a mobile basis.

In the field of qualitative research, mobile phone research offers the advantage of allowing for „ethnographic“ applications such as interviews at the time of shopping and at the point of sale, or in the minute of media use (watching TV, listening to the radio or reading a paper, magazine or book). Global Positioning Systems can even provide the exact location of respondents whose mobile phones have GPS activated. Another application is mystery shopping: data collected by interviewers during test visits can be made available to researchers or clients within very short.

Note: It goes without saying, that questionnaires aimed at mobile devices are restricted in many ways (number of questions, length of text, size of tables and images). Nevertheless, there are applications that can only be carried out by mobile “live” research. The best examples for this approach are studies about media consumption over the day.

Recently, MMRA, the association of mobile marketing research firms, was formed. On their Website more information about mobile research is available, see: <http://www.mmra-global.org>

Online Questionnaire Design

One of the most important things when drawing up online questionnaires is to bear in mind that online research is different from the interviewer-supported methods. There is no interviewer at hand to explain things or drive the interview. The respondent faces the questionnaire on a screen - in most cases alone. Therefore, the design of the questionnaire is crucial. Everything must be done to make the self-administered online interview not only well understandable but also agreeable and interesting for the respondent. A bit of "fun" will reduce fatigue and keep respondents from breaking off in the middle of the interview. As a result, response rates will be much higher than in any other type of market research. This is not a case for "gamification" by which is meant a question format consisting of "fun elements" (quizzes, games) only.

Here are two examples of the special opportunities offered by Web based research.

The Tachistoscope

A tachistoscope is an instrument that can flash optical information before the eyes of a respondent for a split second. Before the advent of the computer, an optical projector was used which could open a shutter for a small variable interval. The tachistoscope is being used in market research to test posters, ads or logos for their performance.

Modern broadband-based online research makes it possible to display an image for any time interval from 1/50 second upwards (shorter time intervals are not enabled because of the inertia of computer systems). No complicated apparatus is required - the exact exposure time can be programmed into the questionnaire. Practical use is for testing alternative stimuli - like, e.g., three different drafts of a company logo. First, the images are displayed for a split second only - to find out which stimulus is recalled best. When afterwards displayed for 1 to 5 seconds, respondents can be asked about further details.

The Testing of Video or Sound

Qualitative online questionnaires may contain video clips to be pretested for their impact or the associations connected with them. Likewise, to test (popular) music, so-called „hooks" (10-20 second audio-clips) can be presented to respondents online for their judgment.

Scales

The 0-10 Scale

In many countries, rating scales are modeled after school notes. In Austria, school children are judged by a five-point scale from 1 (best) to 5 (worst). Teachers, however, see themselves often forced to use „+“ (plusses) or „-“ (minuses) to refine a grade, thus avoiding, e.g., giving a „5“ by using „4-“.

In market research, there is always some „inner resistance“ by respondents against giving the best value „1“ and the worst value „5“. Therefore, such a scale is practically reduced to a three-point scale (2-3-4). When used in market research, the non-symmetrical scale 1-5 develops a noticeable trend towards the middle value of 3.

Note: In the US and in the UK, ratings are usually the other way: 1 is worst and 5 are best.

To avoid these problems, it is advised to use a scale with more steps, for example a six or seven-point scale.

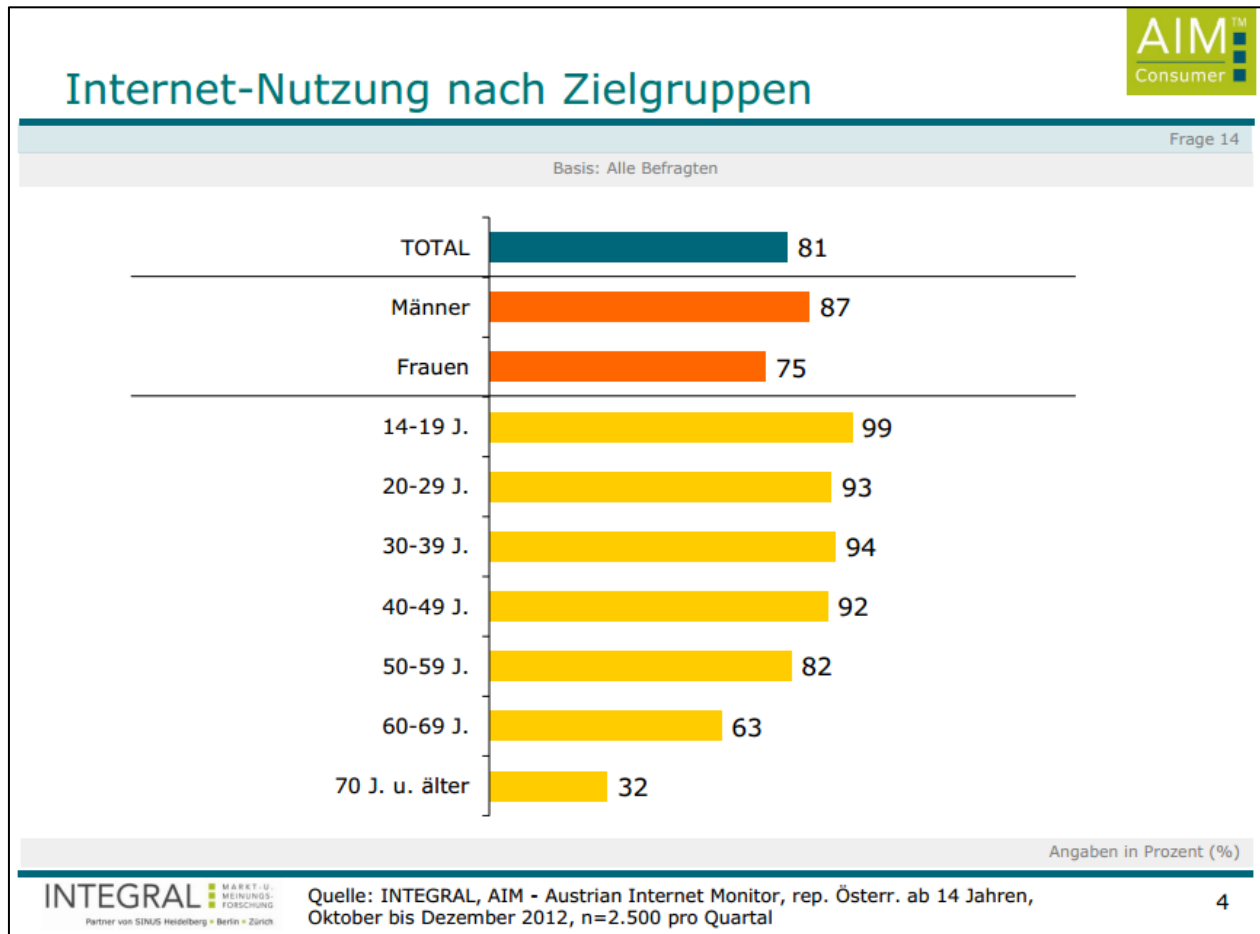
The best solution, in the experience of the author, is to use a 0-10 points scale because it evokes clear associations regardless of age or education and because results can be compared internationally: 0 (points) is easily understood in all cultures as the lowest possible rating, whereas 10 (points) signal a very high rating. 10 are (subconsciously) associated with the perfect number of ten fingers, 100 percent, or 100 degrees Celsius. Due to its „neutral“ character and sensibility, the scale 0-10 can be universally used for most applications - from measuring poster appeal to having people express their sympathy for other nations.

