

Bulletin Boards – a Tool for B2B Qualitative Research Adam Blunt, NOP World Business & Technology

Introduction and background

Online qualitative research has had both its advocates and critics. While recent years have seen a rapid spread in businesses' and consumers' use of the internet, the medium has not been so quick to penetrate qualitative research as a research technique.

A number of approaches have been developed with qualitative research in mind, notably synchronous online focus groups (i.e. where respondents all log on at the same time for two hours, for example, and the discussion takes place in real-time) and asynchronous online bulletin board focus groups, where respondents have the opportunity to post comments at their convenience over the course of a certain number of days.

The aim of this paper is to introduce bulletin boards, explaining how they work, and to demonstrate how online bulletin board groups can be applied as a research technique in the business-to-business environment. The aim is not to compare and contrast different methods of conducting online qualitative research. It is in no way intending to argue that the online approach will become a replacement for face to face qualitative research, but rather that the method can be a viable alternative in certain circumstances.

This paper will begin by looking at how the boards work, and then continue to discuss the advantages and disadvantages bulletin boards present. It will also refer to previous projects, and in particular a project that was commissioned internally to provide input for this paper, and act as a demonstration for our own clients. The paper will conclude with an overview of four case studies, which illustrate the boards in action.

What exactly are bulletin boards and how do they work?

Before considering in more detail how the boards function, it is worth summarising what exactly an online bulletin board focus group is: the technique is based on specialised software which allows respondents to log onto a password protected board - via their browser - where a moderator leads the discussion. Respondents type in and post their comments and can react to other participants' entries as they wish. The moderator can probe responses and show stimulus material. Those taking part are encouraged to answer questions twice a day, and the discussion takes place over the course of a number of days.

This section gives a non-technical overview of the mechanics of a bulletin board project.

Recruiting

In terms of recruitment, the normal principles apply, in that respondents are recruited via a screening questionnaire. Depending on the nature of the study, and one's preference, recruitment is mainly conducted in two ways: by email (e.g. those who

took part in a quantitative online survey, or are part of an online panel), which is a cost effective method; or by telephone, which is more expensive. Despite the extra cost, telephone recruitment is recommended as a more reliable approach, and has a number of advantages: administering the questionnaire in this way reduces the chances of potential respondents answering the screening questions incorrectly; actually speaking to the target audience will give the recruiter a much better idea that people are who they say they are, and know what they claim to know (as with any type of business to business research incorrectly recruited / fraudulent respondents can normally be spotted quite quickly, once the discussion has begun); and such direct contact is likely to increase participation rates.

However, email correspondence should be included during recruitment, for example confirmation of timing, not only to help with participation rates, but also to check that respondents' email addresses are correct. This might sound obvious but it is vital to check email addresses in good time to avoid complications when the board starts. Respondents are emailed their logging in details in advance, so it is a good idea to ensure that they acknowledge receipt of the details, and confirm that they can log on to the site. It is also important to check that all respondents have high-speed internet access and, if not already obvious, are reasonably internet savvy. This is not usually an issue for business-to-business research but can, on occasion, pose a problem for consumer studies.

Participation rates tend to be lower than for face-to-face research. There is also the dropout factor, which means some respondents may not make it to the final day's discussion. As a result, more respondents need to be recruited than for a typical face-to-face focus group. With business-to-business boards, it is important for respondents (especially those at a senior level) to be aware of the purpose of the research upfront, again to help with recruitment and sustain participation levels.

The nature of the research objectives naturally affects the number of respondents recruited, and the number of days the session lasts. A view also needs to be taken on how enthusiastic participants are likely to be about the topics under discussion (and for how long, therefore, they will be likely to participate). Typically, a board may last for three to six days, although the longer it lasts, the more likely it is that respondents will drop out. Views vary as to the optimum number of respondents, although anywhere between 12 and 20 participants recruited is common, to allow for non or partial participation, and also to ensure that rich findings are obtained.

