Traditional or On-line Focus Groups?

Over the last few years the popularity of on-line focus groups has increased, prompting many clients to begin asking for focus group bids that include an on-line alternative. The two most utilized online methodologies are real-time, virtual focus groups where six to eight respondents participate simultaneously; and asynchronous online bulletin boards with twelve to twenty respondents lasting a period of several days. It is imperative to understand the advantages and disadvantages of both traditional and real-time on-line focus group methodologies, in order to make the best decision based upon the parameters of the study. The purpose of this document is to present to the reader an objective comparison of traditional and real-time on-line focus groups (virtual), comprehending a complete focus group project from start to finish.

Attribute	Traditional Focus Groups	On-Line Real-Time Focus Groups
Study Design	Study design can take into consideration a high degree of participant interaction, moderator involvement, and liberal visual aids.	Study design must take into account that participant interaction is limited with each other and the moderator.
Discussion Guide Development	No difference versus on-line	No difference versus traditional
Recruiting	Participants must be recruited within a reasonable geographic area in order to accommodate physical travel of participants.	Recruiting can be done using participants all over the world, as long as they have a broadband connection.
Focus Group Scheduling	Depending on the target, focus group times likely have to work around the effects of traffic and travel during evening and morning hours.	Focus group scheduling does not have to account for traffic and travel.
Travel of Moderator and Observers	Moderators must physically travel to focus group facilities, often requiring long distance travel via airplane. Unless a service like Focus Vision is utilized to stream video across the Internet, observers must physically travel to observe focus groups.	Moderators and observers observe the dialog of the focus group via the Internet from a broadband connected PC.
Validation of Participants	Participants must provide proof of identification before entering the focus group.	Passwords can be used to increase security, but there still exists the possibility of substitutions without the knowledge of the moderator.
Waiting Room Questionnaires	Waiting room questionnaires are common and are typically included as part of the overall cost.	Typically questionnaires are an additional cost due to programming of $300 to $500.
Participant and Client Food	It is customary to pay for participant and/or client meals for focus groups at noon or night, generating additional costs.	No meals are necessary.
Show Rate	There are times when weather or unusual traffic conditions and result in a reduced show rate.	Show rates are usually unaffected by weather or other external conditions.
Moderator Influence and Interaction	Experienced moderators can exert a great deal of influence with participants in terms of motivation, direction of the discussion, and creating a certain spirit within the room.	Moderators must keep the discussion on track, which is highly dependent on exceptional keyboarding skills and knowledge of the software being used.
Observation Quality and Interaction	Observers behind the glass are able to watch the reactions of participants and listen to feedback, including voice inflections and tone. Questions can be submitted ad-hoc.	Observers watch the PC screen and read the feedback on-line in text format, audio and visual observations are not possible. Questions can be submitted ad-hoc via the software interface.
Participant Responses	Participants are free to speak as appropriate. Verbal responses are captured via audio recording, including voice inflections in order to capture the emotion of the participant.	Participants must type in all responses, likely keeping answers short and with little embellishment. Therefore only experienced keyboardists can realistically participate. Voice inflection and tone are reflected (and interpreted) in the content of responses.

Interpretation of Participant Responses	Moderators and observers observe the spoken content of responses (verbally and non-verbally) and interpret.	Moderators and observers observe the written content of responses and interpret.
Real-Time Element	Participants speaking to one another under moderated conditions are "real-time."	Participants typing to one another under moderated conditions, with delays and queues due to typing and Internet response can be seen as less than "real-time".
Non-Verbal Communication	All non-verbal communication is observed and taken into consideration.	Non-verbal communication is not a consideration.
Participant Interaction	There is a high degree of participant interaction using both verbal and non-verbal means of communication.	Participants have a lower degree of interaction, limited to "chatting" capability via the Internet.
Participant Domination	Without an experienced moderator, there exists the possibility of one or more participants to "dominate" a focus group.	With on-line the potential for group domination by one or more participants is reduced.
Technical Glitches	Traditional focus groups rely very little on technology for execution; therefore the potential for disruption due to technology is little to none.	Should a participant's internet connection or PC experience an issue, their participation in the focus group can be negatively affected or eliminated.
Participant Focus and Distractions	Participants are captive in the conference room, facilitated by a moderator to ensure maximum focus and minimum distraction.	Participants are sitting at a PC unsupervised and able to do a number of things (listening to music, eating, etc.) to which the moderator has no visibility of or control over.
Visual Aids	Visual aids can include a wide variety of materials.	Visual aids are limited to graphic slides displayed via the browser.
Incentives	The economic incentives are generally the same as for on-line focus groups.	The economic incentives are generally the same as for traditional focus groups.
Synthesis of Results	Synthesis usually comes as a result of viewing video tapes, with the synthesizer typically viewing all footage to extract key comments and content that helps answer the questions at hand. Only quotations of interest are analyzed on a "word-for-word" basis.	Synthesis usually comes as a result of reading "word-for-word" transcripts to extract key comments and content that helps answer the questions at hand.
Time to Results	Assuming focus groups are held in different cities, travel and set-up time limits the number of focus groups that can be done in a given period of time. Observing focus group footage can also add time to arriving at final conclusions and results. Moderator reports based upon group observations can produce quick results.	Without the need to travel, and the ease of reading word-for-word transcripts to synthesize feedback, the time to results for on-line is an advantage over traditional by a factor of 20 to 30 percent. The increased responsiveness is accompanied by a decrease in the richness of the results due to many of the aforementioned factors.
Fatigue Factor	Travel can add a fatigue factor for both the moderator and the observers.	While the absence of travel can be a great plus for on-line, the need to stare at a PC screen and read text comments for an extended period of time can create fatigue.
Costs	Traditional focus groups on average cost about 10 to 15 percent more, not including client travel.	On-line focus groups on average cost about 10 to 15 percent less, not including client travel.

Online focus groups are ideal for:
- Locating and researching markets that are hard to recruit
- Low incidence (high level executives who may never consider taking the time required for traditional focus groups)
- Sensitive topics (e.g. HIV, confidential subject matter that participants want to not be face to face with)
- Online based subjects
- Geographically dispersed