Note: The discussion about scales is never-ending. In fact, *all* types of scales „measure“- because of the sheer statistical effect of large numbers. And some are „simpler“ than others. This is why scales based on school notes are still popular in market research. Some researchers maintain that respondents must have the opportunity to choose a middle position, others (as does the author) believe in “forcing” respondents to decide for one of two „sides“ of a small scale - thereby avoiding the „tendency towards the middle“: Results of scales with a small uneven number of steps tend to take the form of a Gaussian bell curve when plotted.

Defining Qualitative Online Research

The Internet has brought about far-reaching changes in the use of media - think of online newspapers, Web radio and Web TV. It has had enormous effects on our shopping habits and our use of services. Technical innovation is about to fundamentally change interpersonal communication and social behavior. With the Internet slowly reaching out into the segment of older citizens, the „Social Web“ is becoming a reality for practically all age groups. This means that sooner or later all segments of the population will have

become familiar with keyboard, mouse and headphones. In Austria, e.g., already *one third* of persons 70plus are using the Internet:



As a consequence, social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and various forms of other communities are beginning to become used by all age groups.

Qualitative online research benefits from these general developments. It is possible today to invite „average” persons to take part in online focus groups, participate in online bulletin boards, keep online diaries or post messages in social networks.

Online Research has opened new opportunities to psychologists to probe deeply into motives and habits of consumers - regardless of age or region. *Online qual* is quicker and can be offered at lower cost than conventional qualitative research. „online ethnography” or "immersive research" allows researchers to observe via images uploaded by respondents or by Webcam or mobile device what people own, how they live, shop and consume.

Not all topics lend themselves to online qualitative. There will always be room for person-to-person research - whether because the objects in question or the method may require hands-on-action (smelling, tasting, handling, drawing, or doing) - or because of

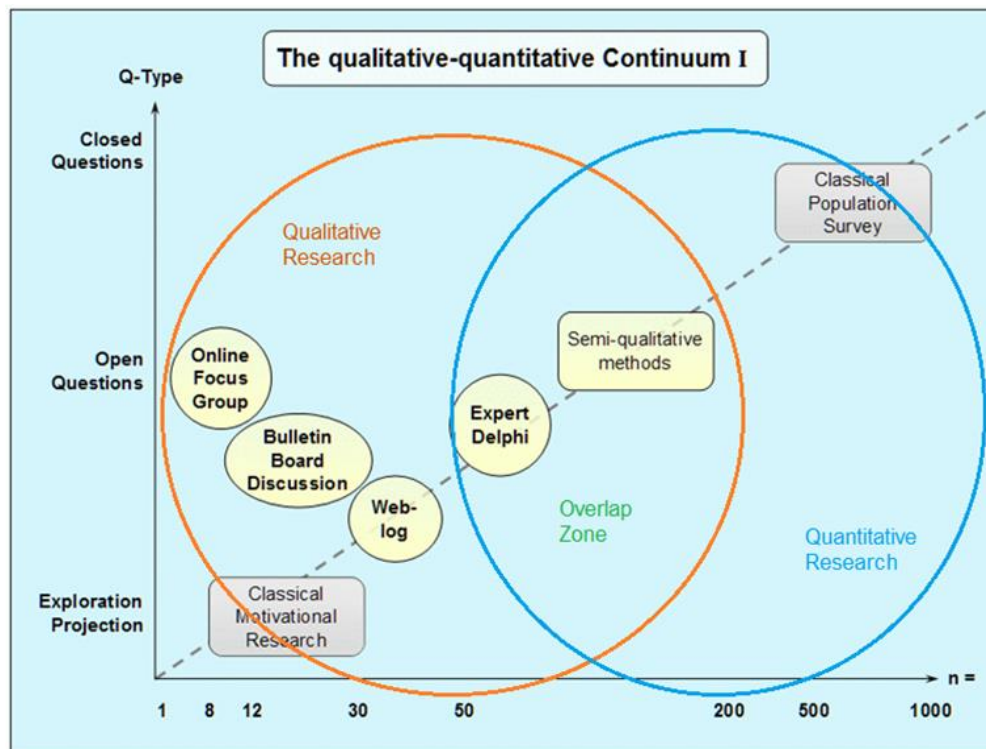
the sheer importance of a personal appearance before the psychologist and action in the bodily presence of other persons.

