

# Perspectives

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## Online Qualitative Research & the DIY Craze: How it's Good, Bad & Always Changing

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## Online Qualitative Research & the DIY Craze

What started with simple and daily activities, such as self-serve gas stations and grocery checkout lanes, has morphed into a multitude of professional DIY spaces. The ever-popular DIY home improvement craze, becoming popular culture in the 1950s, has spawned way too many TV shows and how-to videos, as well as enabled the likes of big name home improvement retailers.

The growth in DIY home improvement centers just over the past decade has been huge. Why? For one, the recession hit hard, so homeowners needed to hunker down and stretch their dollars. They were also inspired by others' DIY projects and had many projects they wanted to do themselves, not always feeling the need to bring in a tradesperson.

### **Do it yourself (DIY)**

The activity of doing, building or making something without direct professional training or assistance

Have contractors, homebuilders and designers become obsolete? Absolutely not! The average homeowner can only go so far with DIY until the experts are needed – whether to fix unintended damage done by the DIYer or because the homeowner recognized that they needed assistance. Retailers and tradespeople alike have benefited largely from this growth.

So what about research? Quantitative research was first to take the DIY plunge when SurveyMonkey launched in 1999. The company now boasts 15 million users – from big brands, to hundreds of startups and small businesses, to thousands of soccer moms, teachers and PTA groups – many of which would never engage in the services of a mainstream quantitative research firm. SurveyMonkey certainly raised reasonable concerns among research professionals, while simultaneously enabling parents, volunteers and businesses alike.

While some may say it is diluting the research profession, the flip side of the coin is that tools like SurveyMonkey, and the myriad of others like them, have raised the awareness of the value of market research and caused more research to be done. This could be a good thing, since companies make too many decisions impacting their financial bottom line without the voice of the customer. They may become more aware that market research is an extremely important strategic function that guides the right decisions for any size business or organization.

We are starting to see similar DIY trends in online qualitative research. Through an analysis of current DIY online qualitative trends, we have provided an outline of the changes, as well as details about when DIY tools could be useful and what pitfalls to avoid when using them.

## Trends in DIY Online Qualitative Research

### DIY now called “Self-Serve”

Providers of online qualitative tools are actually moving from using “Do-it-Yourself” language to “Self Serve” as the moniker because of the negative perceptions of clients doing it themselves. We are even seeing this on the quantitative side - in August 2013, SurveyMonkey launched its own “Self Serve SurveyMonkey Audience” tool – and SurveyMonkey has always been considered DIY.

### “On demand” or “agile” market research – enabling more research to be done

A segment is emerging within online qualitative research for very quick, somewhat low-risk decisions that can benefit from targeted consumer feedback. Recruited “on demand” from large panels, respondents can literally be ready for either a synchronous or asynchronous discussion within minutes of setting up the request, where a typical online or face-to-face project takes at least a week or usually two to recruit and set up.

Could this new type of ‘on-demand’ qualitative tool be the ‘SurveyMonkey’ of the qualitative research world? At first glance it might seem that way. Upon speaking with a few suppliers offering these tools, some interesting themes emerged. Similar to SurveyMonkey, these companies believe that they truly have found an untapped opportunity in the qualitative market. According to Jim Longo of Discuss.IO and a researcher who has been involved with online qualitative since the beginning, “we are enabling more research to be done, rather than replacing traditional forms of qualitative research.”

One might expect that marketers and insights managers would be tempted to start using these tools themselves – and some of the tools were originally designed with this in mind. However, just as in the SurveyMonkey model, providers have told us the clients who were really excited about getting insights faster, and cheaper, often found they simply did not have the time or inclination to actually do it themselves.

### What is Online Qualitative Research?

Qualitative research yields an in-depth understanding of human behavior and the reasons that govern such behavior – the how and why of decision-making.

Most would categorize online qualitative research in two broad types:

**Synchronous** – Research is conducted live, in real time, and can be text-based or video/webcam enabled.

Includes:

- Focus Groups
- In-Depth Interviews

**Asynchronous** – Research is conducted NOT in real time, and can be text-based or video/webcam enabled.

Includes:

- Communities
- Discussion Boards
- Journals/Blogs
- Mobile

*Many online qualitative platforms have “Do It Yourself” options that are available to anyone who wants to use them. This has created the potential for companies to handle some of their research projects themselves. Or perhaps handle some of the steps in the process, while outsourcing assistance for design, moderating and analysis.*

## **Immersive, activity-based research**

Many of the online qualitative platforms continue to leverage technology in different ways. As technology evolves, it allows for the addition of many new and different types of tasks and activities that can be completed as part of the research project. Just as qualitative researchers use a variety of projective techniques in traditional focus groups, these techniques are being parlayed similarly into online qualitative research – often called ‘activity-based research.’ Many of the new DIY online qualitative platforms provide opportunities to include these engaging types of tasks. These online DIY tools enable researchers to virtually immerse themselves with participants by having them include photos and videos to add context to their text responses. For example, a participant may be asked to keep a journal throughout several days, and to respond to questions structured as exercises using various media, rather than responding to a straight question with only text.

