

USING ONLINE BULLETIN BOARDS TO DEVELOP HIGH VALUE CORPORATE STRATEGY

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INTRODUCTION

Planning corporate strategy can benefit from insights generated from interviews with key stakeholders who can be notoriously difficult to pin down. Online Bulletin Boards provide a powerful and flexible way to interact with senior audiences, generating high engagement and rich data for analysis. This paper includes case study detail from an evolving program of studies with key international stakeholders for Philips, leveraging Online Bulletin Boards to generate insights which drive critical decisions within short time frames dictated by senior management.

Corporate strategy is often shaped on the basis of in-depth feedback from key stakeholders within a company's customer base or prospect market. These stakeholders can be as diverse as senior C-Suite executives from customer businesses in the B2B space, or nationally recognized physician experts in the healthcare arena. Often it can be a challenge structuring insightful interactions with audiences who tend to be geographically widely dispersed, with demanding and hard-to-predict schedules that make it difficult for them to commit to 'real time' market research interactions such as focus groups. Online Bulletin Boards provide an effective way to accommodate and overcome these challenges, in order to deliver critical insights that can help drive corporate strategy and corporate communications planning.

WHY IS FEEDBACK FROM SENIOR STAKEHOLDERS CRITICAL IN SHAPING CORPORATE STRATEGY?

The views of 'Senior Influencers' are vital to strategic development within many commercial arenas. These are the people who act as thought leaders within their industry, shaping opinion to influence the uptake of new ideas through direct interaction with subordinates and also more indirectly through publications, speeches at conferences and peer group networking. They include healthcare experts, well known in their fields, who will influence prescribing for new medications. They also include senior business leaders and opinion formers who network extensively to seek and share information and opinion with peer group associates. In planning strategy, companies need to connect with such Senior Influencers' in order to understand which issues are of critical importance to them, to benefit from their insight and advice, and eventually to leverage this powerful source of potential advocacy.

PART 1 / 2010 AND BEYOND: GENERATING INSIGHTS

For Philips, a program of qualitative market research has been developed that leverages Online Bulletin Boards to interact with Senior Influencer audiences. The program has been so successful that it has led to the development of a 'next generation' ongoing research program which is delivering continuous feedback from 'Advisory Panels' of previous participants who enjoyed the initial research process so much that they were keen to engage with Philips at a deeper level and offer more continuous feedback.

WHAT IS AN ONLINE BULLETIN BOARD?

An 'asynchronous' Online Bulletin Board is a highly flexible online 'Focus Group' format in which pre-recruited respondents can log on at any time convenient to them, answer posted questions and engage in online discussion with a moderator and other group members.

Online Bulletin Boards bring together respondents whose numbers are limited, who are geographically dispersed and/or who need maximum flexibility when scheduling. They create innovative options for moderation, permitting different ways to engage respondents to make the best use of their participation. e.g.:

- Questions can be delivered to the group one at a time or simultaneously.
- Respondents can be interacted with individually and privately.
- Others' comments can be hidden until an individual posts his or her response.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN ADVANTAGES?

Convenience and flexibility

Convenience and flexibility are key advantages of this methodology from both participant and client points of view. Traditional qualitative research delivers high quality results but presents challenges in connecting in 'real time' with busy individuals who are geographically widely dispersed. The fact that Online Bulletin Board participants can join the discussion at any time of day from anywhere they may be located (even when 'on the road') is key to successful interaction:

"The process itself was easy to understand and I could do it on my own timeline. As a super busy professional that is appreciated." (Senior Healthcare Professional)

High quality interaction

From a client viewpoint, Philips can engage with clearly difficult to reach C-Suite audiences over a several-day period. An additional benefit of 'opt-in' flexibility is that these senior professionals choose times when they are mentally disposed to focus full attention on the discussion. This leads to particularly rich dialogue, as they are not 'watching the clock'. Over a several-day fielding period participants can come back to points previously made and expand on them, reigniting further conversations. This generates good depth and consideration in the conversations that take place.