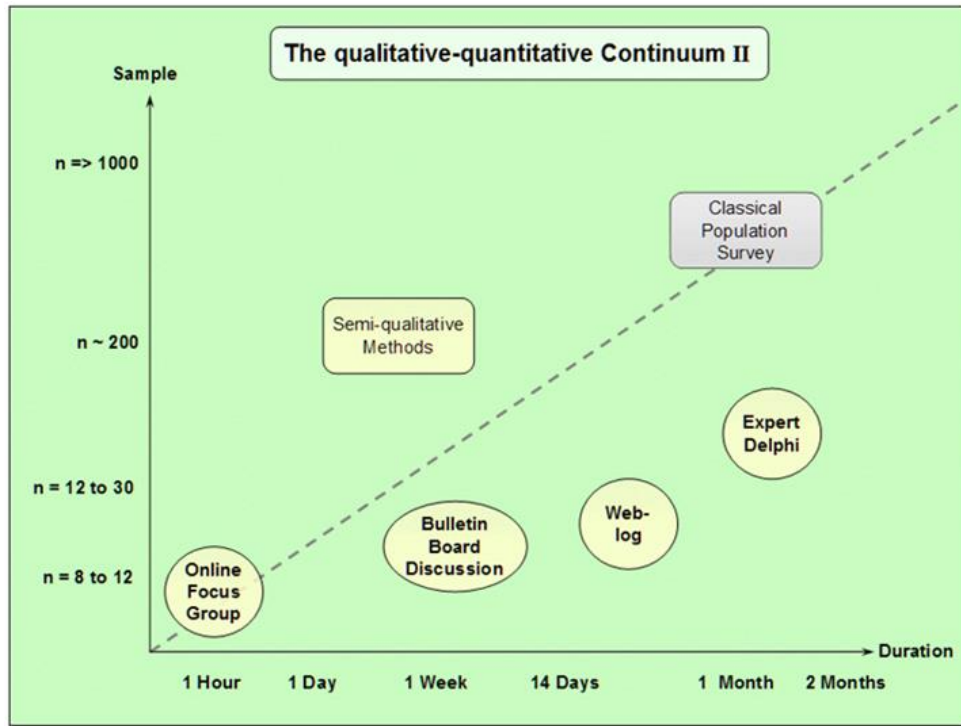
It is not always clear what is meant by „qualitative” research. Content research, e.g., can have quantitative and qualitative aspects. For our practical purposes, qualitative research is defined as research focusing on text-based rather than numerical analysis of data. Thus not only in-depth interviews, (participant) observation, or the use of psychological tests will be defined as „qual” but also all surveys whose emphasis is on gathering and analyzing answers to open-ended questions.

When Quality turns into Quantity

Online research projects can be classified

1. According to sample size (x-axis) and „density” of questions - from intensive exploration to closed questions (y-axis) or
2. according to duration (x-axis) and sample size (y-axis).





The figures above show the possibilities of *online qualitative* - from small samples as, e.g., in one-to-one interviews and online focus groups to bulletin boards and online diaries with up to 30 respondents, and to Delphi studies with, e.g., 50 experts or „semi-qualitative“ projects with up to $n \sim 200$ representative interviews.

As can be seen in the first of the two exhibits, there is an overlap zone in the middle where the emphasis shifts from „qualitative“ to „quantitative“. The theory behind it is clear: answers to open-ended questions become repetitive after a certain number of interviews. If $n \sim 200$ is set as the practical maximum of „semi-qualitative“, this is based on the assumption, that a restricted number of subgroups like male-female, East-West etc. will still enable textual analysis for each group. The term „open-ended question“ is meant to cover all types of questions that produce textual answers. These can comprise also projective questions, the completion of sentences or storytelling exercises.

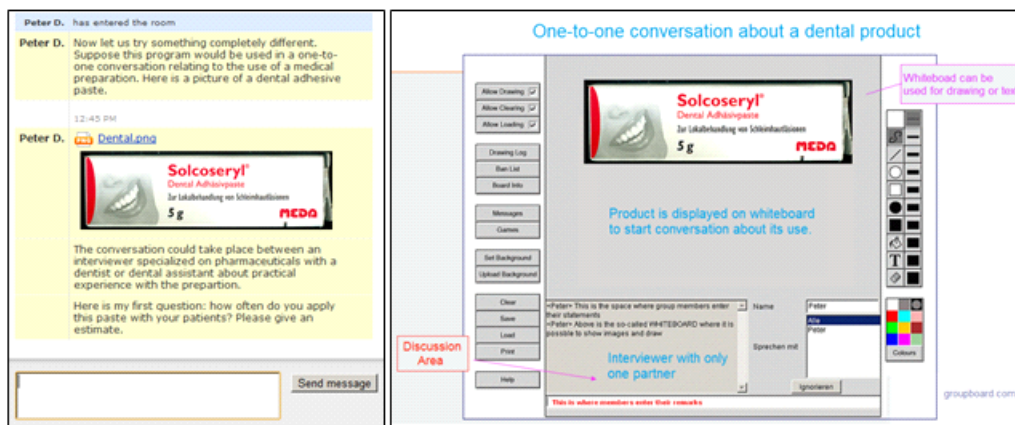
Note: Turn-around time of research projects is a distinctive factor today. Sometimes, quick results are more welcome to clients than statistically valid results.

One-to-one Research

There are applications in which qualitative interviews are best to be conducted on a one-to-one basis - not only in biographical research. This ensures in-depth exploration in which various stimuli or psychological tests can be used, and in which „rich“ text can be gained. Care should be taken with regard to the software used. Basically, any up-to-date chat program can be used to engage an individual respondent to „talk“ with him/her about a specific topic

As can be seen in the exhibit below, any modern chat program allows the inclusion of images, video and sound. In this example, the conversation is indicated as taking place between a moderator specialized in pharmaceuticals research and a dental assistant. To introduce the subject, an image of a pharmaceutical drug is being displayed in the chat program: either as part of the "thread" (the sequence of posted contributions) or on the program's "whiteboard" (an area on the screen reserved for the display of stimuli).

In the first case, the program "Campfire" (<http://www.campfirenow.com>) was used (left). When using a whiteboard, the setup would be like the one shown on the right, using "Groupboard" (<http://groupboard.com>).



A more refined application would be to use a state-of-the-art Web conferencing tool. There are many in the market now; leading products can be compared at: <http://webconferencing-test.com/en/>

Some programs enable dialogue in real-time via Webcam. The conversation is recorded in the form of a video file and can be replayed later for analysis. In this case, no written text will be available. However, "body language" can be included into the analysis - at least in the form of facial and vocal expression.