When respondents are emailed a username and password (generated by the software) with which to log on to the bulletin board, they are also given guidance on what to expect when they enter the site, and what they will be required to do.

The discussion guide

A discussion guide is developed with care being taken to ensure that the questions cannot be misinterpreted. Some hold the view that, in order to encourage as rich a response as possible to a question, several questions should be included at once. This approach is fine as long as the research does not require answers to each specific question because, as with any method, respondents do not always answer the question

asked. It is crucial to ensure that, every time respondents visit the board, they give as much relevant information as possible. Given below is an example of such a question.

4.6 Moderator March 15 2005 9.13pm

Could you now do the same for Dell: what are your perceptions of the company? What adjectives would you use to describe your image of the company? Why? How would you describe Dell's advertising?

The aim of this question was to encourage respondents to think about different aspects of the company so that they posted as rich comments as possible. If, for example, company imagery had been the key topic, a separate question would have been asked.

Once the discussion guide has been designed, it can be loaded onto the board, and broken down according to the number of days the boards last. Alternatively, the questions can be preloaded into the software so that they are automatically posted on set days and at set times. Whichever method is chosen, the moderator is free to probe responses, add questions or edit existing ones. If there is a concern over respondents skipping questions, the topics can be set so that respondents cannot see one question until they have answered the previous one. We did find, however, on one project that a handful of respondents became frustrated with this setting as they wanted to be able to glance ahead before considering their responses.

It is not uncommon for clients to think that, given the board is lasting a number of days, a very detailed (and lengthy) guide can be used. However, care is needed to ensure that respondents are not deterred from full participation by an onerous number of questions, and it is important to remember how time-poor our audiences can be. In addition, time has to be left for respondents to read each other's posts and to respond to probes. The following comment from a senior level IT manager was based on a three-day board with ten respondents participating. There were 21 questions spread across the three days (excluding probes).

6.4.3.1. Moderator 17-Mar-2005 09:47 AM

And what about the volume of topics - manageable, too much, or were you expecting more?

6.4.3.1.1. Harry 17-Mar-2005 01:12 PM

About what I was expecting. Any more and it may have been a job to keep up with replies and additional questions posed.

Similarly, there is also the facility to withhold from each respondent other respondents' answers to certain questions. This can be helpful if an unbiased response to a topic is required, before the issue is opened up to all for discussion. (If necessary, this 'masking' can be made permanent, which would effectively result in conducting depth interviews.) If this method is to be used on any questions, it can be a good idea to explain to respondents upfront what will happen, to avoid any frustration on their part.

Another useful feature of the bulletin boards is the ability to post a question or probe to one individual rather than the whole group. Only the particular individual can see the post. This can prove a tactful way of checking that a participant fits the recruitment criteria (unlike in the face to face group scenario which can be quite awkward). The feature can also be used to post a question the answer to which the respondent may not wish to share with others. In addition, it gives the moderator the opportunity to take a potentially disruptive respondent 'to one side', as the excerpt with respondent 'OO' below demonstrates.

2.3. Mod 08-Mar-2005 04:55 AM

Thank you for taking part. More specific questions about your experience will follow. Please log back in tomorrow, and feel free to comment on other people's answers.

2.3.1. LL 08-Mar-2005 08:43 AM

Look forward to continuing the exchange and learning the experience of the other participants.

2.3.2. OO 09-Mar-2005 11:05 AM

What a waste of time. What is the purpose of this? I know [the client] wants to take [company x] out of the picture. Is that what this is all about?

2.3.2.1. Mod 09-Mar-2005 01:08 PM

Hi - The purpose of this exercise is simply to get some detailed and honest feedback about customers' experience so that [the client] can assess how well [the system is working] and see how it can be improved. It is immensely valuable for [the client] to get that feedback directly from customers.