## **DIY offerings changing to full service model**

It appears that several of these providers who were once offering DIY tools changed their business model to full service, or at least to offer additional service plans for those who did not wish to actually conduct the research themselves. For one provider in particular, the addition of the full service side of the business resulted in significant growth for the company, claiming that full serve now accounts for 80 percent of its business. The other 20 percent is generally qualitative researchers working on behalf of an end client who are using the ‘self-serve’ model to set up projects themselves and get into research faster.

## **Social intelligence**

We certainly cannot ignore the dynamic aspects of technology throughout the past several years with the growth of social media and what these tools have meant for qualitative research. Social media created quite a stir in the research industry with postings like, “Facebook is the new focus group.” It is important to remember that social media has not and cannot replace the traditional formats of research for a variety of reasons; rather, it should be looked at as a *complement* to research insights and analysis.

What began with social media as “passive listening,” has morphed into gathering social insights, and now to showing value with social intelligence - value that leads to strategic business decisions.

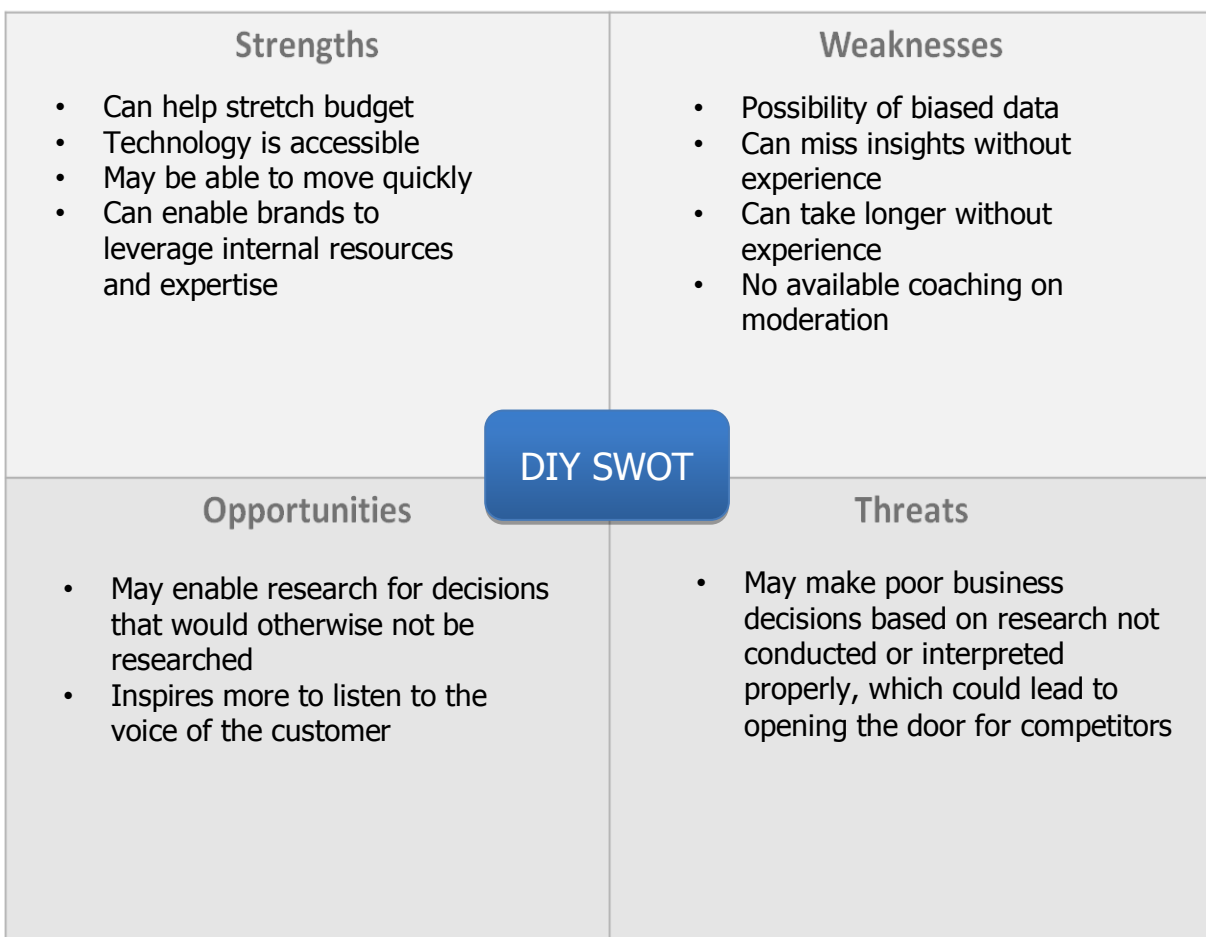
The key social media tools for gleaning research insights are: Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Pinterest, and others that have not even been developed yet that will surely join the fray.