Due to the high caliber of participants, there are special peer-to-peer dynamics which facilitate discussion between audience members as they share thoughts and experiences around common themes. They also respond well to being consulted by the company, feeling 'valued' and developing a bond which increases

PART 1 / 2010 AND BEYOND: GENERATING INSIGHTS

their engagement towards the research and the sense of importance they attribute to it which is noticeable from the quality of comments made:

"It was a good business exercise for me. I have watched focus groups in the past, and they can be a "feeding frenzy" of negativism. This online process seemed to give more nuanced response." (Senior Business Leader)

Respondent enthusiasm for the initial research process has led to the development of an ongoing program of Online Bulletin Boards which is currently generating high levels of response and commitment from participant panels.

Fast turn around

Insight gained is actionable within a short time frame. From the end of day one immediate feedback to core questions is available via downloadable transcripts which, when restructured appropriately by the consultant for analysis, can rapidly yield insights that can be shared with the client teams.

Economy

In general, the methodology is economical in terms of time and cost – no travel, video streaming or data transcription are needed. Because of the facility for geographical coverage and because of the range and richness of response, one Online Bulletin Board can deliver data equivalent, or even superior, to several face to face Focus Groups. Given these large volumes of data, they must be systematically structured to facilitate efficient analysis on the part of the research consultant.

HOW DOES PHILIPS EXECUTE ITS ONLINE BULLETIN BOARDS?

Set up

The program of work for Philips has leveraged several studies at critical time points in the corporate strategic planning process. Initial studies differed in their particular aims, and in the sub-audiences targeted, but they generally took the following form. For a reasonable honorarium, Senior Influencers including C-Suite Executives, Journalists, Senior Physicians, Senior Hospital Administrators, Urban Planners and Lighting Designers agreed to join an online discussion, logging on at their own convenience for a minimum specified number of minutes per day, over a period of two or three days.

In the ongoing 2010 research program, three separate Influencer panels have been recruited to participate in a series of six one- or two-day Online Bulletin Board sessions over the year. Individual respondents are not always able to participate in all six sessions, but on average at least 75% will participate each time. (Rare) panel drop-outs can be replaced with new members.

Logging in and out whenever convenient to them, panel members can interact across multiple time zones, and/or countries that share a common language. Since Philips is a global company with worldwide reach, Influencers are recognized across a wide range of geographies. These Online Bulletin Board studies were recruited across the United Kingdom and United States, adding another dynamic to the mix. Allowing senior individuals to interact with their trans-Atlantic peers is engaging for participants as well as valuable in yielding cross-cultural insight.

PART 1 / 2010 AND BEYOND: GENERATING INSIGHTS

The issue of audience heterogeneity is addressed by running several Online Bulletin Boards concurrently, with the different sub-audiences each interacting at peer group level while discussing a mixture of topics - some that are common across all audiences and others that are specific to the sub-audience concerned.

Discussion guide development

The flexible format enables ongoing discussion guide development throughout a given fielding period, and can incorporate a wide variety of visual aids and modes of enquiry. The studies for Philips have included pre-seeded discussion, questionnaire rating scales, and evaluation of print ads, multi-media clips and websites in development. 'Overnight' tasks have also been undertaken to meet particular objectives for Philips, such as generating 'real time' media diaries and interaction with specified websites.

Synchronicity

Whilst Online Bulletin Board participation is generally 'asynchronous', meaning that different respondents are logged on at different times, there are times when discussion can be 'live' because several participants are logged on simultaneously. In the initial Philips studies, a senior consultant team based in the United States and the European Union provided 'round the clock' moderation to ensure that participants were responded to whenever they choose to log on, and to facilitate 'real time' online discussion at times when this was possible. Similarly the client team could log on as 'Observers' and maintain continuous contact with moderators.

The need for synchronicity diminishes with experienced and motivated panels. In the 2010 continuous panel research less facilitation is required; participants have become used to the format and no longer require encouragement to engage in online discussion, which is now a major incentive to participation and which they understand does not have to be in 'real time'.

We are now working to include other nationalities in the mix, by expanding our agency team of senior moderators to include native speakers of languages other than English who will work with US/UK-based team members to produce globally based reporting.

Analysis and reporting

The large volumes of data generated can provide challenges for fast turnaround of results - data must be carefully structured to facilitate analysis. For Philips, Online Bulletin Board raw data are exported into a searchable database which enhances our ability to manage multi-site data streams and efficiently query and code data to generate insight.

