

Hot Topic: Custom Panel vs. Communities

Do I want a Custom Panel or a Community? How do I know? Are these the same? If not, what are the differences? These are the questions companies ask themselves when they think about the various approaches to having an on-going dialogue with their customers or consumers that delivers the benefits of being fast, insightful, and affordable.

Some research and panel suppliers are using these terms interchangeably, but at EasyInsites we believe a clear distinction is required. Both Custom Panels and Communities have in common the ability to learn over time, as well as to develop even deeper insights than previously possible. They also have in common the fact that customers or consumers are recruited into an online environment where they are asked to provide detailed profile information about themselves and to participate in research. However, there are some clear and distinct differences between Custom Panels and Communities that should be discussed and understood.

The key difference is that a Custom Panel does not require nearly as much investment by the owner/company, unlike a Community. A Community allows and encourages direct, unstructured contact and interaction amongst its members. As a result, the company needs to dedicate considerable resources to creating this environment as well as to monitoring and reacting to the various threads of feedback shared. Importantly, the feedback is typically unending and often highly sensitive. There is the constant question for the company of whether and how to respond when negative and potentially destructive feedback is being voiced about the company or brand, having an impact on both the specific topics of discussion as well as the Community attitudes at large.

In addition, because of the high level of commitment, members of a Community only represent a select and skewed group who are the most engaged and vocal of the company's customers or consumers. It is therefore highly appropriate if a continuous dialogue and open exchange of ideas is encouraged and beneficial to the business. With a Community, the entire environment and communication on the Community website needs to be completely aligned and consistent with the company's branding, this means that Marketing and Brand Management at the company needs to have an on-going role in the oversight and usage of the Community. In sum, a Community is not only a market research endeavour but is a comprehensive commitment on the part of a wide array of functions throughout the company's organization.

In contrast, a Custom Panel can be either branded or blinded (i.e., not directly associated with the brand or company). The company decides how and when its members will participate in research, and any interaction amongst its members is set-up and structured by the company and its research agency. For example, a bulletin board or focus group can easily be set-up where members are invited to participate in discussions, and read and respond to the viewpoints of others. With this approach, the company and research agency can be selective about who is invited and can focus the research on the key topic of interest. Further, since the level of commitment required is so much less than when joining a Community, Custom Panels are typically larger and more representative, and as a result are useful for a wider breadth of research purposes.

Finally, Custom Panels provide enormous cost saving benefits to companies who seek to have their own source of sample for conducting a variety of ad-hoc and tracking research. If a company is interested in experimenting with a Community, then a custom panel should be at the forefront of their mind. A Community is actually a subset of a Custom Panel, and should be considered at a later stage – the walk before you run analogy certainly applies here!