Webex - <http://Webex.com> (price US\$ 19 per month)
Teamviewer - <http://teamviewer.com> (one-time from US\$ 499)

Online Focus Groups

An online focus group (OFG) is an opportunity to assemble a group of usually six to eight persons to conduct a live discussion via the Web. Most up-to-date OFG software will include a whiteboard. A whiteboard is a separate area on the screen on which the moderator can display objects or links to other sites. The participants can enter text or use the whiteboard for drawing. Other focus group programs may also provide for the use of voice and Webcam.

Note: Use of, and drawing on, the whiteboard requires that participants have *Java* enabled in their browsers. This must be mentioned in the invitation e-mail unless there are problems from the beginning of the group.

The work with online focus groups is not without problems. One of the most common objections against real-time discussion on the Web is the contention that body language cannot be observed. In order to overcome the lack of body language and non-verbal expression, Webcams can be used. However, there are technical restrictions. Above all, the number of participants' faces to be displayed simultaneously on one screen is limited to a maximum of eight.

Practice has shown that the results of online focus group discussions are not very different from those gained in conventional person-to-person discussions. Of course it depends on the situation - e.g. participants in online focus groups cannot be asked to smell, taste or handle objects online. Nevertheless there is always the possibility to deliver such test objects to the households before the discussion.

As it is possible to conduct a discussion among persons living at any place of the globe, time-zones must be regarded. An incentive, normally about ten times of what is paid for completing a normal online questionnaire, is necessary to motivate participants to show up punctually and take part actively. Over-recruiting is advised because practical experience has shown that some invitees are not willing or able to attend at the actual time at which the OFG takes place.

Members of focus groups may use „nicknames” to ensure anonymity. Often thumbnail photographs of participants are being shown with their postings. Participants must be computer-savvy. They must be able to think and type quickly because an online discussion normally runs at quite a pace. Everybody is entitled to enter text at the same time. This is one of the drawbacks of the online focus group method: generally, heavy Internet users will have an advantage. On the other hand - many stakeholders are more interested in early adopters and younger, up-market segments of the population anyway. Special target groups, of course, need special recruitment.

Note: Most up-to-date OFG programs allow for the participation of “observers” who can communicate with the moderator without being noticed by regular participants. This is often required by experienced clients.

The moderator must be very quick in the uptake. He/she must have a carefully prepared „discussion guide” at hand with the questions, topics and uploads (images, videos, links etc.) earmarked for being discussed in the short period of time available. Normally, running an online focus group will require that the moderator is aided by a „technical assistant” who posts the topics, stimuli, and links. The assistant welcomes visitors, discourages latecomers from entering the chat room or invites additional participants if need be, while the moderator keeps the discussion going. The moderator can ban participants who violate the rules set for the discussion. Above all, he/she must encourage „shy” or reticent participants to „speak up”.

Usually, an online focus group runs for 60 to 90 minutes. With regard to the limited time, lengthy introduction and welcoming passages must be avoided. For an online group to be effective, every minute counts - otherwise the resulting copy (or video file) will be „thin“. Participants must be instructed about typing („please disregard spelling mistakes“, „keep your sentences short“) and „Netiquette“: this term is used for „network etiquette“. It prescribes, e.g., to avoid typing in all caps which is considered equal to SHOUTING.

The text produced and the processes triggered in an OFG are recorded on the server so that a precise transcript including images can be downloaded immediately after the discussion.

Note: Practice has shown that copy produced by OFG is not as voluminous as text gained via online bulletin boards (q.v.). Experienced researchers therefore prefer to use the latter method.

Here are some programs which can be used for online group discussions:

Groupboard includes a whiteboard with a number of nice features:
<http://groupboard.com> (free of charge)

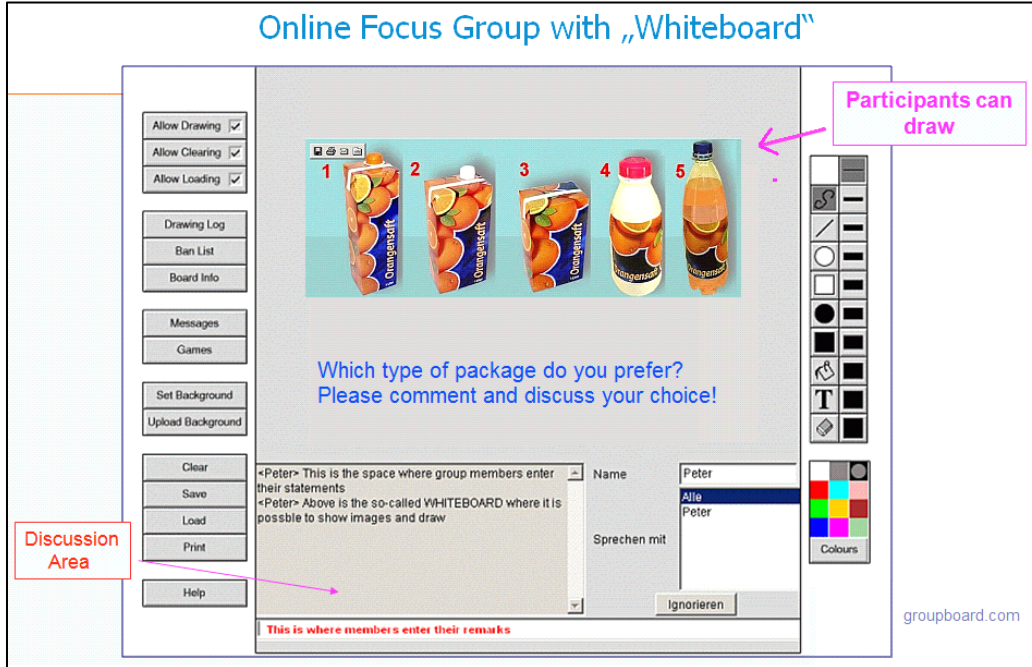
Campfirenow is a simple but reliable chat program. It does not have a whiteboard but allows the use of stimuli: product images, audio or video clips can be uploaded for display and discussion within the threads.
<http://campfirenow.com> (price ca. US\$ 24 per month)

VisionsLive offers Focus Groups and Bulletin Boards for reasonable fees.
<http://www.visionslive.com/products/online-focus-groups/>

Kwalitools is state-of-the-art group discussion software which provides for simultaneous discussion of up to eight persons with Webcams enabled for all of them and with a very flexible whiteboard. The transcript - a video file - is available on the server but can be rerun for analysis: <http://www.kwalitools.com/> (pricing must be inquired, not too cheap)

Webex is a fully professional Web conferencing program. It allows simultaneous voice discussion including Webcam transmissions. It has a flexible whiteboard and also allows the use of a chat function: <http://www.Webex.com> (price US\$ 19 /month)

Example: Groupboard - <http://groupboard.com>



Online Bulletin Boards

The online bulletin board (OBB) is Web space where a person can go and post a message. Other visitors of that site can view this message and any visitor can either post another message or reply to any of the messages already on the board.