DIY is not a threat to the research industry; rather it can increase the amount of research being done overall. In some cases, it enables qualitative research consultants to work faster; in other cases it may make sense for clients to use it themselves.

## Pros and Cons of DIY Online

A SWOT analysis of DIY online qualitative research demonstrates that organizations need to go in with eyes wide open when conducting their own research. While it seems simple, as easy as having a Facebook ‘conversation’ or engaging in a Skype chat, it still is research and should be accorded the same level of planning and analysis just like any other research effort. See the visual below for a breakdown of the DIY SWOT analysis:

### DIY SWOT Analysis



## Pitfalls to Avoid When Considering DIY Online Qualitative

### Recruiting

Any qualitative research project starts with finding eligible candidates who meet the specifications of the project. While using lists may be the most feasible option for some projects, because of low incidence of the target or needing to talk to very specific customers, recruiting respondents without engaging professional recruiters is not advised for the following reasons:

- It could unintentionally bias respondents' behavior.
- Professional recruiters could have a stronger ability to get higher participation rates.
- Privacy legislation and ethics issues need to be considered and adhered to.

When it is possible, studies using respondents from an opt-in panel that is managed by a professional recruiting firm tend to get better results. When this is not possible, have a professional recruiter make the calls from your list.

### Managing Online Communities

According to a number of platform suppliers interviewed, some clients are becoming interested in managing their own online communities (called MROCs for Marketing Research Online Communities). Brand teams and insights managers are trying to avoid the costs of going with a full-service professional provider and are choosing instead to do it themselves.

The appeal of communities is, for the most part, in line with the appeal of the 'on demand' tools that are emerging. You get instant access to conduct research with your target without having to wait weeks to set up the research. If managed properly, the community can also be very cost effective for companies who need to do extensive research among their own clients, when compared to the cost of fielding each study separately. Communities allow brands to do a lot more research than they normally would.

However, the main reason for the high cost of full service, or turn-key communities, is that they demand many dedicated hours of attention. For example, communities require a great deal of planning to ensure there is ongoing engagement with the panel, the panel needs to be maintained and refreshed, research needs to be planned, executed and then analyzed, and anyone who has conducted research within a community knows the amount of data received can be enormous. Even if a team has extensive resources and experience with research; it would be wise to choose a supplier with experienced staff who they can lean on if/when necessary, or hire an experienced qualitative research consultant to help manage the process with them.

## Online Discussion Boards or Online Focus Groups

Apart from recruiting, there are three main tasks that could comprise any online qualitative research project:

- Developing a discussion guide
- Moderating
- Analysis and reporting

### *Discussion guides:*

Occasionally clients will want to write their own guides, while either moderating themselves or hiring a professional to moderate the discussion. Unless they have been exposed to a considerable amount of online qualitative research, client written guides, or guides written without professional assistance, are typically not optimal.

While a well-written guide is important for any qualitative research, it is critical with online research, where rapport needs to be built, engagement maintained, and instructions for tasks need to be crystal clear. Not to mention the fact that with asynchronous research, the ability to use activity-based rather than direct questions opens a whole new world that many clients have never been exposed to, but results in far richer results. An experienced moderator, especially in the area of online qualitative, gets this and understands how online activity guides need to differ from discussion guides for in-person qualitative.

Companies who do intend to do it themselves would be wise to either pair up with a technology partner who can offer technical support, and/or work with a professional moderator to at least consult on the project.