2.3.2.1.1. OO 10-Mar-2005 05:18 PM

This is a remarkable statement. I am not aware of other publishers' taking such an interest in [this]. I would think [the client] might consider how well they handle their own subscriptions. If nothing else [company x] answers the phone, which is a huge improvement over any customer service I received directly from [the client].

2.3.2.2. Mod (private post) 09-Mar-2005 01:12 PM

Hi - I'm sorry you feel that way but thanks very much for your responses so far. As far as I am aware, there is no hidden agenda. We hoped that this bulletin board format might be a friendly way for people like you to feed back what you thought. Do you have a suggestion for how we could do it differently? In any event, I hope that you might be able to take part in the later questions. Thanks.

In terms of stimuli, the bulletin board allows the moderator to show concept descriptions, print and TV material, and can incorporate live websites for evaluation.

Moderating

Overall, the same skills as for conventional moderating apply, in that the moderator needs to recognize where to probe, and how to handle the dynamics of the group. However, as described later in this paper in The benefits and drawbacks of bulletin boards, the way in which the dynamics manifest themselves can be slightly different. Also, practice will show how best to phrase a question or probe to obtain the fullest response. Extra thought needs to be put into writing the discussion guide to eliminate misinterpretation of the questions as, unlike real-time groups, the moderator cannot simply re-phrase a question there and then.

In addition, to encourage interaction, probing questions should be phrased to welcome responses from all respondents. Where there is ambiguity over a participant's post, clarification will sometimes be needed given the absence of facial or vocal clues. It should also be remembered that the moderator does not have the same level of interaction with respondents as the face to face scenario, and that every probe leads to respondents having to spend more time online.

In terms of using the software, it is reasonably intuitive and does not take long for someone new to the boards to familiarise themselves with its functionality. It is certainly worth getting some practice in before attempting to moderate for real. The topic guide is typed into the software and, once loaded, can be edited, and also used as a template for future guides. As appropriate, stimulus material is attached to the relevant questions so that it is shown with the correct topic. The moderator should allow in the region of two hours a day for monitoring a board, posting questions, probing responses, and handling any observer comments.

Encouraging regular participation

As for how often respondents should be encouraged to visit the board, they should ideally read and post comments twice a day, for something like 15 - 30 minutes at a time. It is easy, via the software, to track respondents in terms of which questions they have or have not answered, and when they last visited the site. In addition, it is possible to send out emails to those who need reminding that they still have questions to answer. Obviously, there may be unforeseen events, which keep participants from the board on certain days, but they often get back in touch when they can, and make up for lost time.

A balance needs to be achieved between covering all the research objectives and ensuring as far as possible that respondents stay motivated and continue to post full responses right up until the end of the discussion. Normally the topic is one that is interesting and engaging for respondents, but it is important to make it clear from the beginning that incentives will be paid to those who take part each day and post comments on at least the bulk of the questions. It is easy to see who is making the effort, and who is not. Again, individual messages can be sent to those respondents who might appear to be adopting the 'yes', 'no' quantitative approach. The following example, taken from a bulletin board conducted by NOP World Automotive, illustrates this point. It did not require a great deal of expertise to realise that something was not quite right about this respondent.

Moderator: How did you find out about your navigation systems? How much and for how long did you research the market before deciding on your particular product?
Sun 4:32 am

Felice: Don't know Mon 9:21 pm

Client observers Online bulletin board focus groups also have the facility for clients to observe the discussion as it unfolds, via the password protected website. This feature can be quite popular with clients for several reasons. First of all, it makes the research – in whatever country it is happening – instantly accessible from wherever there is internet access, and at whatever time is convenient. Also, the ‘virtual back room’ holds a large number of people. In addition, observers can pass the moderator virtual pieces of paper with additional questions / comments which the respondents cannot see. However, it is probably worth setting some ground rules if there are to be several observers.