Recruitment can be carried out in the same way as for traditional focus groups. But, instead of inviting people to a central location at a specific date and time, people are invited to a Website. As a rule, respondents must accept to visit the site a number of times over a period of one week to ten days. This is the major difference to online focus groups: the session will go on for several days. Both the moderator and the respondents can „pop in” to the site when it is most convenient for them. Normally, every day in the morning a new topic is introduced or reference is made to a prior discussion.

E-mails are used for recruitment, containing a link to the discussion board, for providing instructions and for sending out reminders („don't forget to visit our online discussion today...“). Initial recruitment should provide for about double the number of participants needed to take part during the entire period.

Note: It is important that the respondents are committed to the task; otherwise there is an obvious risk that people „forget” to visit the site. Appropriate incentives are a must. Many of the rules and restrictions mentioned in the section on online focus groups pertain also to the online bulletin board. The decisive difference, however, is the fact that the OBB is not at all hectic as it goes on not for an hour but for days.

The moderator posts topics or questions on the board using a special signature to distinguish him/her from the respondents. The respondents reply to the moderator's messages but can also reply to any other respondent's posts. In this way a discussion „thread“ is created.

Note: Care should be taken by the moderator that the discussion is more than just „question and answer“. This is helped by stimuli like images, charts or even videos. Interesting topics will best guarantee active participation.

The moderator should create an open, comfortable environment that allows participants to realize they are talking to a live person. Moderators can truly get to know many of their participants, depending on the length of the board.

Along with providing a personal touch with the moderator, prolonged online research allows participants to glimpse into their fellow members' lives. They start to naturally interact with each other, sharing their opinions and personal stories. Participants may even be sad when projects are over.

Sometimes it is advisable to ask participants to do some homework in advance and send it in electronically prior to the group. This can help with setting up the discussion guide. Added benefit: people who send the homework ahead of time are more likely to show up.

Like in online focus groups there is the possibility to let the client (from any place in the world) visit the site and follow the discussion as an observer - unseen by the participants but able to interact with the moderator.

Note: Many clients nowadays like the possibility to observe qualitative research projects from „behind the one-way mirror“. But there is also the opposite opinion: clients should not interfere with the researcher's methodology and activities.

Today's bulletin board software provides for the inclusion of all kinds of multi-media (images, videos, sound, and links). With the help of a whiteboard, respondents are confronted with images of products, maps, graphs and other optical stimuli. They may be asked to comment in writing or drawing. Respondents can be asked to send in videos, create collages, photo journals, metaphors and more. Other projective methods are storytelling, sentence completion and letter-writing.

Some state-of-the-art bulletin board programs enable „sentiment tagging“. By this is meant the possibility for respondents to mark objects on the whiteboard and add text to express „likes“ or „dislikes“. These markers can eventually be condensed into a „heat map“, or analysed via the transcript. Another possibility is to enable the moderator to "tag" opinions uttered by respondents with his own remarks. These tags/remarks will eventually facilitate the final text analysis.

One of the big advantages of the OBB - functioning as an „asynchronous“ discussion - is the rich volume of copy generated (sometimes more than a hundred pages). Postings

can be viewed in the transcript in their original form which means that in this phase of the analysis, individual statements can be identified. Respondents can be pre-grouped in segments (young-old, female-male etc.) in order to analyse their posts accordingly. Some programs even provide basic instruments for text analysis such as word frequency counting software or programs producing „word clouds” (for details cf. the section on text analysis).

Some OBB software includes a chat feature for real-time conversation between respondents and moderator.

Note: Online bulletin boards are well suited for brainstorming exercises of all kinds.

Advantages of Online Bulletin Boards

An OBB makes it possible to form a group of geographically dispersed respondents. Respondents do not have to travel to a central location; instead they can take part in the discussion from any Internet-connected PC or hand-held device.

Respondents do not have to reserve a specific hour to participate; instead they can enter the board whenever it is convenient for them. Therefore, target groups that find it inconvenient to take part in a traditional focus group might be easier to recruit to a bulletin board (e.g. professionals, executives, experts in different fields etc.).

It is possible to handle a relatively large number of respondents per session (up to two dozen persons).

Bulletin boards provide anonymity to the respondents (use of „nicknames”).

Social cues - like the way someone looks, dresses, and talks - are not relevant.

People tend to use a detailed and more colourful language when participating in bulletin boards, which results in a more qualitative „flavour” compared to online focus groups where the discussion is always pressed for time.

The fact that the respondents can think for a while before giving an answer, makes it possible to ask more complex questions that otherwise would be difficult to answer (e.g. how would you suggest to improve this product/service?)

There is no limitation on how much they can say in each of their responses, so every participant can have equal airtime to explain their viewpoints. They don't have to negotiate sharing time with others in a designated response window.

The moderator does not need to act in real-time and can therefore take his time to reflect and revise the guidelines or even consult with the client before asking follow-up questions or launching new topics onto the board.

OBBs are easier to fit into a moderator's agenda since the moderator can join in at his/her own convenience. Additional questions or topics can be prepared without rush.

Note: As in all online research, topics which are normally not easy to talk about (alcohol, taxation, sex, health problems) can be discussed more readily in bulletin boards.

Disadvantages of Online Bulletin Boards

It is not possible to get really spontaneous reactions from respondents.

