

# Fresh focus on face to face

## By Louella Miles

As barriers to conducting face-to-face sessions lessen, maybe it's time for a realistic assessment of which projects would most benefit from this type of approach.

After months when, for many qualitative researchers and viewing studios, work went on hold clients are now wanting to get up to speed. Some, as one researcher puts it, want to be first, others are nervous to be first. It's left those working in research grappling with the 'new reality'.

The growing use of online platforms has speeded up exponentially, but this doesn't mean the transition from face to face has necessarily been smooth. Neither does 'new reality' entail slavish adherence to realism, the word of the moment. Try managing expectations of clients wanting to conduct a multi-country study and 'like for like' methods while explaining that, though they can have more people in a group in Italy, current restrictions limit them to mini groups in London. Fast forward to planning a multi-country project in the autumn, when even predicting what will happen in the UK is a non-starter, and life becomes even harder.

Or try talking about cost with clients who believe that online should always be cheaper than offline. Yes, there are some free or very low-priced tools around but more complex 'discussions' require time to set up software, perhaps respondent tech checks, extended monitoring of participation rates and significantly longer hours, both moderating and analysing and this, of course, impacts on cost. Hence the need for realism.

The way forward may involve putting the case for face to face, and indeed qualitative research, in this new environment. In this context I asked a range of experts what types of project might lend themselves more to F2F than online. They highlighted groups where:

- the approach would benefit from greater levels of interaction or group 'spark';
- the volume of topics to be discussed would take the group duration beyond a comfortable video duration and where retaining focus against the background distractions of home life would be hard;
- a physical product or prototype is being discussed (that cannot be advance dispatched);
- product testing or in-store shopper sessions are called for;
- stimulus or topic matter should not be made available to the wider world;
- there is a lot of stimulus to show, where the materials and structure really matter more than the labelling;
- co-creation sessions are needed;
- the focus is on workshops;
- interviews which require brand mapping exercises;
- and in the future, where the client wants to use the opportunity to bring their nationwide or global team together to one location.

The smart money, when talking to clients, is to be honest about the limitations and possibilities of online and face to face. One expert took the approach of "considering the limitations we have around doing face to face, X would work online and we could do Y and Z", giving suggestions of exercises or ways of approaching it digitally.

When asked to do a mapping exercise online, for example, they proposed sharing their screen with all the logos on and being directed by the participants to move them around. They explained that there were limitations versus sharing the actual products, but that in the circumstances this was 'good enough'. Clients have been on board with that, recognising the limitations but also that the timings meant the project could be delayed.

Attitudes towards online have changed. Platforms are slicker, less challenging, and most people can use them irrespective

of age or technical competency... yet the challenges online presents highlight the need now, more than ever, for the expert skills and training of a professional moderator. Viewing studios have worked vigorously to ensure their readiness for re-opening. They have put in place all the necessary procedures to ensure the safety of all those attending sessions, from participants and clients to venue staff. Venues screen for attendees who have travelled overseas, and need to quarantine, ask people to call in advance if they feel unwell or are displaying symptom. And given that some may not want to use public transport, they also screen for travel arrangements to eliminate no shows.

The good news for the venues is that participants are keen to return, as seemingly are clients. What's more in doubt is whether researchers will be as keen, with people divided on whether it's 'too soon'. There is limited time for this dichotomy to be resolved. Some studios, having been without income for so long and with limited – if any – help from the Chancellor or their landlords, may decide to call it a day. At the very least there is likely to be a shake down.

The uncertainty that this pandemic has generated, in research as in so many other areas, is not easy to deal with. Some fear the possibility that planned face-to-face research might have to be postponed or shifted online should a second lockdown occur.

The more reassuring news is that good researchers, having survived the shock of 'no warning' the first time round, will ensure that every project has a Plan B in place at the design stage. 'Be prepared' is a motto that's no longer limited to the Scouts.

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