Before the client agrees to the bulletin board method for the first time, it is important to manage their expectations. This is especially the case if they are looking to draw comparisons with other qualitative methods they have used on subjects similar to those to be discussed on the board. The most obvious way is for the client to see or, better still, take part in a demonstration of the technique. They need to be made aware that the moderator is not online 24 hours a day. Also, it is important for the client to make it clear which objectives have the greatest priority

The output

Given that participants have time to consider their responses, and that every respondent can answer every question, bulletin board focus groups tend to generate long transcripts. To give an example, one respondent posted a 413 word response to a question in a recent project; and in another recent study which lasted six-days, there was a total of 2,200 posts.

For analysis purposes, this instant transcript can then be organised (using the software) by question or by responses from certain respondents if required. Handling the transcript can take some getting used to, because it does not have the flow of real time transcripts. Each comment needs to be considered against the question it is answering which is not necessarily the preceding post.

We have found that, before they see the output of a board, clients can sometimes be slightly sceptical of the quality of the responses participants give. Again, the best way to overcome this barrier is to show them examples from previous projects. The following posts from two senior IT managers on a bulletin board are good illustrations of the quality of information to expect.

3.1. Moderator 13-Mar-2005 04:33 PM

Thinking about your own company, what are the main business issues affecting your company today? Why are these an issue?

3.1.1. Jon 15-Mar-2005 01:03 AM

Our main issues are: Debt Management (Increasing bills will increase the reluctance to pay) Improving Customer Services (We are trying to reduce customer contact through a 'One and Done' approach) Streamlining core business processes (Reducing operating costs) Water availability (concern over pollution, weather, drought, etc) Knowledge Retention

3.1.2. Steven 15-Mar-2005 09:49 AM

We have to regain the confidence of the public, who have been taking their business elsewhere; for the last 2-3 years sales have plummeted and the market is becoming increasingly competitive. We have to reverse the trend and encourage customers back. We have recently been through a re-branding process and unfortunately due to the recent takeover, are about to go through another one. This will make the job harder short-term but long-term should help identify the brand.

The benefits and drawbacks of bulletin boards

This section considers the main benefits and drawbacks of the bulletin board technique, and looks at how to determine whether or not the method is suitable for a particular piece of research. There are, of course, no hard and fast rules on when to use them in the business to business environment, but it is our general view that bulletin boards offer an alternative means of conducting research where face to face methods (usually the ideal) are not so practical. This is naturally subject to the specific research objectives, and whether they can be effectively met in the online environment.

Benefits Perhaps the key benefit, therefore, of the bulletin board in business to business research is its ability to reach geographically dispersed respondents. The target audience of the research may be very spread out and / or too low in number to successfully convene face to face focus groups. A recent study conducted by NOP World Business provides a good example of this advantage. There was a low incidence of respondents – a particular type of academic - and they were scattered across the US. The client wished the audience to be able to exchange views in the research, and online bulletin boards proved to be an appropriate method of achieving this aim.

In another example, part of the objective of the project commissioned for this paper was to obtain views from senior IT executives based across the UK, rather than in London, where much of the research (using group discussions) with this over-researched audience is conducted. Not surprisingly, we found that those in the more 'remote' locations claimed they were not being contacted as often as those in London / the South East usually claimed, and were pleased to take part. The following respondent was based in Stirling, Scotland.

6.2. Moderator 16-Mar-2005 10:45 PM

How often are you contacted to take part in focus groups or face to face in-depth interviews? How do you feel about that? What motivates people to take part, do you think?

6.2.5. Ged 17-Mar-2005 01:15 PM

Rarely asked to participate in groups, perhaps 1-2 times p.a. usually as a portion of a seminar on a specific subject. My organisation has worldwide focus groups on IT topics that are common across the various geographical sites.

Motivation can be achieved through various routes! Financial incentives are handy, but seeing your input used effectively is also inspiring.

A second key benefit of bulletin boards is that they provide the opportunity to access a time-poor target audience. In the business to business research environment, potential respondents are often very busy individuals who may not have the time to be able to travel to a facility in order to participate in a group discussion; or who are unable to attend at the last minute (a common problem). Indeed, in a bulletin board project we conducted recently, one UK respondent had to travel to the US on business at the last minute, yet was still able to take part.

