



Engaging Deeply with the Education Market Through Asynchronous Online Focus Groups

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In our frequent conversations with successful developers and marketers of education products and services, we find that a common ingredient in their success is their deep understanding of their market segments. They read widely about their market, review anecdotal reports from sales staff, connect with educators through social media, and also sponsor independent market research, especially focus group research.

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Focus group research is highly effective for understanding your target market—when you seek deep, open responses and want to learn from educators’ interactions with each other. Focus groups can serve a variety of purposes in the education market:

- Understand the experiences and opinions of decision makers and teachers
- Identify their needs and challenges
- Learn from their expertise
- Obtain reviews of product concepts and products in development
- Get reactions to marketing materials, marketing language, and branding

Incorporating focus group research into your product development and marketing plans makes it much more likely that your product will be well-received in the education marketplace.

Traditional face-to-face (F2F) focus groups are especially valuable when you want to observe participants exploring a physical product and their reactions to it.

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However, there are significant challenges and limitations associated with F2F focus groups:

- If you want to conduct cost-effective F2F groups, they need to be scheduled to coincide with a major conference you’re already planning to attend.

- Participants are limited to one locale or to those who commit to a major conference. You can't recruit educators who can't travel.
- In the limited time available for F2F groups, it's hard to get in-depth responses to each question from all the participants. This is a problem especially for product exploration and review.
- Participating educators may not have access to relevant information from their own districts.
- A few dominant personalities could monopolize the conversation.

What's the alternative? Many education companies are turning to online focus groups, either real-time or asynchronous.

Real-Time Online Focus Groups

A variety of technology tools support real-time, voice-based or text chat online focus groups. Most real-time focus group systems provide the ability for participants to review digital resources and react to them.

These types of focus groups replicate the F2F focus group process without the travel time and cost. They are not bound to a specific location, as educators can participate from anywhere. They can be scheduled at any time throughout the year and are quick to implement.

However, education companies choosing real-time online focus groups also face challenges and limitations—some similar to those of F2F focus groups and some unique to the particular online format:

- Because of the time constraints, it is often impossible to obtain in-depth responses from all participants to each question.
- It's easy for participants to get distracted and not give complete attention to the discussion.
- With voice-based focus groups, participants tend to talk over one another and there's the risk that a few participants might monopolize the conversation.
- Real-time text chat focus groups can be chaotic and difficult to moderate. Participants tend to focus on writing their own response and not attend to the comments of others. The moderator is so busy reading participant comments "on the fly" that there is little opportunity to ask thoughtful, probing follow-up questions.

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Asynchronous Online Focus Groups

An asynchronous online focus group is a threaded, text-based discussion that runs over an extended period of time—typically a week but the time can vary. Since this format doesn't require educators to all participate at the same time, it offers

flexibility—ensuring that they can join in when professional and personal responsibilities aren't competing for their attention.

Group members log in to a secure online research facility with an assigned username and password. They answer questions posted by the moderator and also interact with each other. The moderator can ask follow-up questions to the whole group or to individual participants. Discussion questions can be prepared in advance and prescheduled, but the format lets researchers revise or add new questions as desired. Sponsors can observe the ongoing discussion and provide feedback to the moderator throughout the week.

High-quality asynchronous online focus group systems allow researchers to include digital presentation materials, such as PDF files, PowerPoints, video clips, links to web pages, and online surveys. This makes the format effective for testing product concepts, products in development, and marketing materials. The sponsor receives an auto-transcript of the complete discussion as soon as it concludes.

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Asynchronous online focus groups offer many advantages over F2F focus groups:

- It's easier for high-level administrators and classroom teachers to commit to participation because they have flexibility as to when they join in.
- Each participant has the time to respond to moderator questions more expansively and deeply. This approach generates thoughtful responses rather than quick, "off the cuff" reactions. This emulates the careful deliberation in districts when education decision makers evaluate products or services.
- Presentation materials receive careful review and reaction.
- Individual participants can't monopolize the conversation, since there is time and space for all to respond fully and deeply.
- Since participants are identified only by username, the format feels anonymous, so respondents tend to be completely open and give "no holds barred" responses.

- Researchers have the flexibility to run the focus group as a completely open discussion, or they can require individual responses before participants read the comments of others. Alternatively, the “group” can be set up as private one-on-one interviews without such interaction.
- The moderator can dig deeper with specific follow-up questions to individual participants, rather than just trying to control the main thread of discussion.
- Because focus group sessions unfold over many days, there is time to adjust the flow of questions and topics, as the need arises.
- You don’t have to wait for a third-party transcript. And because the auto-transcript identifies the writer of each comment, there is never any confusion over who said what.

Need for Experienced, Effective Online Market Researchers

Experienced research firms have strategies to solve potential challenges with this format. They can:

- Ensure that participants stay engaged. Researchers can incorporate carefully designed materials that participants react to, stay active in asking follow-up questions, and communicate frequently with participants by email or phone over the course of the focus group period—about new topics that are launching and about follow-up questions to their previous comments.
- Use time-tested strategies that generate discussion among the participants. Researchers can include some questions that invite sharing of experiences and opinions, keep the groups to 10 participants or fewer, and have the moderator actively encourage discussion.
- Compensate for the fact that researchers can’t see the participants’ reactions. Facilitators can incorporate rating scale items to gauge the degree of the participants’ reactions, and they can analyze the language that participants use to convey emotion. Are they writing in a neutral tone, or are they expressing excitement?

Getting the Most from Asynchronous Online Focus Groups

- Decide which staff roles you especially need to learn from—e.g., district curriculum and/or technology leaders, school principals, subject specialists, or classroom teachers. Then decide which questions are appropriate for which staff roles.
- Start with questions that get educators to share their professional experience and expertise, and to express their opinions about their experience—such as challenges they face, what works and what doesn't work on a practical level, and their perspectives about content and pedagogy. Then move on to questions that focus on review of products and/or marketing materials.
- Give assurances that what participants say will make a difference in development, not just marketing. This is especially important in recruiting district administrators.
- Use rating scale questions plus discussion prompts to get focused, deep discussion on key positives/negatives of a proposed product or marketing approach.
- Choose a moderator who has the expertise and ability to understand and interpret the participating educators and “talk their language.”
- Make sure the research analysts possess the expertise in the education market to make sense of participants' cumulative comments.

A Valuable Alternative to F2F Focus Groups

In sum, focus groups are a great way to understand the target market for your education products and services. Asynchronous online focus groups offer many advantages over face-to-face groups while avoiding the challenges and limitations of F2F groups.

To gain deeper knowledge about your market, call 212-769-1715 to schedule your demo of EDRoom, our asynchronous online focus group service today.

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Serving the PreK-12 and higher education publishing and technology market Interactive Educational Systems Design (IESD) specializes in research to support product development and marketing, and in effective communication with educational decision makers. Services include focus groups (face-to-face and online featuring our EDRoom online research facility), surveys, in-depth interviews, usability testing, literature reviews and white papers, case studies, competitive market analysis, customer analysis, and efficacy studies. For more information, contact Ellen Bialo at info@iesdinc.com or call 212-769-1715.