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Using On-Line Bulletin Boards to Gather Preliminary Information

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Abstract: *Internet bulletin-board sessions can be used to collect preliminary, qualitative data. This method allows Extension personnel to gather responses from stakeholders about potential programming, consumer needs and desires, and preference for program delivery method without assembling participants in one location. Several other advantages exist, including time available for moderators and researchers to review participants' submissions and ability to alter questions, if*

needed. Disadvantages, compared to traditional face-to-face focus group session, exist; however, certain shortcomings can be overcome. Preliminary data collected can help Extension personnel identify issues to explore further including programming and opportunities for stakeholders.

Introduction

Prior to developing a new product or program, or enhancing an existing one, researchers and Extension personnel need to investigate consumers' attitudes and behaviors. One way to learn about underlying issues is to conduct a focus group session and "listen (to participants) and gather information" (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Focus groups have been identified as an appropriate tool for researchers investigating underrepresented audiences' Extension needs and food choice (Farner, Rhoads, Cutz, & Farner, 2005, Ingram & Syvertsen, 2005, Parker, Pinto, Kennedy, Phelps, & Hermann, 2007) and recognized as providing information useful for making programming decisions including:

- Assessing "program breadth" (White, Arnold, & Lesmeister, 2008),
- Learning whether online nutrition education appeals to low-income consumers (Case, Cluskey, & Hino, 2011), and
- Discovering what channels of information Iowa corn and soybean producers prefer (Licht & Martin, 2007).

Investigating Internet Bulletin-Board Value and Methodology

As technology continues to evolve, it is only reasonable to assume that Extension personnel will employ online resources and tools at an accelerated rate. Statistics, recently published by Pew Internet (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012) indicate that four in five adult U.S. consumers have Internet access. Hence, researchers felt that administering focus groups online would be appropriate and resolve issues associated with bringing groups of consumers together in one location for face-to-face focus group sessions. To do this, the researchers enlisted Survey Sampling International, LLC (Shelton, CT) to recruit participants from their registered panel members and provide a facilitator who would oversee the entire process.

Whereas a traditional face-to-face focus group session is conducted within a 1.5 to 2 hour session (Grudens-Schuck, Allen, & Larson, 2004), an Internet bulletin-board methodology was selected for the research reported here. The bulletin-board

sessions were structured to consist of twice-a-day postings during a 48-hour period. During this period, panelists logged into the system and responded to the moderator's questions and commented on other participants' responses. Each morning the moderator would send a reminder e-mail to all panelists, review responses, and post new questions. In total, participants who completed the Internet bulletin-board sessions logged in on four separate occasions.

To determine the utility of this tool, Internet bulletin-board sessions were conducted on two separate occasions as a component of a preliminary investigation and to gather responses to open-ended questions:

- Investigate targeted ethnic groups' (Asian Indian, Chinese, Mexican, and Puerto Rican) access and use of culture-specific ethnic greens and herbs (conducted 10-12 Mar. 2010) and
- Pennsylvania consumers' awareness of their state's promotional program, Pennsylvania Preferred, and interest in purchasing products marketed under the program's brand (conducted 24-26 Feb. 2010).

The researchers followed the methodology prescribed for a face-to-face session (Grudens-Schuck, Allen, & Larson, 2004), including:

- Selecting an appropriate moderator,
- Recruiting eight to 12 participants based on screener criteria, and
- Developing a moderator's guide focusing on pre-defined issues with corresponding open-ended questions.

Internet Bulletin-Board Advantages and Disadvantages over Traditional Face-to-Face Sessions

Administering Internet bulletin-board sessions provided several benefits over traditional face-to-face focus group sessions, including:

- The ability to reach participants living in multiple locations and who are distant from the moderator and researchers, concurrently, is increased;
- Generally, if a professional marketing company is contracted to conduct a traditional focus group session, the cost of conducting an Internet bulletin-board focus group can be much less;

- Participants could login and respond to questions based on their schedule, within a predetermined time frame;
- It allows participants to provide responses to all the moderator's and participants' questions and replies without waiting for other participants to respond, and possibly miss responding if the conversation changes direction;
- It allows the moderator and researchers to review participants' submissions and alter questions, if needed, based on these responses; and
- Because responses are typed there is no need to transcribe verbal responses, as is done when traditional face-to-face focus group sessions are recorded (Ingram & Syvertsen, 2005).

Conducting Internet bulletin boards do present some disadvantages compared to a session that assembles participants in one location, for example:

- Moderator and researchers are unable to view participants' body language and tone of voice when responding to questions and comments;
- Internet bulletin boards could be cost prohibitive to conduct depending on system (e.g. a proprietary system vs. a free application) used to administer the session;
- Participation could be limited based on potential respondents' access to the Internet and comfort with using the response system;
- By requiring participants to travel to a central location there is less chance of individuals being non-responsive or withdrawing before the session ends; and
- Researchers cannot record video and/or audio body language and tone of voice to be reviewed after the session ends.

Overcoming Internet Bulletin-Board Barriers

Costs associated with recruiting consumers for Internet bulletin-board sessions can be reduced or eliminated by identifying potential participants, as has been done with traditional face-to-face focus groups sessions:

- Recruiting consumers already involved in Extension programs,

- Enlisting the help of community leaders to identify potential participants (Farner, Rhoads, Cutz, & Farner, 2005),
- Recruiting industry members from businesses (Mathiasen, Morley, Chapman, & Powell, 2012).

Costs are also associated with the mechanism used to carry out the session. The researchers were provided a moderator and Web space to conduct the Internet bulletin board session for a fee. Based on budget, this option may not always be feasible. Other online tools can be used, for example:

- Facebook Page discussion board applications,
- Google groups, and
- Other free user created online communities.

Utilizing Internet Bulletin-Board Responses

Data from the two Internet bulletin board sessions were used to develop qualitative surveys that were administered to larger samples of consumers with demographics, psychographics, and geographic locations that mirror the bulletin board screener criteria. Implementing the bulletin board prior to the full survey alerted the researchers to evaluate questions and topic issues, based on participant responses, which may not have been considered otherwise, for example, questions developed to investigate practicality and consumer interest in separate state promotional-programs for fresh and processed foods. Other Extension researchers have recognized that this is a true benefit of implement focus group sessions (White, Arnold, & Lesmeister, 2008).

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