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Are Market Research Online Communities Just the Latest Buzz - or Truly Effective at Driving Insight?

also to ensuring that ex-MROC members remain vital and active respondents for future research projects.

The Research Plan

The community we chose for our research was built from an existing online access panel. Our original research plan called for us to interview panelists immediately after they had completed their MROC experience. We would then compare our findings to measures we had taken when the community first got underway. Finally, we planned to interview the ex-MROC members on the same topics three months after the community ended. We'd compare those results to a control group to assess when any temporary conditioning from MROC participation would decay.

Not everyone who qualified for the MROC we were examining elected to take part in it. Therefore, we had a natural control group for comparing MROC members and non-members in terms of their involvement in future studies, their response to invitations and other overall differences in panel behaviors.

Unfortunately for our experiment, the MROC we chose for the study has had its active life extended. Therefore, we have not had the chance to measure any potential decay in conditioning.

What Kinds of People Join an MROC?
To understand the differences between those who join MROCs and those who don't, we selected corporate favorability—how positively or negatively each person views the sponsoring company—as our key variable. Our findings show that corporate favorability does not account for sign-ups to the community. In fact, those who join the community are also more favorable toward competitive brands. It seems that what really influences the decision to join a community is favorability toward the total sector and the brands within it rather than favorability toward the sponsoring company.

The community in our study is actually named after a specific product within the sponsoring company's portfolio. Whether a person uses or is even aware of the product, however, does not drive MROC membership. When we test brand awareness, just 7% of joiners and 6% of non-joiners name the sponsoring company's product.

On the surface, MROC joiners and non-joiners look fairly similar, but there are some key differences. For example, when asked to respond to a series of attitude statements related to lifestyle choices, joiners show a clear pattern of more positive responses. We suspect that people who are more positive are also

more likely to join communities. Their outspokenness makes them excellent community members. Remember that MROCs are not as much about measurement as about active discussion, feedback and idea generation.

Based on our study of MROC "joiners," it appears the community is, in fact, fit for its purpose. Any minor biases caused by self-selection—or by revealing the name of the sponsor prior to joining—would not affect the community's outcomes.

How Does an MROC Change People?

To discover if—and how—community membership changed joiners, we asked them the same questions after they had participated in the MROC for 2 ½ months. One of our most striking findings is that joiners' original enthusiasm for the sponsoring brand diminished dramatically over the course of their membership. Interestingly, during the same period, non-joiners increased their favorability toward the sponsoring brand.

Is joiners' waning enthusiasm a reaction to the community? Could what they are being asked to do or discuss within the MROC be driving their attitude changes?

To find the answers, we looked at what was happening to favorability ratings for competitive brands. Results show that changes in favorability toward the competition are exactly the same for joiners and non-joiners. Each segment—those inside and those outside the MROC—mirrors the other. Clearly, the only thing MROC membership is impacting is participants' opinion of the sponsoring brand.

What about top-of-mind awareness? It does increase among MROC members but not by much—just 17%. (from 9.2% to 10.8%). For non-members, however, it jumps 65% (from 3.5% to 5.8%).

For some reason, membership in the study's MROC causes negative conditioning. Joining the community results in a less positive view of the product—and a lower tendency to mention it first when asked to recall product names within the category. Our findings even show that it reduces product consumption.

An alternative view, and one that could not be tested given the experimental setup, is that it could have been a 'I'm having a good day' feeling at the time of recruitment that tipped the balance between joining and not joining the community. The underlying attitude might have been exactly the same between joiners and non-joiners with joiners simply reverting to type over the course of the MROC. The MROC itself may be completely neutral.



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One of the most exciting – and talked about – developments over the past few years has been the growth of market research online communities (MROC). With more than half of consumers blogging about their brand experiences—and social media use skyrocketing around the world among all age groups—more and more companies are building on these trends to create their own online research communities.

Proponents of MROCs laud their ability to drive insights and innovation while reducing both risk and cost. They see MROCs' strength in supporting ideation by providing feedback over time. Through MROCs, members can comment and re-comment continually. As a result, researchers can build stronger relationships with respondents. In addition, they can gather reactions to topics, as they happen without incurring additional expense, because respondents are already part of the community.

Fans of MROCs also see their potential for creating more trusting and intimate environments. Participants feel like they are part of a small and special group of people—so they have a genuine desire to influence the MROC's topic. They are more engaged, leading them to offer more meaningful and candid responses.

Our excitement about the possibilities MROCs present, however, should not stop us from asking what happens to respondents when they participate in such an immersive research experience. As we do with all research techniques, we must examine whether MROCs accurately reflect the views of the wider population—and if they are, in fact, suited to their purpose: maximizing consumer insight while minimizing business risk. To assess MROCs' accuracy and "fitness for purpose," SSI performed a research study to answer three key questions:

1. Are people who join an MROC substantially different from those who do not?
2. Does being a part of an MROC alter opinions toward the sponsoring brand or competitive brands?
3. How does participating in an MROC affect panelist behavior?

As a company that provides the people who form MROCs, SSI has a special interest in the third question. We not only are committed to providing our MROC clients with expert guidance but