

Online Focus Groups Provide Hearing Aid for Listening to the Deaf

The authors explain how online research reached a unique market segment and gave their client some unexpected insights.

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We recently worked with a client who is a technology leader in cochlear ear implants. They were seeking feedback from a select group of deaf and hearing-impaired individuals who were considering a new surgical intervention that relies on the implants. Our client needed to help their management understand each prospective patient's decision-making process.

Cochlear implants represent a relatively new technical advance, offering a quantum improvement over old-fashioned hearing aids. From the patient's point of view, the decision to go forward with a cochlear implant is more complex than deciding to get a hearing aid, because surgery is involved, thus the stakes are much higher.

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Our marketing agency clients, who brought us into the project, felt that by listening directly to their customers, the company could gain insights that would be more meaningful than management's shoot-from-the-hip approach to marketing decision making. "Like many other young, leading-edge companies, this one is staffed with brilliant, committed professionals, but this can sometimes work against its growth," the clients explained. "This is especially so when key decision makers use their own opinions and perceptions of the marketplace to guide R&D or marketing without touching base with customers. As a result, with no objective means of validating the actual wants, needs, and decision factors, costly miscalculations can be made," they pointed out.

To secure its leadership position in this marketplace, the client wanted a better grasp of consumers' decision-making processes surrounding cochlear implants. They needed answers to such questions as:

- How do prospective patients learn about the procedure in the first place?
- How do they choose between the competing brands of cochlear implant devices?
- Who advises them in that process?
- What are the roles played by other deaf or hearing-impaired friends; by family members; by family doctors, audiologists, and surgeons?
- What are the perceptions of various manufacturers of cochlear implant devices amongst those in the trade and among end-users?
- How did those perceptions get formed?
- What features are they looking for?
- What hopes and fears surround the implant process among end-users and their caregivers such as parents of children with profound hearing loss?

To really understand the answers to these questions in depth, a qualitative approach was called for. One-on-one interviews could yield the answers, but obviously a telephone interview would be inappropriate for deaf or hearing-impaired respondents. One-on-one, face-to-face depths or traditional focus groups were not good options either, since the candidates for cochlear implants live all over the U.S., and there was no budget for a national junket.

Conducting an online, real-time chat group was selected as the best option for two reasons.

First, online focus groups are text-based, so they are perfect for the deaf and hearing-impaired. Second, online groups are ideally suited for medical topics where participants might experience some embarrassment in a face-to-face encounter.

Respondents were recruited primarily from online support groups concerned with hearing issues. This guaranteed a population interested in cochlear implant technology, as well as one already possessing some comfort with online communication.

These respondents were extremely eager and enthusiastic communicators. They were also extremely grateful that a manufacturer cared enough to solicit their input and appreciated the opportunity to learn from one another.

Outcomes

The client was pleased to learn that, by and large, their targeted market perceives the company in a positive light. At the same time, critical issues demanding attention also surfaced. They learned, for example, that information found on the Internet plays a large role in the decision-making processes of those considering cochlear implants. They also learned about a number of factors that respondents felt differentiated their product from the competition. In addition, participants agreed that a powerful benefit is that the client's current implant technology has the power and capacity to take advantage of more advanced upgrades as they are introduced in the future.

The study's learnings will play a critical role in refining the company's product development. It will also help fine-tune sales, as well as print and online marketing communications, so that they will better reflect the real-life needs and concerns of the market.

After the study was completed, the client recalled that when primary research was initially recommended, some of the company's executives felt that outside research might not be necessary. Fortunately, management was wise enough to proceed with the research, and everyone, including the skeptics, couldn't have been happier with what they learned. Overall, the process led to another insight that is now ingrained in the client's corporate culture—when it comes to forging lasting relationships with customers and partners, the most important step a business can take is to listen to the voice of the marketplace. 