### *Moderating:*

Text-based synchronous online qualitative focus groups are arguably the most challenging format to moderate. This is mainly because of the sheer volume of activity in a short period of time, as well as relying entirely on text without the benefit of nonverbal cues from respondents. There are typically six to eight participants to interact with, questions to post, and often a few observers and tech support to deal with – all at the same time. It really does take some practice and requires a seriously fast typer/multi-tasker. Not the job for just anyone.

With non-real-time asynchronous online qualitative, the challenges are in understanding how to use tone and manner to probe appropriately. Also the amount of probing and frequency of probing needs to be taken into account. One highly experienced in-person moderator told us that when she started online research, she had to resist the urge to probe more deeply into everything that every participant on her bulletin board said. This was clearly noticed as her engagement slowly dropped and she received feedback of participant frustration at the sheer volume of probes they had in their inbox daily.

With any focus group – in person or online – bias can occur in probing. As an internal/company moderator, it's hard to emotionally remove yourself when you're vested in the company's efforts. For example, one former client-side marketing

researcher recalls how, due to budget constraints, she decided to conduct some supplier and distributor groups herself, while hiring a pro to conduct the groups with end users. Having now been through rigorous training for moderators, she can see in retrospect that her inexperience, as well as her status as an employee of the company, put her respondents in an awkward position, influencing their responses. “It is so plain to me now that respondents were giving me a ‘BS-factor’ in their replies,” she recalls.

### *Analysis and Reporting:*

As with any online qualitative research, the volume of data can be overwhelming, even for the seasoned researcher. Synthesizing and consistently pulling out meaningful insights in a timely manner can be a challenge.

It is critical to have a solid analysis plan and enough time to parse the vast amount of data that is collected. With asynchronous qualitative research especially, each participant often responds in considerable detail to each question, so it is easy to end up with hundreds of pages of transcript. Experienced qualitative researchers have been known to get calls from clients who tried to do it themselves and end up overwhelmed at the analysis stage.

### **Social Media**

To use social media in qualitative research, you have to know the tools, understand the environment, and “be a player,” according to Ben Smithee, Managing Partner, Spych Market Analytics, and a leader in using social media effectively in qualitative research. He said you should actually engage in the environments yourself and experience them. “It’s one thing to collect the verbatims from posts, but you have to be able to know how to analyze the data and turn it into actionable insights,” Smithee said. “It’s much more than just reading through a stream of posts.”

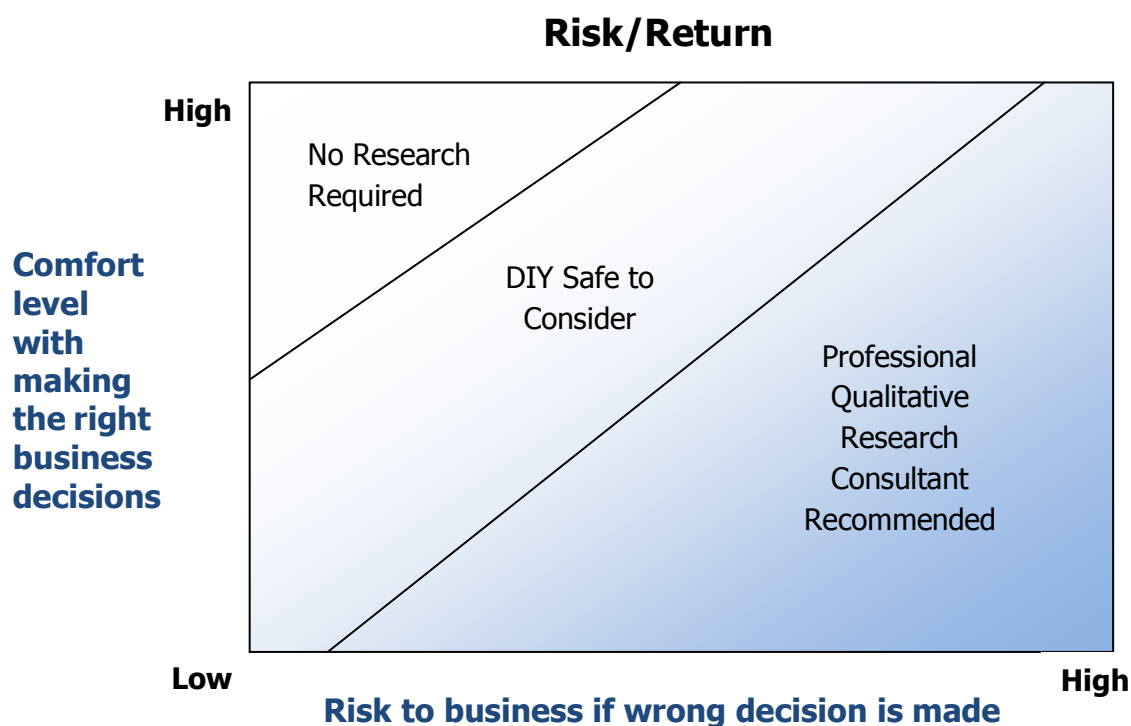
As noted earlier, social media should not be conducted in a silo for qualitative research projects. It is critical that these tools complement the other online research tools in order to show value that can lead to action. These social streams of data need to be aligned and integrated with the various other automated streams of data that a company collects.