There is a lack of non-verbal input from respondents, unless Webcams are used.

There is no possibility to test taste, smell, and handling of products (unless samples are delivered to the homes).

It is not possible having respondents do what can be called 'get up and move' exercises where they get out of their seats and interact with stimulus, pick things up, physically sort them, etc. which helps to keep respondents engaged and their energy levels high. Traditional psychologists might dislike the „high-tech-feeling“ and therefore reject the method.

Sometimes the output of a bulletin board (or several) can be so large that analysis becomes too time-consuming.

Recommended software:

Dub-Ideastream <http://www.dubstudios.com/>

ThinkingShed <http://www.thethinkingshed.co.uk/features.php>

Qualboard (20|20 Research) <http://qualboard.com>

Visionslive <http://www.visionslive.com/>

Revelation <http://revelationglobal.com>

Online Diaries/Blogs

In contrast to online focus groups and bulletin boards, an online diary („Web log“ or „blog“) is kept on an individual basis and for a longer period of time, sometimes for months. „Blog“, by the way, is a portmanteau word combining the parts of the phrase „Web log“. A blog is a personal journal published on the Web, consisting of more or less regular entries („posts“). These entries are typically displayed in reverse chronological order so that the most recent post appears on top.

The purpose of an online diary as an instrument of market, media or social research is to record occurrences on a daily basis in digital form. Typical applications are diaries to record radio and/or other media use or blogs to collect data on health problems or medication.

Online diaries are kept either with the help of special blogging software or with a program otherwise used for bulletin boards or online focus groups (q.v.). Even more than with bulletin boards, the keeper of an online diary must be ready to enter the required data on a daily basis. Incentives, therefore, must be attractive enough to prevent respondent fatigue and drop-out.

Market Research Communities (MROCs)

Web 2.0, the so-called „ Social Web“, is characterized by the existence of many types of user groups, forums, informal and formal communities and, especially, commercially oriented social networks such as Facebook, Linked-In, Xing, and Google+ etc. There are a very large number of social networks available. Cf. the list at

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_Websites

Social networks, communities and forums come in all sizes - from Facebook (<http://facebook.com>) with approximately 900 million users via „Patients like me” (<http://www.patientslikeme.com/>) with ca. 150,000 participants down to smaller communities like the Austrian senior citizen forum „Seniorkom“ (<http://www.seniorkom.at/>) with 15,000 members - still an impressive quantity members.

Internet-based communities enable quick information sharing and collaboration among their participants. The software used for communication may include the possibility to conduct short „polls” - mainly informal one-question surveys with instant display of results. For the purpose of professional market research, there are two different options:

1. Using an existing social network by becoming a member and attempting to conduct discussions, polls or surveys among the other members. In some way this resembles acting as a „participant observer“. As a member of a community it is possible to initiate conversations about specific subjects, conduct polls or at least share and record „buzz” (Web lingo for online communication e.g. between customers or consumers of specific products for the exchange of opinions, criticism and recommendations). A mere company page in Facebook, however, is not considered a „community”.

Note: Activities described above must not be confused with „Web mining“ by which is meant the digital method of locating conversations on blogs or in forums (by means of search engines) and extracting text and images from these by means of special software (robots, spiders).

2. Creating an ad-hoc market research community (MROC) for a client with the intention to use it for tracking the distribution of a product or a service or monitoring marketing/advertising campaigns. Participants can be recruited from a sufficiently large online pool (e.g. screening for persons who have their digital photographs printed by a certain company) or from address lists provided by the client (e.g. electronics chain store). Members must be willing and able to integrate themselves into a community to exchange opinions and comment on topics. Moderators must be experienced in community activity and be able to use the special Web vernacular.

Depending on the product/service, short-term MROCs can be used for qualitative purposes (commenting and discussing topics as, e.g., the awareness and acceptance of an advertising campaign) or for gaining quantitative results - e.g. tracking by means of closed questions like, e.g., scaling the quality of a product/service over an extended period.

The question remains: are communities really an appropriate instrument of professional market research?

Side-by side studies have shown that reactions by members of online communities do not differ substantially from those of online panels - except for the special interests shared by the members. It is self-evident that e.g. the members of a motorists’ forum initiated by a specific car maker will be emotionally closer to their sponsor’s product than

the general public. Like in any research, target groups must therefore be considered carefully.

Meta-research into studies of communities suggest that community members remain candid and honest over time - despite many months of ongoing participation where they form relationships with one another and the sponsoring company.

Note: Practical experience with research in or by communities is scarce - there are considerable doubts that the effort necessary for recruiting and maintaining a functioning community can be calculated such as to cover the costs, so that at the end the created costs will justify the price of the service.

Semi-qualitative Projects

The „Online Market Scout” - a semi-qualitative approach

Practical work with online research has shown that it is easy to profit from the special possibilities of this research method. One such possibility the Internet offers is a quick yet productive check on a specific problem or market - we shall call it the „Online Market Scout “.

On the basis of approximately $n = 200$ completed online interviews selected on a representative basis from an online pool, a basic insight can be won into a market whose details are not known so far. The „Market Scout” can be used to serve as a preparatory survey for subsequent more elaborate research („pilot study“).

Note: This kind of study is called „semi-qualitative” because with $n = 200$ interviews, based on only one open-ended question, it lies somewhere in the middle between in-depth interviews/group discussions and representative quantitative studies. Answers can be coded, but even a simple word frequency count and some browsing through the *verbatim*s would enable the researcher to make himself a picture about the major results of the project. Besides its short turn-around, this type of survey has the advantage that panel members do not need to get more than a minimum incentive. The „Market Scout” is therefore a cheap instrument of basic market analysis.

Online Ethnography

Traditionally, „*ethnography*“ is the term used for a type of social or market research in which the researcher acts very close to the respondent - e.g. as a passive observer in a household or in a shopping mall. The first recorded example of an ethnographic study with „participant observation“ was probably the study „*Die Arbeitslosen von Marienthal*“ , carried out in the years 1931-1933. The Austrian sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues evaluated the effects of unemployment with stopwatch in hand in the streets of a worker's settlement close to Vienna. One of the main results of the Marienthal study was that prolonged unemployment leads to a state of apathy in which the victims do not utilize any longer even the few opportunities left to them. For details see:

<http://agso.uni-graz.at/marienthal/studie/00.htm>

This study was also published in English:

Jahoda, M., Lazarsfeld, P.F., & Ziesel, H. (1971/1932). *Marienthal: The sociography of an unemployed community*. Chicago: Aldine.

