

HOT TOPIC SESSIONS

Parallel Hot Topic Sessions:

HOT TOPIC 1 Has online research in Healthcare gone too far! Or does it still have much further to go?

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Chair: Nigel Burrows, IMS Health. Speakers; Piergiorgio Rossi – SGR International, Andreas Moeller – Answers Pharmaceutical Marketing Research, Jerry Arbittier – All Global, Asif Javed – Medefield.

Billed as “Mission Impossible” the hot topic on the current and potential future role of online research provoked an action-packed debate between those agents on both sides brave enough to accept the mission to defend their beliefs!

There was no attempt to deny the status of the Internet as *the* innovation of the 21st century. Indeed Piergiorgio Rossi and Andreas Moeller were happy to recognise the benefits of online research, namely cost, speed and ease of administration. It would be hard not to acknowledge the instantaneous geographical reach of online research; the reduction in need for interviewers and even recruiters; the ease with which visual material can be shown to respondents as compared to research conducted over the telephone; the flexibility by which respondents can choose their time to complete the interview and the lack of need for editing.

Caution, however, was urged. Rossi and Moeller argued that too often these attributes tempt us to abuses, however unintentional, of online research. Interview lengths are over extended; unsuitable and over complicated, questionnaires are fielded, that in reality require assistance from an interviewer. The need for subtlety that a fifth variation on a question can provide is easily built up to and administered by an interviewer. Left on its own with no explanation or empathy from the interviewer, the same question risks inducing tedium and irritation in the respondent and there is no-one to ensure it is fully answered.

On the contrary, replied the defence, in the form of Jerry Arbittier and Asif Javed. Online research gives respondents the option to take a break from the interview and come back fresh to it later. Equally, longer interviews (of over 40 minutes) can be split and answered at different times. A questionnaire that has been constructed properly with really thorough piloting to eliminate any ambiguities and to ensure the inclusion of detailed instructions will more than hold its own online. On top of that, a good online questionnaire benefits from the added bonus of no interviewer bias or misinterpretation of complicated medical terms.

Undeterred, Rossi and Moeller persevered with their concerns by questioning the validity of online panels. They suggested that the ease with which these interviews can be administered has led to an increase in online research, which in turn has led to respondents being approached too often.

HOT TOPIC 2 How if at all will the developing healthcare environment alter the skills of those we employ in market research?



Online workshop

In addition, they worried that we are constantly returning to a biased sample of younger, more high-tech health professionals, if indeed we are even interviewing our target audience – or is a junior inputting information for an overstretched senior registrar?

The agents for opposition robustly responded to these claims. Arbittier and Javed, argued that time poor senior health professionals are more likely to participate in an interview that they know they can fit into their schedule at their convenience, rather than committing in advance to a pre-determined time slot for a face-to-face interview. Also, controlled use of well-maintained panels, followed up with call backs would ensure a dependable respondent base. This also applies to country differences when conducting internet research. Use of the internet is more advanced in some regions and this needs to be taken into account, but again controlled use of a panel should be able to take account of these differences.

So far the debate was pretty even, but there were some concerns, however, that could not be so easily allayed. The question was raised as to whether some agencies are promoting online research more in an attempt to get the proposal accepted by procurement, since this form of fieldwork apparently offers less expensive research which can be conducted quicker and more cleanly than other methodologies. There was also recognition that initially incentives paid for online research had been too high and had therefore “spoiled” health professionals for other types of research. These incentives had now been lowered, it was argued, but attention needs to be paid that they do not increase again.

Ultimately, there are always at least two sides to every argument – often equally plausible. Nigel Burrows, who would have made the perfect gentleman diplomat in another era (think Henry Fonda in “12 Angry Men”), was eloquent and fair in his summation. There were no outright winners in this debate – the whole hot topic of online research is simply too complex to decide whether or not it has gone too far. Instead there was general agreement that the most appropriate methodology should be chosen in order to answer the specific objectives for each individual project, a “horses for courses” approach. In Hollywood, this is known as “smart casting” and certainly this measured style would appear to be prudent. Maybe a little less “Mission Impossible” and a little more “Sense and Sensibility” but still with an eye keenly on the creative ways in which we can enhance online research in the future.

When talking movies were first launched as an alternative to the old silent movies, it was thought the craze for talkies would soon die out. But the first words ever spoken in a movie proved to be prophetic: “Wait a minute, wait a minute. You ain’t heard nothin’ yet!” Al Jolson said in the Jazz Singer. And so it may prove to be concerning online research...

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