As expressed in the respondent comment below, busy individuals may be more likely to take part given that they can visit the bulletin board in their own time and post comments when it is most convenient to them.

6.4.1. Jeremy 16-Mar-2005 11:16 PM

The advantage is that I can do it at home in my own time and space ... see the time!! To be honest, I have more important things to do at work. I would do something similar again.

The extended length of time respondents have to think about a topic, using bulletin boards, can also make the method an appealing solution. Taking a 'typical' face to face focus group with eight respondents and lasting two hours, each individual has, on average, 15 minutes to speak (and that does not take into account the moderator talking and the mandatory verbose respondent). As the boards take place over a number of days, each participant has time to consider his or her response before posting it, which can result in more thoughtful comments, as described by one respondent, below. (Naturally, a considered response is not necessarily the best approach for certain types of research.)

6.1.5. Steven 17-Mar-2005 09:34 AM

I've quite enjoyed the format of this market research, somehow writing your opinions down rather than voicing them causes you to think a bit more about it, esp. as you answer the questions in your own time.

Not surprisingly, therefore, with these more developed responses, the amount of information a single bulletin board generates can be the equivalent of two or three face to face focus groups. This aspect of the bulletin board technique can appeal to clients who wish to explore issues in depth, but still want to preserve a discussion element within the research.

When discussing sensitive issues, the sense of anonymity the online environment provides can encourage respondents to answer questions more openly and honestly than they might otherwise do in a face to face study. The fact that participants are often responding from a comfortable, familiar environment may also help. It has been our experience that business to business respondents appear to be very open with their comments related to their work and their companies (see case study overviews at the end of this paper). All respondents have time to post their views, so there is also more opportunity to contribute for those who might be reluctant to air their opinions in a face to face group (for example in the presence of more vociferous respondents).

One of the popular beliefs regarding bulletin boards is that they are a time and cost effective means of conducting research. Certainly in terms of time, fieldwork can be conducted simultaneously and in several countries, thus considerably reducing the fieldwork period. This saving in time, however, should be balanced against the time needed to analyse the large amounts of data the boards can produce. Similarly, external project costs are reduced because there is no outlay on travel and accommodation expenses, and the boards usually work out cheaper than hiring (viewing) facilities. This is especially the case with international projects. Again, however, lower external costs should be balanced against the possibility of greater internal costs, as extra time may be required for analysis purposes, in order to deal with the volume of data generated. (Analysis software would certainly save time.) Also, moderating / monitoring the boards can be quite labour intensive.

As described earlier in the paper, clients are able to view the bulletin board discussion as it develops, from wherever they are located. The added benefit here is that, if stimulus material is being tested, the client may wish to revise or develop it as the discussion progresses.

Drawbacks

One of the main obstacles to adopting bulletin boards for qualitative research is the issue of confidentiality. Take face to face research methods: the moderator has complete control over what material is shown when, and everything is collected in at the end of the discussion. There is, of course, nothing to prevent respondents subsequently discussing with peers what they have heard, discussed or seen. With the bulletin boards, the stimuli / topics under discussion could be viewed by people other than the respondent, if the respondent chose to show others the site. There is also nothing to stop the determined participant from taking screenshots of what he or she sees. Some researchers using bulletin boards do ask respondents to sign a confidentiality agreement although this is no guarantee of confidentiality (and it could even have the opposite effect to the one intended - the less scrupulous respondent might see this as a signal to tell all). The following feedback from a client illustrates the concern where the information researched is sensitive.

This methodology needs to prove that it can be implemented in situations where the information and the material put in test has a confidential character. You do not want your competitors to get early information on your strategic reflections or communication programs. (IT sector client)

Good recruitment can go some way to ensuring that respondents are trustworthy, but both face to face and online discussions are vulnerable to the confidentiality issue. The client has to feel comfortable with the boards and, when the decision is taken to use them, we have found that the benefits to the specific study outweigh any doubts over confidentiality.

