Editorial

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As a social science researcher myself, I always feel duty bound to undertake email surveys. This can be a tiresome duty. This is partly because, as a result, I am exposed to all the vicissitudes of bad practice in design and administration, ludicrous questioning and all the obsessions of anxious clients that the industry has to offer. One national broadsheet is once again obsessed with what I think about their re-launch; another survey is unreasonably curious about the football teams I support (even though I do not support any); a further study wants to use me simply as a way of getting at the views of my 13-year-old son. Panel surveys generally ‘forget’ who I am and require constant reminders of my age, gender and geographical location by TV region. But it was with a particularly heavy heart that I recently opened the third panel survey request of the day from a well-known UK research house to read that ‘This survey should take no more than 45 minutes to complete!’ Instinctively, my finger reached for the delete button.

We have all heard about the exciting opportunities that online research offers to achieve better and more nuanced insight into customers. Academics have been pointing this out for some time: ‘the speed, ease, cost and perhaps, novelty of research using the Internet explain its appeal to clients for both quantitative and qualitative research ...’.¹ But is the novelty wearing off: are firms becoming complacent in their assumption that in a digital democracy we are happy to be at their beck and call? Perhaps, too, firms are becoming sloppy in their constant recourse to email. After all, it is all too easy to patch together a quick survey to confirm a hunch. But perhaps what I am really suffering is a form of democracy fatigue brought on by the superficial and one-sided nature of these inquiries.

Certainly, the enthusiasm for so-called ‘first generation’ marketing tools may be waning: email

questionnaires and interstitial, or pop-up, website surveys are increasingly a source of irritation to users. But the potential for employing the internet for more qualitative insights may be greater. The interest here has bred the evolving language and terminology of netnography, describing attempts to provide ‘thick descriptions’ of ‘the lived experience of consumers’ and drawing upon established approaches derived from ethnography.² Today, that somewhat inelegant word has morphed into the much more fashionable notion of the ‘research community’ and it is here that the attention of many market researchers is now focused. From the marketer’s point of view, a focus on communities has very considerable attractions. We already have a wealth of experience in recognizing the importance of brand communities. Studies of brands as varied as Harley-Davidson, Star Trek and Apple have shown the richness of insights that can be gained from recognizing and encouraging such phenomena.^{3–5} The benefits of such communities are clear: greater proximity to the customer, a longer-term relationship with that customer, a clearer and earlier sense of the customer’s attitudes towards the brand and concerns; as well as opportunities to co-create new products and services. The risks are also apparent: strong brand communities tend to believe that they, rather than the company, own the brand. Communities outwith the control of the firm can go bad and risk reputational damage to the brand. It is rather like allowing the cameras in to film a fly-on-the-wall documentary – a calculated risk.

Research communities are more focused and rather less risky vehicles, but offer similar and additional benefits for measurement, insight and analysis in marketing. However, the term conceals a multitude of variants. Research communities can be simply observational, or

they can be participatory; narrowly drawn or crowdsourced; tightly focused research instruments or glorified customer feedback schemes. Understanding objectives here is important. For example, UK discount airline Easyjet has created a 2000-strong research community drawn from customers who have traveled with the airline over the preceding 12 months.⁶ This bounded community is used to generate specific insights from the customer base. By contrast, Starbucks created My Starbucks Idea in 2008 as a crowdsourced feedback and idea generation mechanism (<http://mystarbucksidea.force.com>). Viewers are invited to vote for their preferred suggestions, the best of which will be implemented. By July 2009, over 74 000 suggestions had been made. Leading 'ideas in action' included a Treat Receipt (buy a drink before 1400 hours and return with the receipt for a discounted drink later in the day) and a key chain 'mini Starbucks card'.

For marketers, the convergence of online with ethnographic techniques and approaches offers a potentially rich and nuanced toolkit for targeting and analysis. But in moving down the

co-creation and collaboration road, marketers need to be aware, too, that there may be natural limits to such collaboration. How many brands are you sufficiently involved with as a consumer to want to devote time to netnographic musings and discussion? Democracy fatigue may yet be waiting in the wings once the novelty wears off.

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