Ethnography allows for the opportunity to observe „users“ in their typical settings, acting in their common patterns - with or without the presence of specific products. In certain situations, research can thus be staged directly in the consumer's world - for example, by so-called „tag-alongs“: walk-alongs, sport-alongs, drink-alongs, etc.

In the age of Web-based market research, „online“ or „virtual“ ethnography means the use of digital cameras, (smart)phones and other devices such as tablets or Webcams to „pull in“ actual situations in households, pantries, refrigerators or in supermarkets, in front of shop shelves or while using mobile phones. Together with online diaries, such an approach can indeed paint a very vivid picture of the real life of today's consumers.

Virtual ethnography attempts to maintain the values of traditional ethnography through providing a „thick“ description through the „immersion“ of the researcher in the lives of his subjects. Like in conventional market research, care must be taken also in online ethnography to preserve privacy of respondent by strict adherence to ESOMAR rules.

Note: In contrast to qualitative market research by „online ethnography“, the term „Netnography“ describes sociological research, chiefly by way of participant observation, into processes and habits of communication in social networks and online communities.

Website Usability Research

Testing the Performance of a Website

There are several different approaches for testing the performance of a Website and determining the demographic structure of its visitors. A productive way of establishing the quality of a Website is to discuss it personally with respondents while they surf the site to be tested. A quicker and less expensive way is to discuss a Website in a focus group session. This can be done offline in the conventional way or in an online focus group. In order to find out about the performance of a Website with a topical character (e.g. a news media site) the use of an online bulletin board is advised.

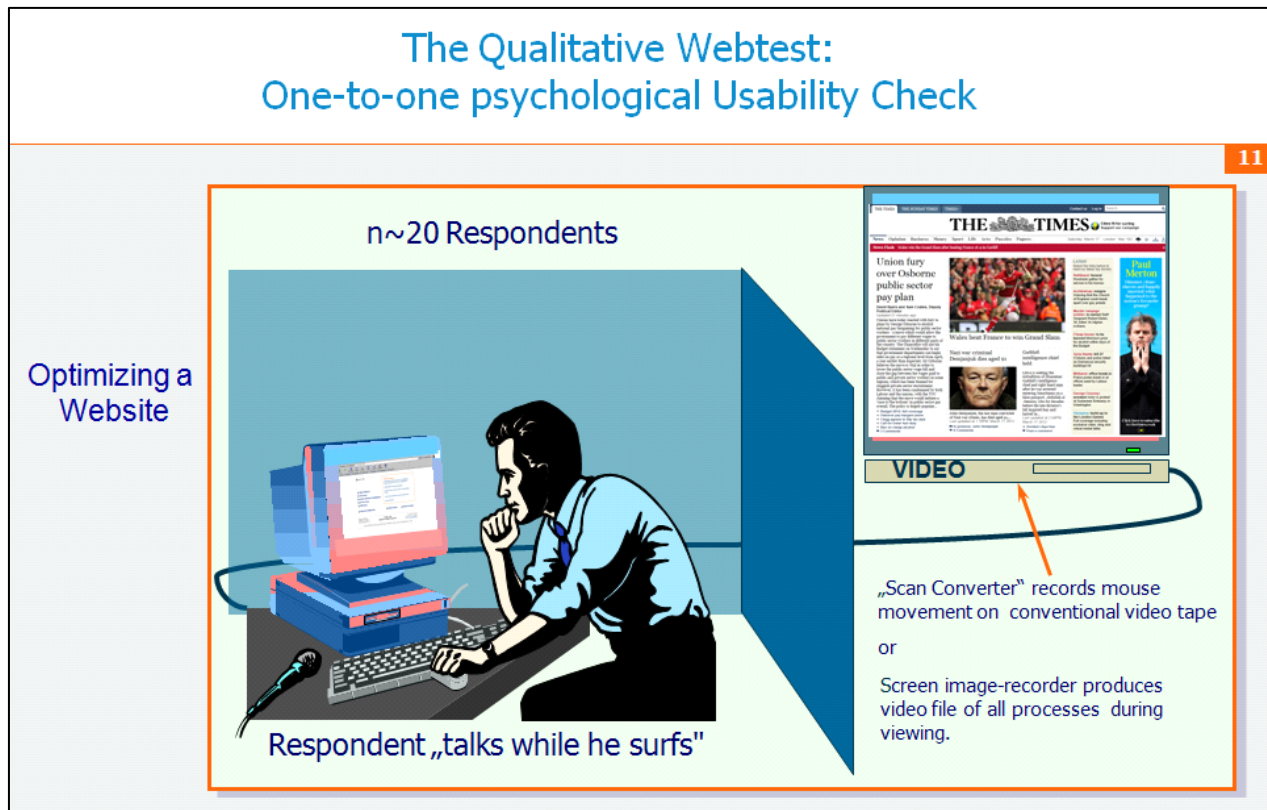
Naturally such tests can comprise not only one Website but may include one or two competing sites for comparison.

Note: Like in other applications of market research it is possible to corroborate qualitative findings by a quantitative (online) survey.

Accompanied Surfing

The most intensive qualitative approach to discover the usability/performance of a Website is to subject it to a „safari“ by a number of respondents. As can be seen in the graph below, respondents are being invited to an institute to test a Website in a one-to-one situation. With a qualified interviewer accompanying him/her, the respondent is asked to visit a site and go through its pages like a typical user. While the respondent surfs the site, he/she is asked to speak out loudly about his/her experience and observations.

This method is called „think aloud“ („Methode des lauten Denkens“). It enables the researcher, not only to observe what the test person is doing, but also to listen and pick up the spoken word via microphone and recording device.