Reporting is provided at various levels.

- Initial insights are provided via downloadable transcripts at the end of each field day.
- Full transcripts, exported into the searchable database format, are also provided.
- Team based analysis feeds into PowerPoint reporting which is shared with Philips Senior management at an early stage.
- Philips also share key learnings with relevant stakeholders inside and outside the organisation, including creative agencies and media partners where appropriate.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES OF AN OBB PANEL APPROACH?

Recruiting the right participants

Screening and recruitment of participants must be undertaken with care. If the right people are involved from the start this will save time and trouble (and expense) later.

Having similar level respondents is highly advisable. In the Philips studies, restricting the conversation to C-Suite respondents, even though they come from different industries, allows for successful interchange of ideas. It is doubtful if the same high quality of results would be generated had the C-Suite audience been mixed with another.

It goes without saying that participants should be core members of the target groups that they represent. Philips supply detailed definitions to feed into the screening process.

Panel management / maintaining engagement

As in any longitudinal research we need to minimize risk of panel dropouts, and avoid 'contamination' from dysfunctional members. Unlike Focus Groups, where one can 'hook' a respondent out of a room, here we need to 'manage' the OBB membership to make sure it is both robust in terms of sample size, and functional in terms of respondent quality. Participants do not need to be positive, but they do need to interact adequately.

From time to time we do need to say a tactful 'goodbye' to a dysfunctional participant or to replace one who needs to move on for other reasons. We then need to 'top up' panels with new recruits. Such 'new blood' can have a positive impact, bringing new viewpoints to the mix. We have allowed for up to 20% panel replacement over the course of this year and this is on target so far.

Delivering expectations

When recruiting participants, it is important to explain what will be required of them, to set expectations up front and to deliver on these. It is also important to avoid participants feeling that this is a 'sales exercise'. The idea is to consult them not to try to influence them.

A thorny issue involves how much time they will need to schedule for the task. In practice we have found it challenging to estimate how much time participants will actually spend online each day since the level of input/contribution to online discussion threads is up to them.

Crafting the discussion guide

The Discussion Guide must be carefully crafted for these highly motivated but potentially critical participants. Repetition must be avoided as well as any questions which may be construed as boring or 'time wasting'. As far as possible we explore only areas in which participant feedback can be actioned, avoiding areas where irreversible decisions have already been made. When it is necessary to obtain feedback for 'finished' initiatives we need to make it clear to participants why this feedback is required – for example in order to make improvements to creative executions next time around, or to explore website functionality.

PART 1 / 2010 AND BEYOND: GENERATING INSIGHTS

The Guide must also be kept at a reasonable length. As a rule of thumb we try to ensure that the posted questions can be answered within two thirds of the allocated time (e.g. 30 out of 45 minutes). This allows some time for participant to participant interaction. However, participants will often get highly involved in discussion and may spend several hours on a task that was slated for completion in under an hour. This will not lead to panel drop out as long as they feel that their input is genuinely valued.

Providing feedback

As part of the ongoing panel exercise it is important for participants to feel that their voice is being heard. We maintain an ongoing email dialogue with panel members between formal interactions. This includes feedback from Philips highlighting initiatives that have been implemented based on their input.

Optimising the online experience

At the end of every OBB session we ask respondents how they have found the experience. We listen to what they say and where possible we make suggested changes. This has led to better question formatting and also to moderators learning when to 'bow out' and allow participants to interact more directly with one another. We also carefully focus follow up probes to avoid wasting participants' time. As a result, we find that our supplementary questions will generally be answered. When a participant goes back online the first thing he/she does is to check for, and respond to, new posts and discussion threads.

Incentivisation

As in most research situations, we offer suitable honoraria to OBB participants to thank them for their time. While this is undoubtedly appreciated it is not the core motivation to participation.

Managing bias

An obvious question, as with any panel research, concerns respondent bias: are we creating 'pro-Philips' cohorts who are unrepresentative of these audiences as a whole? At this stage what we can say is that participants seem to think and behave as an 'Advisory Panel' or, at times a 'virtual boardroom'. Some of their initial opinions of Philips have naturally improved over time, based on increasing familiarity with the company and its aims. But we are satisfied that they make an unbiased appraisal of the topics presented for discussion. The presence of senior peers also keeps the discussion at an objective level. We are not attempting to measure campaign effectiveness – Philips has other research vehicles to deliver that.

