

## Expert Panels for Product Development and Improvement

By Jim Young

Originally published in eZineArticles

Marketers and engineers often have the need for customer feedback that goes deeper and into more detail than the typical satisfaction survey or new product concept tests among a random group of product users. What is needed is the type of expert feedback, from an “early adopter” group of product category users, that can help the marketer and engineer to see beyond just the next incremental change and on to a whole new version of a product that gives it a distinct competitive advantage. In addition, such an early adopter expert panel group can also help to create entire new product categories.

Geoffrey Moore's *Crossing the Chasm*, is a classic book on marketing high technology products. In it he defines “early adopters,” or “visionaries,” as “that rare breed of people who have the insight to match an emerging technology to a strategic opportunity, the temperament to translate that insight into a high-visibility, high-risk project, and the charisma to get the rest of their organization to buy into that project.” In many cases these people are the mavens, or salespeople, or combination thereof, described in *The Tipping Point*, by Malcom Gladwell. We all know these people. They are the ones who, back in school, or at our work, seem to always have the latest cool gadget and who are on top of the latest technology, and who, importantly, know what its potential is. They understand the bigger picture of what technology can do to make our lives easier and/or more fun. They are intellectually curious, love using new technology, and in particular, like to figure things out and how to make a product work better and be more useful. In our work we see these folks in just about every high-tech focus group we conduct, and they're wonderful. They care greatly about technology, they're passionate about it, and they give a lot of thought about how technology can be improved to make it more useful for people.

These early adopters, or visionaries, then, are exactly the types of people who can provide marketers and product developers a wealth of outstanding information with which to help them develop products. Expert panels are an excellent tool for keeping your products current and ahead of the competition. Expert panels are a group of people who have agreed to be “on call” for the client company to provide expert feedback and opinions on current products, new product prototypes, strategic product direction (i.e., new markets for current products) and big picture “pie in the sky” brainstorming on new product concepts. Using these outside experts, a company can help to assure that it keeps pushing its technology forward and stays ahead of the competition.

It used to be that these expert panels would be brought together in-person, in a focus group type setting. This can be and often is still done, but with the web and social media tools, expert panels can now be recruited and brought together much more easily and frequently, online. The concept of “purposed online communities” (POC's), a new trend in the mixing of social media and marketing research, is an excellent tool for developing and using expert panels. POC's are online panels recruited by the company, with the purpose of periodically initiating a conversation about specific topics the company needs to get feedback on.

While POC's can't be used for many types of research due to the nature of the participants (typically they are only comprised of current customers) and the fact that you can't implement a targeted traditional survey, it can work very well as an expert panel tool, since you can draw in a large number of experts quickly and cheaply, and generate a great deal of interaction and brainstorming-type discussions about specific topics. In essence, these act as loose focus groups, being a bit less guided than a focus group session, but still with some general guidance from the online moderator. Thus, as in a focus group, the information gathered is directional (vs. definitive, as in a survey), yet can yield a wealth of informational gems. The same is the case if you are conducting an expert panel in person.

Given the new ability via the web of companies to quickly and inexpensively develop expert panels, which can help them gain and keep a competitive edge, it is becoming clear that this is a research tool that all companies, large and small, cannot afford to not be employing.