The mouse movements on the screen can be recorded. There are a number of programs to record screen movements, such as, e.g., Screncorder 5, see:

<http://www.matchware.com/ge/products/screncorder/default.htm> (price US\$ 379)

It is also possible to use a video camera to record the facial expressions of the test person. Today, practically all digital still cameras enable the interviewer to record respondent behavior in HD.

The exact number of test persons required to produce a detailed report on the usability of a specific Website depends on the details expected. As a minimum, six carefully selected persons (users and/or potential users of the site) should be taken to gain a first insight. Reliable results can be achieved by interviewing 12-30 persons in this manner.

Note: The actual surfing experience should be followed by administering a paper-and-pencil questionnaire to record the demographic data of the respondent .

Practice has shown that sometimes - to the great surprise of Webmasters, screen designers and site owners - accompanied surfing reveals problems in the use of a site nobody had thought of before.

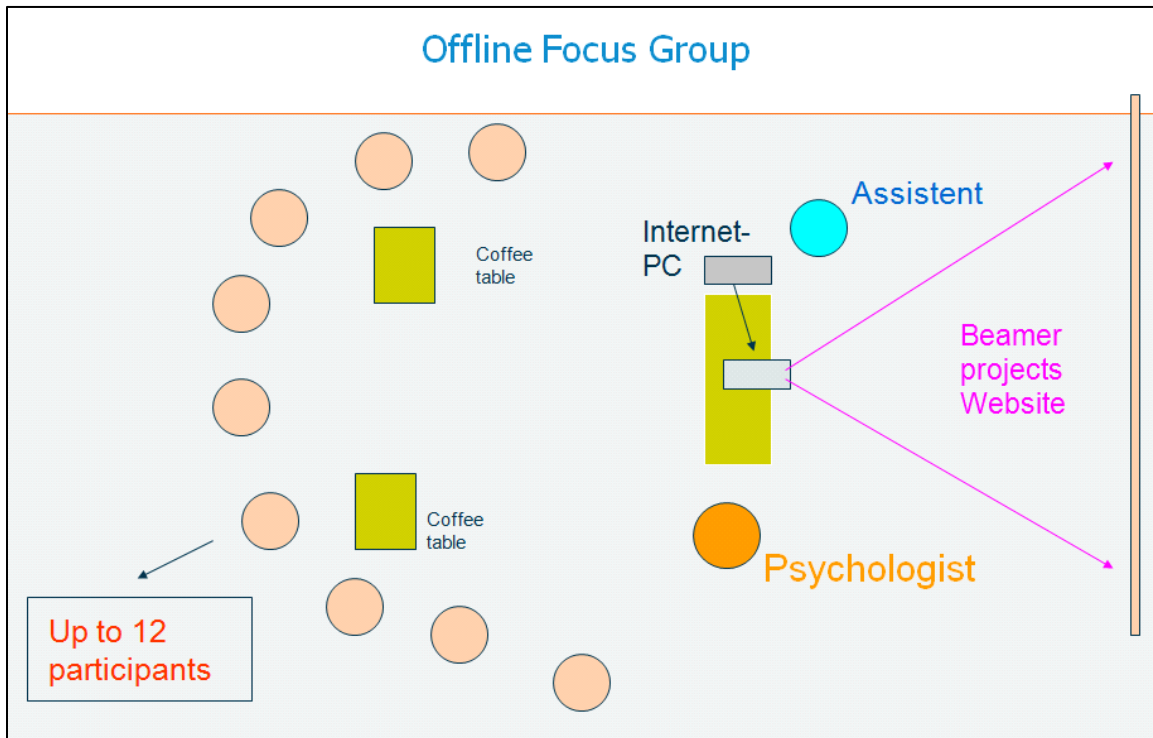
Testing a Website in a Conventional Focus Group

As can be seen in the graph below, a conventional focus group can be used to discuss the usability/performance of a site - including one or two competing sites.

To optimize discussion, respondents should be seated at small coffee tables in a semi-circle facing a screen where the moderator's assistant shows the sites/pages to be discussed. After the discussion, the respondents are asked to fill in paper-and-pencil questionnaires to rate the standard dimensions of the site(s) and enter their personal demographic data.

The specific situation of a focus group is different from other methods. In contrast to „accompanied surfing“, the discussion of a Website in a group of 8-12 persons is not as intensive with regard to personal experience. After all, the surfing process must be simulated by the moderator's assistant. On the other hand, the discussion in a group can be quite creative: new ideas may spring up; views by one person can be supplemented or corrected by somebody else etc.

Note: The results of a group discussion about a Website may be somewhat more superficial than those achieved by „accompanied surfing“, but they are gained in a much quicker and definitely cheaper way.



Testing a Website via Online Focus Group

It is quite clear that testing an object which exists only on the Web is best done online. This method can be called „*indigenous research*“ („Untersuchung ohne Medienbruch“) because in this case the test is done in the original setting.

Thus, testing the usability/performance of a Website in a qualitative way will be done best by means of an *online* focus group or an *online* bulletin board.

The members of an online focus group - usually not more than eight persons - must be recruited from the target group of the site to be tested (users or potential users).

Eye Tracking

Eye tracking has long been known and used as a method to study the visual attention of individuals. There are several different techniques to detect and track the movements of the eyes. Originally, a camera mounted above the respondent's eyes was used. Now a number of companies offer analyses of Websites, e-mails and other stimuli presented on a computer screen by following the movement of the respondent's eyes. The results of such research are displayed in „gaze plots“ (graphs depicting vision paths), „heat maps“ on which red color indicates the spots with highest attention, and „focus maps“ in which the most visited parts of the object are shown as white areas on black background.

The most commonly used non-intrusive eye tracking technique is *Pupil Centre Corneal Reflection (PCCR)*. The test situation in eye tracking resembles the conventional form of "accompanied surfing" (q.v.). An example can be found at:

<http://www.tobii.com/eye-tracking-research/global/library/white-papers/tobii-eye-tracking-white-paper/>

By a sophisticated method, eye tracking can also be simulated online. Any graphic image (e.g. ads, leaflets, and Webpages) can be uploaded to be analyzed. The results are presented as described above and are considered to be representative for the first five seconds of a new visitor's viewing behavior. For an example see the Website of the German firm "Eyequant" at <http://eyequant.com>