Moderation

In order to take full advantage of the opportunity offered to gain insight at this senior level, a senior and sophisticated moderating team must be employed. We believe that this should include people native to all countries represented in the panels. For example, 'local language' and culture is different in the United Kingdom than in the United States and should be reflected within the moderating team.

In studies where participants are located across multiple time zones, moderation may need to be continuous, even 'round the clock'. Regular moderator team meetings must be scheduled to manage 'handovers'.

PART 1 / 2010 AND BEYOND: GENERATING INSIGHTS

The moderator's role includes stimulating 'asynchronous' discussion between participants (without getting in the way of it) as well as following up on individual responses. This is particularly important in standalone studies.

Other challenges

Some other challenges are inherent in this methodology but for these studies have been outweighed by the benefits:

The 'asynchronous' format can provide less opportunity for participant-to-participant interaction– but the longer fielding period provides plenty of opportunity to set up discussion threads and, as explained earlier, there are many times when discussion can be 'live'.

Lack of visual contact with participants eliminates non-verbal communication but this is compensated by additional depth of response.

WHY HAS PHILIPS DONE THIS AND HAS IT MET EXPECTATIONS?

Background to research needs

Philips launched its Global **Because* campaign two years ago with the aim of establishing Philips as a thought leader in the field of Health and Well-being. We identified senior business influencers as the core target for the campaign due to the fundamental shift it implied for Philips' corporate strategy from simply an electronics company to a health and well-being one.

At the time of the new strategy development we had relatively limited knowledge about this target audience in terms of who they were (especially from a non-commercial perspective), how they currently perceived our company and how credible they thought this shift in strategy would be for Philips. While the foundations of the campaign were in place, we needed to constantly review and evolve the activities we developed, the themes we communicated on to these audiences and the channels through which we communicated with them.

Due to the evolving nature of the campaign, we therefore required a research set up that would be highly flexible to the frequent need for information which would support regular internal decision-making milestones relating to the campaign and would also inform its strategy.

The Global Marketing & Communication (GM&C) Market Intelligence (MI) team therefore searched for new ways both to inform the campaign strategy quickly, enabling faster decision making than before (about content, topics, ad copies, etc.), and also to measure its effectiveness among a particularly hard-to-reach audience – Senior Business Influencers from each of our core businesses: Healthcare, Lighting and Consumer. This required a move away from a purely traditional qualitative research approach which can often involve high costs, lengthy set-up times, even longer insights delivery times and allow minimum interaction between the client and target. As a result, we began discussions with our agency partner to develop the appropriate method dictated by senior management and a more interactive yet cost effective solution.

PART 1 / 2010 AND BEYOND: GENERATING INSIGHTS

Consistent with a rich culture of innovation at Philips, we are enthusiastic about piloting new, innovative research techniques with similar-minded agencies. The Online Bulletin Board was seen initially as another opportunity to test out a relatively new methodology among a very different kind of audience – Senior Business Influencers – but with no particular expectations as to the outcome. It is even fair to say there was some internal skepticism in the ability of this methodology to successfully reach and engage a quality C-level audience as frequently as would be needed to generate insights for the campaign's health and well-being themes and content.

Chosen solution

An initial pilot Online Bulletin Board conducted among Senior Business Influencers in mid-2009 was essentially a sense check of reactions to campaign material already created and launched in the market. The Board generated very high participation rates and incredibly rich verbatims on our pre-defined list of topics. Interaction between respondents proved successful despite differing time zones and, based on feedback from participants, was highly stimulating and something most would be keen to participate in again. The OBB also allowed a great deal of flexibility for Philips to participate in the live sessions via the moderators, to follow-up on interesting comments and instantly to download restructured discussion transcripts after each day. This first pilot provided some key proof points on executions already in the field and a first insight into how this stakeholder-type audience perceives the boundaries of Health and Well-being to allow us to better define and communicate the space in which Philips plays to the external world.