At a more practical level, the boards pose a number of other challenges. The moderator needs to be available to monitor the discussion several times a day to ensure that key probes are not missed (although this can be done from anywhere with high speed internet connection).

Further challenges lie in dealing with the dynamics of the online bulletin board group. To begin with, there are no vocal indicators as to the tone in which a comment is made. Caution is therefore needed in interpreting some posts. On occasion, respondents will help out by adopting chat room terms and symbols (for example, 'lol' if a comment provokes amusement, and ':-)') to express a post delivered with humour – even by business to business respondents). Similarly, there are no facial clues as to how respondents are reacting to an idea or a piece of material – the folded arms, navel gazing, along with the forward-leaning, attentive signs. To counter this absence, respondents are encouraged to be as explicit as possible in their posts. It is also very easy to view all the comments made by an individual respondent, in order to gain an overall impression of their tone of voice.

In keeping with this theme, it can sometimes be a challenge to encourage respondents to interact with one another on the board, rather than simply respond to the question each time and then move on. However, it is generally the case that, assuming the recruitment is good quality, and the topic(s) under discussion are of interest, respondents will happily exchange views with others, but not necessarily to the extent experienced in face to face discussions. The moderator can also help by prompting participants to react to the posts of others.

To sum up this section, therefore, the researcher who is considering bulletin boards as a possible method or component for a project should consider first and foremost whether face to face groups, in-depth interviews or some other approach are a realistic option, and could just as easily fulfil the objectives. It is then important, of course, to ensure that the client is comfortable with the approach.

Case studies

This section gives an overview of some examples where bulletin boards have been applied to business-to-business research.

Research with senior IT managers

NOP World Business commissioned this study not only to demonstrate to interested clients how the boards work, but also to explore a number of issues with senior IT managers that had arisen across projects conducted for several different clients using groups and face to face interviews.

This target audience has become ever more difficult to recruit effectively for discussion groups – particularly in London which is usually the chosen location because there is a sufficient source of large companies. There are several reasons for this problem: IT managers are over-researched in the South East, and are contacted often on a weekly basis to take part in studies; companies are becoming more restrictive about their employees participating in research; if the recruiter does not have the name of a contact in the IT department of a company, it can prove very difficult to progress past the main switchboard. We felt therefore that boards offered an alternative or complementary avenue, to reach new business to business respondents outside London for group discussions. Also, based on our experience, the problem is not unique to the UK – similar issues are arising in other European countries. As a result, our clients are starting to consider what they could effectively achieve through this alternative means of reaching respondents.

An ongoing need that clients have is to understand how their brand is perceived in comparison with its competitors; we saw this study as a good opportunity to conduct a ‘temperature test’ of these brands.

To explore all these areas, a board was convened with 12 senior IT managers from medium and large companies who had enterprise-wide strategic responsibilities. Size of company was defined by number of employees, and a mix of respondents was recruited from companies with 500-999 employees and 1000+ employees. We found that, in a few cases, we were able to persuade very senior executives to take part primarily because they did not have to make the time to attend a group, which even then they might have had to miss. The general consensus amongst the respondents was that they appreciated the flexibility of the format, and that they would be happy to take part again. Peer interaction was another positive outcome from the project.

6.1.4. Paul 17-Mar-2005 09:33 AM

Very interesting actually reading what other people have to say on the subject in question. There is no wrong or right answer and I find it very informative too.

The board lasted three days and participation rates remained high, with nine respondents of the original 12 making it to the final day’s questions (although 10 respondents did answer the bulk of the questions). The findings themselves have already helped to convince one client that online bulletin boards can generate valid and detailed findings (as similar – but less detailed - results had been observed in face to face discussions). The following quote is from that client – from a global IT company - on having observed this bulletin board (while in France), and indicates areas in which he can see a use for the technique.