## When Might DIY Be Embraced for Online Qualitative

While market researchers would prefer that a professional with experience conduct all research, there is a time and place where DIY online qualitative research could be considered.

The Risk/Return visual below gives a broad-brush look at when DIY research might be appropriate for an organization. Bottom line – It boils down to a company's comfort level in making the right business decisions vs. the risk to the business if the wrong business decisions are made.



Typically DIY scenarios are those where decisions are deemed relatively low risk, and the decision makers would feel relatively comfortable making the decision without research if they had to, using their knowledge of the business, their “gut” and/or secondary information sources.

### Tactical vs. Strategic research

While there has traditionally been a division in online qualitative based on the *format* of the research (synchronous vs. asynchronous), with DIY it might appear that going forward there should actually be more of a divide based on the *objectives* of the project.

- Tactical projects – such as optimizing concepts, ideas or ads, or checking out promotional ideas, etc. are likely better suited in general to DIY tools because there is less risk as it relates to the business decision.

- Strategic/Exploratory – decisions that tend to have a larger impact on the future of the brand or company. These types of projects should continue to be led and managed by a professional qualitative research consultant.

For these larger, more strategic projects, online qualitative research has opened a whole new way of engaging with participants. Asynchronous tools in particular, enable researchers to immerse and engage participants in activities instead of simply asking questions. These activities might include storytelling, the use of projective exercises, photo collage building, co-creation exercises, etc. These take a considerable amount of planning and creativity to design, not to mention experience to analyze.

### **Examples of when DIY might be appropriate**

- A start-up business with no research budget wants to get direction on some new business ideas
- An ad or promotion agency wants to incorporate some insights/voice of the customer into their new business pitch
- A company wants to literally gut-check direction on a decision that needs to be made quickly, with no time or money for traditional research
- A marketer wants some very quick feedback on tactical promotional concepts from some target users before putting the idea in front of the executive team
- A company wants to narrow down or hone some ideas before a large-scale research project is undertaken
- A marketing team has a highly iterative process and needs to move very quickly from one iteration to another (early concept or ad development)

In any of these cases, clients should always be reminded about using qualitative research results directionally. They cannot be projected to a broader population, but can be helpful by providing some insight and direction into a specific issue.

### **Examples of when DIY should not be utilized**

- Strategic feedback is needed on a new brand positioning
- A company wants their distribution channel to be involved in complex product design ideas before moving into expensive product development
- Key financial decisions need to be made regarding features for a new product launch
- A marketer wants thorough feedback on a promotional campaign before taking final recommendations to the executive team
- A large membership-based organization wants to ensure member support before launching new initiatives
- An important hybrid research project that includes qualitative and quantitative research, where all elements need to align accordingly

In these examples, the risk to the business if the wrong decision is made is relatively high and could negatively impact the business if the wrong decision is made.

## What Does the Future Look Like for DIY Online Qualitative

Just as the onslaught of DIY home improvement retailers has not made building contractors obsolete, neither will DIY online qualitative make qualitative research consultants obsolete. As the future unfolds around us, it appears as though qualitative research professionals will continue to always be needed, especially in the area of strategic and exploratory qualitative research. The qualitative research professionals who will excel tomorrow will be strategic consultants, with a true understanding of how marketing research needs to align with marketing and business decision-making.

With technology changing everything we do today, it will continue to impact qualitative research. We will continue to use these tools ourselves, as well as encourage companies to use them too when the business decision risk/value equation is appropriate.

We're excited to see how technology will continue to evolve and impact the qualitative research profession. DIY tools have raised the awareness of the value of market research and caused more research to be done. This is a very good thing for businesses and the research profession alike.