

INSIGHT SERIES

Closer to the Action

How private online research communities bring clients closer to their customers

By Deborah Gemmell

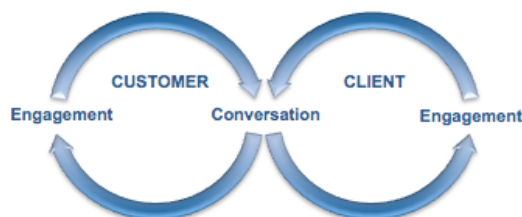
"Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I'll understand."
Chinese proverb

We're often asked to explain why clients should consider using private online research communities instead of traditional qualitative approaches such as focus groups. There are a number of real differences that are evident in the process and methodology, and others that relate to the outputs. However, one of the more unique and influential differences is level of client involvement. And it is this involvement that keeps our clients coming back for more.

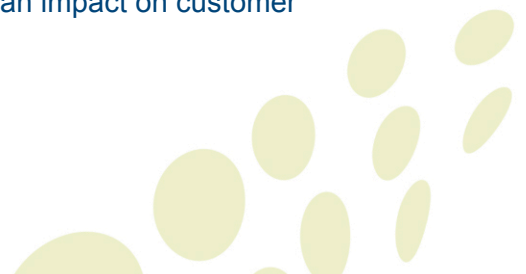
For clients, involvement in traditional qualitative research typically means watching focus groups from behind a one-way mirror. This enables them to view what a small group of people or customers have to say in a discussion setting. Client attendance at the groups is often limited to the Marketing and/or Insights teams, reinforcing the notion that too often in companies, there is limited real understanding of customers outside the marketing department.

Online research communities are revolutionary in the sense that the client can actively 'listen' to the voice of the customer from their own desk, any time, or all the time. By providing our clients with direct access to the communities, we enable the marketing teams to bring the customer deeper inside the business. Armed with login details, people from Research & Development, through to Customer Service can see exactly what the customer has to say about their brands, products and services. This is particularly important for senior management, who can operate at arm's length from the real customer experience. Should the CEO desire to 'listen', active customer conversations are only a click or two away.

Unlike focus groups, online research communities are longitudinal, lasting most often for months. Because a community runs 24/7, there are member discussions occurring on a daily basis. Clients have the opportunity to log into the community whenever they want and see what their customers are talking about. Over the life of the community, the connection with our members deepens, giving us permission to dig deeper and ask more. This, in turn, means our clients connect more deeply with their customers, as they follow conversations from beginning to end.



Essentially, conversations between customers which are observed by clients bring the two closer together. Conversations initiated in our online research communities migrate offline into our client's businesses as they in turn discuss what they have observed and how this can impact on customer relationships.



Context Rich Insights

An additional benefit for clients is the depth of knowledge that online research communities provide in terms of the customer's context. Instead of merely finding out what they think about a topic or issue, we gain an understanding into why they hold an opinion. Like any social network, our members share a lot – and we listen to everything. We hear of births, deaths and marriages; we learn about their families, backgrounds and preferences; we see pictures of their homes, pets and holidays. In the end, with the luxury of time, we're provided with insights that can't be achieved in other research methods.

Additionally, in the privacy of an invitation-only research community, customers feel safe to say what they really think. They not only respond to the moderator's seeded discussions, they proactively start discussions amongst themselves about the things that are important to them. These spontaneous discussions can be the most rewarding because, as researchers and clients, we tend to focus on the questions we believe are relevant, especially when following a prescribed discussion guide. So, it's the discussions we don't initiate that can generate the most excitement, because they are truly customer led.

This context and richness, helps marketers actually connect with their customers. Through greater knowledge companies are able to develop targeted products and services, improve the customer experience, better plan and position their advertising and communications. So while we might not be able to 'view' our customers in an online research community, we can certainly see into their lives and respond to their needs.

Sharing the task

An innovative aspect of online research communities is the concept of co-creation or collaboration between companies and customers. The platform allows for a creative dialogue to develop over time, where ideas are shared and critiqued, tested and accepted (or rejected). While yet to take hold in Australia, this approach is being quickly adopted overseas where both public and private sector organisations have co-opted customers, or stakeholders, to provide input into products, services, programs, etc. The benefit of working collaboratively with customers is self-evident – it guarantees a better and more relevant outcome for both sides.

A two-way street

At this stage, we've only talked about what the client gets out of the process in terms of getting closer to the customer. But it's definitely not a one-sided conversation with only our members talking. Our clients don't just listen, they actively participate in the community. This can include live chats on a specific topic or writing a blog for members to read and thanking them directly for their input. Importantly, as moderators, we provide continual feedback to our members that their opinions are highly valued and appreciated by the company sponsoring the community.



While there are many positive aspects to deeper engagement with the customer during the research process, it's necessary to also recognise the potential issues if clients get too close. Online research communities are not about customer relationship management, or for following up on individual complaints or issues. If client involvement becomes too overt, members may develop unreasonable expectations of how their input will be responded to. The role of the moderator must be also be as gatekeeper, facilitating the flow of information in and out of the community.

In summary, our online communities allow our clients to be more involved through:

- ↳ **Deeper understanding**
- ↳ **Collaboration and co-creation**
- ↳ **Active participation**

Perhaps, though, the most compelling reason for clients to get closer to their customers through online communities comes from the customers themselves. The final word...

"It's the interest that you (client) and your company have shown towards us, the customers, and our opinions that makes all the difference. So many companies just don't seem to give a hoot about anyone and it's uplifting to read how much our views and opinions mean to you." Community Member, June 2009

About Latitude Insights

Latitude Insights is a market research consultancy, specializing in online research communities to develop rich and deep customer insights for our clients.

Dianne Gardiner
Director
p: (03) 9571 1199

Web: latitudeinsights.com.au

