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## A Focus Group for the 21st Century

By **Bridget McCrea** • 02/13/13

Companies developing products for the education technology market can do one-on-one market research with potential customers, without breaking the bank.

EDRoom, developed by Interactive Educational Systems Design (IESD), offers a private web space where vendors can take a pulse on their new products through in-depth, targeted discussions with administrators and teachers.

### Virtual Focus Group

At its simplest EDRoom serves as a sounding board for companies that need solid, practical insight into the education industry. Using EDRoom, companies create "groups" that match their target profiles and then engage in meaningful dialogue with that target audience over several days. The platform collects detailed feedback from every participant on every question (without interruptions, time constraints, or a few people dominating the conversation) and provides ample time for participants to interact.

Ellen Bialo, IESD's president, says the company developed EDRoom to free up companies from the limitations of traditional focus groups, which are bound by geography and require both participants and companies to spend multiple hours on-site, sitting on either side of a one-way mirror. Another disadvantage of this traditional setup is the fact that not everyone participates, says Bialo, and interaction among participants is extremely limited (if there is any at all).

"We wanted to use technology to get into participants' brains and get them talking to one another," says Bialo. "Companies that use EDRoom not only come away with deeper insights, but they also save time on travel and human resources." The system is also flexible and allows, for example, companies to quickly replace questions that aren't garnering responses or creating interactive conversations between participants.

### On Their Own Terms

Because EDRoom is asynchronous, group members can participate on their own schedules, and without the need to travel or take much time away from work and life. When the focus group discussion wraps up, EDRoom generates a complete transcript of the interactions. Using a customized analysis database, the platform generates a categorical analysis of recurring themes, quantifies important data, and supplies actionable recommendations.

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"Companies see every question and response, plus the conversations that participants had with one another," explains Bialo. The platform is also beneficial for advisory groups, which can be assembled several times throughout the year to gather input, garner feedback, and interact with each other on specific topics and issues.

In addition to focus group type discussions, a company can use the platform's survey function to solicit feedback from both current and potential customers. The surveys can be conducted blindly – so respondents don't know to which companies they are responding.

Some companies use EDRoom to hold virtual sales meetings with 30 or 40 participants and others rely on it to provide honest, straightforward competitive analysis – once again in a "blind" environment. "It's an effective platform for talking to customers about how they use their current products, and what they like and dislike about them," says Bialo. "The information gathered is helpful for new product development."

Bialo says EDRoom is being continually tweaked and upgraded to meet users' needs and that a tablet-friendly version is currently under construction. "Participants will be able to use EDRoom on the fly," says Bialo, "and companies will have access to a more mobile platform that allows them to dig down deep into the educational space."