

*Online
Communities
Maximize
Understanding
of Youth*

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About 10 years ago, marketers, brand managers and youth program developers had an important “a-ha” revelation. They realized that talking directly to youth – instead of only to their parents or other influencer audiences – about how they feel about a product or an idea had a direct and positive effect on their “win rate” for new products and programs. Yes, going right to the source – to the kids themselves – produced a higher return on investment of precious research dollars.

Since that time, “youth moderators” have been in high demand. However, only the very best of those moderators were breaking through the protective barriers that youth instinctively put up to shield them from sharing their true feelings on important topics. The research community listened and moved away from potentially intimidating large-group interactions, and instead began conducting small groups, friendship pairs, and individual one-on-one interviews. The key being to make youth feel comfortable and protected during a research interaction. Setting was also found to be an important factor in creating that comfort-level – and in-home interviews with kids, tweens and teens put marketers inside the cocoon, actually seeing where youth were making decisions about what they need to improve and enjoy their lives.

So it’s all about talking to youth on their terms, in the places they’re most comfortable. More and more, that place is online. Yes, today’s tweens and teens are an online population. That’s their community.

They use the Internet to talk to friends, gather information for a report, check out sports scores, and practice their own social skills on a larger population. Their access to the Internet is mobile and virtually immediate, including at home, at school, and at friends’ houses and every step between on their hand-held device. Their online communications skills are often greater than their parents. They’ve even developed their own online communications shorthand. But most important, they enjoy being online and are quite comfortable sharing their thoughts, opinions and feelings in this setting.

Now the challenge becomes how to morph traditional methodologies with new technologies in order to reach a population steeped in online and wireless communications. We must honor youth preferences to share their ideas with us through electronic means.

STEWART and PARTNERS, along with our online partner, PluggedIN, are engaging youth using unique online communities to gather valuable qualitative market research insights. These communities are a way for you to constantly connect with your target audiences over time.

Online communities are an extremely valuable and authentic way for organizations to be more in touch with the audiences they serve – especially youth. A few benefits of online communities as a whole are:

- **Connection:** The community will help you get a much better picture of the target audience in their own words and images - without having to leave your desk! You will be able to get to really know the audience over time through their answers in ongoing discussions, surveys, blogs and photo sharing exercises. Additionally, this community creates a proactive resource for gathering qualitative research and capturing user generated content. This methodology is also more in line with how teens communicate today compared to other research modes.
- **Collaboration:** This community will help you generate ideas and collaborate with community members on an ongoing basis. For example, we will be able to ask community members to brainstorm ideas around a topic, flesh a formal product concept out and iteratively refine and test the concept. This type of collaboration would not be possible in “point-in-time” research methodologies.
- **Convenience:** Having a targeted group of people continuously available in your own community will allow you to quickly and cost effectively ask questions and test concepts that are developed internally over the course of this project. Rather than waiting weeks or months for findings, the community will allow you to send findings across the organization in one to two weeks (or less).
- **Complement:** This community will also complement all of the other research activities involved in this project. We can use the community to further explore topics raised in the initial qualitative phase of this study. We can also use the community between the tracker waves to explore any surprising findings or overflow issues that cannot be incorporated into the tracker survey.
- **Facilitated:** The community is facilitated by trained PluggedIN moderators who are responsible for creating engaging activities, interacting with members, and digging deeper on research objectives.

For studies that require more in-depth thinking about product attributes or program offerings to determine how youth will “live” with the offering, we recommend setting up an **exclusive advisory community** of 100 tweens and teens for periods of time of 1 to 3 months. These communities can often be recruited from existing pre and post wave online quantitative studies where we know an email address is connected to youth or a parent of a youth.

We have found that a short-term online advisory community can provide enough time to allow the members to get to know each other, and be comfortable enough to explore a range of issues. Specifically, these communities can:

- Help us develop a more comprehensive understanding of the lives of teens, including attitudes about healthy living, smoking behavior, health goals, concerns about their future, and a variety of other lifestyle issues.
- Give us an ongoing venue to explore a variety of elements of specific communications campaigns or conduct advertising assessments on an iterative basis (e.g. new ads, strategy shifts, media/web content).
- Better inform and validate research findings from other modes (e.g. friendship pairs, tracker results) and improve future tracker waves and other research efforts.
- Act as an on-demand research resource for any ancillary topics or issues that may surface over the course of a project.
- Provide teens with an exclusive venue to share their thoughts (unprompted) apart from research specific activities and truly have a voice in the direction of your campaign.
- These communities can also demonstrate that your company is actively listening to teens by providing them a place to exchange of ideas.

We use a number of tools in our communities to gain invaluable insight from youth. Rather than work in ton of “whiz bang” features, we concentrated on perfecting the areas that really matter for research - discussions forums, surveys and ways for youth to express themselves (i.e., blogs and photos). Our belief is that it’s not the platform that delivers a compelling community; rather, it’s the people running the community and the people in the community that matter. Below are a few of the “core” features in our platform – officially called the “PIN Community Platform.”

- **Discussion Forums:** The forums are where most of the “action” occurs. It’s here that we launch weekly qualitative-type exercises around a range of topics. The discussion section is threaded, with the ability for moderators to probe and inform respondents of follow-up probes to their comments. Moderators also have the ability to push discussions to targeted groups of individuals without the remainder of the community knowing about it. Finally, our facilitators have the ability to run discussions in an “unaided” format, which minimizes the impact of “group think” on the responses.
- **Surveys & Polls:** The survey and poll section is ideal for running short surveys and polls to the greater community or a sub-set of members. We have twelve different survey question types available, ranging from simple multiple choice to “drag and drop” ranking questions. Results are available instantly for clients to see, as well as select members (with permission). Client observers can instantly download survey data for additional analysis.
- **Blogs & Diaries:** Each community member is provided with a blog, which is similar to an online journal or diary. Having a blog gives community members a venue to tell us what is important to them, apart from the ongoing research-related activities in the discussion and survey section. We use the blog section for research by having community members keep an ongoing diary of their experiences with a product or service.

- **Photo Sharing:** All community members are also provided with the ability to upload and share photos with the community. These photos can be arranged into albums based on themes we define, or simply shared on an ad-hoc basis with other community members. Giving community members the ability to share photos provides us with a “semi-ethnographic” perspective of their lives, and helps us get a much better picture of who they are beyond their responses in discussions and surveys.

STEWART and PARTNERS, along with our online partner, PluggedIN, stand ready to help you explore the world of children, tweens and teens using online communities.