



**ONLINE COMMUNITIES
& THE BENEFITS OF
ENGAGING DIGITALLY**



For good or ill, there's no escaping that the internet has changed the way that we interact with the world. Where once talking to people, whether in person or by telephone, used to take precedence; many of us now feel it natural to message people instead, using email or text messages. In more recent years we've also experienced a shift to communicating digitally, whether it be through social media platforms, Facebook Messenger, or WhatsApp – tools which rely on data to convey our messages. Statistics from the ONS in 2019 showed that 91% of adults in the UK were recent users of the internet, the third-highest rate in the EU. This high penetration in internet usage tells us not only that there is access to the internet for the majority of society, but also that there's an appetite to engage with digital platforms in a variety of different ways.

Our internet usage feeds through to other behaviour. When considering buying a mobile phone on a monthly contract, the emphasis now is on the data included within the tariff as a key differentiator, and the call minutes and text messages are given within the package.

This goes some way towards highlighting how, as a nation, we really are moving in many ways towards a "digital

first" approach, whether for consuming information, communicating, or just the boring essentials of life admin. So, when designing our research projects, we need to consider all these shifts in behaviour and preference, and consider: is what we're planning the best and most appropriate way to communicate and understand this audience? Rather than just opting for repeating the norm, we need to challenge ourselves to find the techniques that are right for the customers of 2020.

When we consider social media usage, we see a similar picture emerging. According to Avocado Social 'The Latest UK Social Media Statistics for 2019' (published in February 2019) in the UK there are 45 million social media users, so around 2 in 3 of the entire UK population. Further to this, 39 million users consume social media using their smart phones and 96% of UK social media users visited a social network or messaging service in the past month. Every day, the average UK based user spends 1 hour 50 minutes scrolling through social media sites. So not only are people using social media, it is becoming a bedrock of their interaction with the wider world, whether reading or watching the news, catching up with friends and family, or following a celebrity or brand. Some of the benefits of social media are that it's dynamic, engaging, agile, and responsive, and it is because of these features that the principles of social media have been adapted and applied to other uses, especially in qualitative research through the use of online communities

Online communities

Online communities have evolved through seeing how people interact and share information on social media platforms. Sites such as Facebook and Instagram have allowed researchers to really see the benefits of engaging digitally, and the proposition of online communities is based and shaped around the aim of piggy backing on these routine and habitual behaviours that we see on social media platforms. Can research use the power of community, interaction, and gamification to create a better experience for customers, and richer insights for organisations?

When we think about the broader trends that we're seeing in society, research techniques have very much followed these trends. Over recent years, we have seen a huge growth in web-based research being used as the main research methodology. Ongoing online communities are now a key component of many voice of the customer programmes, particular for companies who deal with consumers. The programmes providing a constant stream of rich information, in an agile and engaging way.

Ongoing communities are a great way to provide a snapshot of customers and their thoughts, feelings, and interactions in real time. However, ongoing communities might not be acceptable or appropriate for all businesses, as they do require significant investment, of both time and cost, in order to get the community set up and also keeping a high level of engagement with customers.



This is really important—if engagement is lost, then you have to work even harder when you need insights quickly, incurring more cost and often finding that you’re unable to get results as quickly as the business needs. This does often mean that it can be hard to manage ongoing communities in-house. Many organisations outsource their communities, unless they have an established and very well-resourced insight team.

Ad-hoc Communities

Building on the benefits that we’ve experienced with ongoing communities, but trying to reduce the time and cost impact, we have started to apply communities to shorter, ad-hoc projects, lasting anything for a couple of days to a few weeks.



Debs Binks
Client Manager
TLF Research
debsbinks@leadershipfactor.com

Based on our experience, some of the practical benefits of using online communities in this way are:

- **Time. Quick set-up. Especially if you’re wanting to cover a number of locations, fieldwork can start within 1-2 days of recruitment or whenever stimulus is ready.**
- **Costs. Negates the need for any fieldwork travel, accommodation, and venue costs; and often the cost of the platform hire is similar to a viewing facility for one session.**
- **Feasibility. Especially for a disparate customer base where interaction is required, this removes geographical considerations/biases.**

Further to these practical benefits, there are many other benefits to conducting an online community, especially for participants who are engaging in the research.

Participant benefits are:

- **Responsive platform. Can be used on a number of different devices with ease and further to this the participant can switch between a mobile, tablet and computer depending on what is most suitable. We find that this helps to build engagement as the research is less of a chore and helps to facilitate “in the moment” feedback for projects such as customer journey research.**

- **Multimedia. It’s easy to upload and share media for both participants and moderators e.g. images, photographs, videos; especially from a mobile or tablet device.**
- **Flexible and convenient. Allows participants to complete the tasks at a time of the day to suit them and their needs – it is this flexibility that further helps to create engagement by ensuring that the tasks don’t feel too arduous and fit around people’s lives and schedules.**

So there are practical benefits to conducting research via an online community for the researchers, clients, and participants; and there are further benefits as well from adopting an online community approach.

- **The platform is expandable in terms of its usage and suitability, meaning that the uses are endless, whether it’s diary keeping to understand “in the moment” experiences through to proposition and concept testing.**
- **A mix of individual and group tasks, providing personal reflection through to interacting with other participants on other tasks, can help remove group bias.**
- **Builds engagement over time, especially beneficial if there are co-creative elements – pre-sensitises participants to the topics being discussed, which helps to foster creativity over time.**
- **“Cleaner” and quicker analysis which is sometimes difficult when analysing group**

discussions and time consuming when carrying out a number of depths.

- *Can evolve during the project, e.g. adding in new stimulus, creating stimulus based on the earlier customer feedback.*
- *Can be used alongside other methodologies and approaches as and when required.*

These are just some of the benefits that we have found from using online communities for shorter and more focused research projects. Whilst there is a natural fit between online communities and consumer audiences, it isn't solely for use with consumers. Depending on the seniority of the audience, the relationship, and practical aspects (e.g. equipment to engage on the communities), it can be a great tool when conducting business to business research. There is just a need to ensure that tasks are appropriate in content, length, and frequency, and the participants will get something out of taking part in the community, whether it be sharing some of the findings or just enjoying sharing their views with peers or other professionals. We would advise talking to the audience beforehand in order to establish what would and wouldn't work, before the community is designed and launched.

The impact of COVID-19

In March this year the UK entered into lockdown as the nation began its fight against COVID-19. The main strategy, until a vaccine is found, is the principle of social distancing. Social distancing has massive implications for research projects and, in terms of qualitative research, the benefits of online communities became even more pertinent as a way to keep that rich dialogue going with customers.

For some companies who have never used or considered using online communities for research purposes, and who may doubt whether it would be appropriate for their audience, it is worth considering the trends we have seen since entering lockdown. For example, CNBC reported that Zoom daily

users spiked to 200 million in March, compared to just 10 million in December.

As a nation we are seeking more meaningful ways to interact with each other and fill the void that social distancing measures have created. The movement towards video calling remains pertinent across both business and personal communication. There is comfort in seeing people's faces, their reactions, and expressions, whether it be family, friends, colleagues, clients or suppliers. So again when thinking about the "sell" of an online community into both your organisation and also the audience, the methodology has probably never felt more appropriate.

Life after COVID-19

One thing that we need to consider is what will be the long term impact of COVID-19 in terms of our acceptance of different channels and preferences when communicating. Further to this, when thinking specifically about research, when will it be appropriate to conduct face-to-face research? Bearing this in mind, online methodologies and specifically communities are likely to become an ever increasing methodology of choice, yielding deeper and richer insight but in a safer, and potentially more engaging, manner.

