

Analyzing Online Qualitative Research

The GfK NOP experience

For many qualitative market researchers, the benefits of reaching time poor and geographically dispersed respondents through online research can be outweighed by the time and cost associated with analyzing the rich volumes of data generated.

But GfK NOP - the UK arm of MR giant the GfK Group – has discovered data analysis software may be the key to making online research viable.

A growing number of agencies are using research software XSight to manage and analyze the qualitative data generated by bulletin boards, online focus groups, blog monitoring and other online mediums. GfK NOP has been using the QSR International developed software for the past two years to assist with both traditional and online qualitative research projects.

A software solution to the online data problem

Dr Liz Montgomery, Divisional Director of GfK NOP's Business and Technology Division said their division initially sought a software solution to help manage the sheer volume of rich data generated on bulletin boards conducted for business to business clients.

"There's something about any form of web research that means people actually become more frank," she said.

"They also have the ability to think about the questions and their responses before posting them and this translates into much more meaningful and considered comments.

The challenge that every researcher has at this point is managing and then analyzing a print out of hundreds and sometimes thousands of detailed, but disjointed, posts."

Managing thousands of posts – quickly

The anonymity of the online environment and the respondents' ability to participate on their own terms means it's not uncommon to hear of researchers wading through between 500 to 5000 posts per project. Dr Montgomery said the advantage XSight has in managing this data is that it lets the user set up frameworks within which to classify and later analyze the information, leading to significant time savings. She explains:

"Qualitative data analysis software lets you create analysis frameworks, either before you begin your research or as you input the data. You can define the characteristics of each research sample in as little or as much detail as you want," she said.

"We ran a series of online sessions for BT (British Telecom) recently and gathered about 800 posts over three days. That's an extraordinary amount of rich data, but we simply cut and pasted the posts directly from the bulletin board into the software's frameworks, assigning attributes like employee size, industry and segment as overall parameters. We were able to accurately match every single comment to each respondent and bring the data back together very quickly and succinctly to start the analysis."

Interrogating information in a richer and more creative way

While some researchers may not think the process is that dissimilar to importing transcripts into Microsoft Excel, Word or Access for collation and analysis, Dr Montgomery said the sorting functions of XSight make it a simple process to call up variations of the data: for instance everything a particular respondent said about company objectives; everything all respondents said about a particular topic like environmental issues; or everything respondents from a particular sector said about the topic of environmental issues.

It is in this crucial phase that GfK NOP has found the time savings that many in the market research industry had hoped online qualitative research would bring. Dr Montgomery points to the BT project again:

"Sometimes you need a bit more than just your interpretations; you actually do need to take a different cut of the data. Software lets you interrogate the data in a much richer and more creative way," she said.

"We were re-testing a concept with a group of senior managers via a bulletin board. The material had been well received by an earlier face to face group, but it quickly became apparent some of the respondents in the online group didn't relate to it.

"Using XSight's query function we could actually take those comments and look back across the board to see how the same respondents had reacted to other topics. We could drill down into that data to try and understand whether or not things were interrelated much more quickly and easily than we could have using other techniques. That led to an insight about what the reality of working life was like for these managers, quite separate from the original brief."

Robust and marketable analysis

Dr Montgomery said the trick is that the software makes the dataset robust and the analysis much more manageable.

"Because you can vary the structure of the information without damaging the original dataset you can create new views and run as many queries or test out as many theories as you want. For instance I can do keyword searches and generate new sample characteristics based on my queries. With an Excel spreadsheet you are constantly cutting and pasting your results and if someone who doesn't know what they're doing messes around with the data, it can be horrible. Qualitative data analysis software provides speed and an extra richness at this stage."

Over the past 18 months GfK NOP has extended the use of XSight to five of its custom divisions, and a further two are about to commence usage.

"The fact that we're using technology to help us get the most out of our qualitative data has actually become a selling point for us," said Dr Montgomery.

About XSight

XSight is the only qualitative software on the market designed specifically for commercial market researchers. It provides a sophisticated workspace that enables users to work through their information and get to their analysis faster. Its suite of tools allow researchers to track themes, test theories and map their thoughts easily. XSight is ideal for testing an advertising campaign, researching new packaging or community consultation projects. You don't have to be a market researcher to use it either. Because every organization deals in information, XSight can add value in almost every setting.

About GfK NOP

GfK NOP Ltd is the UK arm of the GfK Group (one of the top five market research companies worldwide) and a leading research agency in the UK. It is a renowned supplier of syndicated and custom research, producing industry specialists, best-in-field research design, methodologies and analytics for qualitative, quantitative, ethnographic, omnibus and online services. Based in London, GfK NOP brings together under one brand the established market research companies NOP Research Group, GfK Martin Hamblin UK and GfK Media UK. Information: www.gfknop.co.uk.

About QSR International

QSR International is based in Melbourne, Australia, with offices in North America and Europe. Its flagship products – XSight and NVivo 7 – are both designed to help researchers and other people working with non-numerical data to compile, compare and make sense of their information quickly and easily. More than 360,000 users in 90 countries use QSR research software, from market research agencies, government bodies and universities, to tourism, urban affairs and human resources professionals. QSR International is a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner and the company's NVivo 7 software was used as a reference project at the Microsoft TechEd 2006 conference in the United States. Information: www.qsrinternational.com.