This should prove an appropriate methodology in a number of situations. I think in particular of collecting target reactions to 'pain points' or validating messages for a PR or advertising campaign. Also, the recruitment of participants in focus groups is proving so difficult in certain markets that such advances are truly welcome and should be positively received by a number of research users.

Concept evaluation research

NOP recently undertook a bulletin board project for a global transportation and customs clearance brokerage company. Having developed a large number of service concepts, the client needed to test them in the US, Canada and Latin and Central America. The target audience were import / export / logistics managers.

Boards were chosen as a suitable approach for a number of reasons. To begin with, the client was keen to ensure that a wide spread of locations was covered in each country, thus reducing the likelihood that the findings would be too heavily weighted towards a particular location. A further important reason for selecting bulletin boards lay with the stimulus material: the number of service concepts to be tested could not adequately be covered in the 'typical' two hour group discussion or one hour depth interview. In contrast, respondents in this study had six days in which to give their considered responses to the services. The level of detail achieved in their responses to a large number of concepts would not have been possible in a face to face scenario. Although not the deciding factor in choosing boards, the client liked the idea that key stakeholders in the research would still have the opportunity to view the discussions.

In this case, an equivalent viewed, face to face research design would have been prohibitively expensive. Even so, the analysis required for this study turned out to be very labour intensive because of the amount of material shown.

Customer experience evaluation

A large international publisher had set up a pilot scheme whereby certain of its US customers (academic librarians) were able to deal with a third party to receive key services rather than having to deal with the publisher direct. The client wished to obtain feedback on its customers' experience of the trial (positive and negative perceptions etc.), the effectiveness of the communication channels now in place, and on how the new system could be improved.

This target audience was especially niche, low in number, and spread widely across the US. Group discussions, although the favoured approach, simply would not have been possible given the audience's geographical dispersion and the low number of individuals on the pilot scheme. The suitability of the method was reinforced by the respondents' culture which values highly the sharing of information and which quickly embraced the use of online communications. It also enabled clients to 'attend' from the US and the UK.

The bulletin board was very quick to launch, helped by the willingness of respondents to take part in research using a convenient format that was both familiar and innovative. Of the 18 respondents who initially agreed to take part, 14 actually did so, with nine of them participating in the entire discussion. However, despite reminders, only one respondent followed instructions to log on at least once a day and many logged on only a couple of times during the course of the week which undermined efforts to moderate the discussion more carefully.

In an attempt to encourage respondents to answer all the questions, the moderator set up some of the questions so that participants could not move on to a question until they had answered the previous one. However, this set-up was not liked by all

respondents. One participant in particular became frustrated by this device, which appeared to act as a means for him to vent some frustration at the client (as described earlier in this paper). The moderator posted a public message thanking him for his comments and a private message to the participant explaining how the client genuinely valued his input and wanted to look at ways of improving the system. Interestingly, when the moderator had phoned the respondent as a final recruitment check before the group started, he was extremely polite and more than happy to take part. Although purely anecdotal, this does raise the question of the extent to which the face to face approach would have influenced the openness of these respondents. In this instance, it is unlikely that these librarians would have been so frank in a one-to-one discussion.

The project delivered conclusive results, which are currently helping the client to develop its outsourcing operation.

Company evaluation

A financial investments firm based in the US was keen to understand how the financial advisers who promoted their products perceived the company, and the Group as a whole. In particular, the study looked at the strengths and weaknesses of the company in the context of competitive organisations. The client decided that boards would be appropriate because of the spread across the US of their customer sample, and the need for a group discussion environment. Two boards were run, each lasting six days; one board consisted of core customers and the other of what were considered by the client as 'at risk' customers.

Conclusions

The conclusions for this paper are very simple. We believe that the online bulletin board is a very worthwhile technique to have in the business to business qualitative toolkit, and certainly suits the way in which many of our respondents work (time-poor, and sometimes difficult to reach). It is meeting a need and generating interest – and projects – from clients.

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