Given its success – with the external and internal audiences - a second round of OBB research was commissioned at the end of 2009 and expanded to include Healthcare and Lighting Influencer audiences. It has finally evolved into a continuous dialogue platform running throughout 2010 with almost monthly interactions. This continuous version of the Online Bulletin Board approach provides the added advantage of gauging change in perception of Philips due to campaign exposure over a longer period of time.

Overall benefits to Philips

Through this research program we have been able to learn more about our influencer audiences and, hence, are in a position to better fine tune our messaging to each via a better understanding of how similarly or differently the targets react to particular messages and themes.

The tool has also quickly uncovered any underlying skepticism around campaign themes and initiatives. We were able to quickly identify issues, take action (if they were not already launched ideas) or at least anticipate reactions to them externally (if they were already launched). Some instances of criticism, for example, included us being seen as using 'marketing jargon' to explain campaign themes. In addition some initiatives were criticised as being overtly commercial.

PART 1 / 2010 AND BEYOND: GENERATING INSIGHTS

Specific examples of how insight from the program has helped drive strategy change

Improving Getinsidehealth.com website

Situation: We wanted to better serve our audience of healthcare professionals.

- We learned that Healthcare Professionals want serious peer-reviewed content – not opinion pieces or articles on general, consumer topics.
 - Of all our senior influencer audiences, Healthcare Professionals were most skeptical of blogs – considering them too opinion based. This knowledge enabled us to focus our efforts moving forward, using blogs only to communicate research and facts.
 - We are also adding more health-related media partners/content outside of the US, working with two major international healthcare journal publishers.

Livable Cities Award

Situation: We wanted to launch the Philips Livable Cities Award and wanted to develop the concept with feedback from our three audiences.

- We learned the Award needs to be a serious award, overseen by an independent judging panel (with up to one Philips representative); it cannot be just a marketing tool. We are therefore putting together an independent jury of experts in all of our main award category topic areas, and requiring entrants to deliver robust business proposals.
- We learned that cash awards should be invested back into the community. This confirmed our proposal to give grants to execute ideas rather than just give away ‘award’ money to reward successful projects.

The Philips Centre for Health and Well-being

Situation: We recently established the Philips Centre for Health and Well-being and required insights from influencers to build further on the initiative (topics, content delivery methods) and understand its positioning in the minds of this same audience.

- We learned that the independent content and nature of The Centre is critical to establishing credibility among stakeholders and must be separate from our products and services in order to do this.
- We learned that it was an attractive proposition for our targets but The Centre wouldn’t work if it was a marketing/product-led approach.
- We learned in which ways the target audience would be most receptive to receiving content and other information relating to The Philips Centre for Health and Well-being.

Other benefits and risks

Engaging internal stakeholders

Due to the high actionability and depth of the insights continually demonstrated by the Online Bulletin Board program, we have witnessed a broadening of interest and use of the platform among internal Philips stakeholders, from the Brand Campaign team initially to Professional and Public Affairs, the Philips Centre for Health & Well-being and our Sustainability office colleagues, who use this as an opportunity to validate near-to-final content they are about to launch and to generate ideas, for example, around ‘think tank’

PART 1 / 2010 AND BEYOND: GENERATING INSIGHTS

initiatives. Also, because of their participation in the research process, from the development of Discussion Guides to observing Online Bulletin Board discussions in real time with the flexibility to shape the conversation through direct contact with a moderator, the Online Bulletin Board program has helped to bring market research to the active thinking of these same internal audiences instead of them just being passive receivers of the resulting research data.

Blurring the boundaries

What we have also interestingly observed is that the Online Bulletin Board program has had the unexpected result of blurring the boundaries between market research and stakeholder relationship management as we allow these target audiences to actively and continuously participate in the development of strategic elements of Philips' brand positioning. This is no longer the traditional, one-way, outside-in conversation of market research. As such it came with unexpected benefits but equally exposed us to foreseeable risks to our brand equity if not properly managed.

The positive impact on our brand perception among this group of Influencers has been a welcome bi-product of the research program. The research has raised awareness of our B2B and B2C portfolio and of our company's strategic direction. Opinions of Philips have begun to change and improve over the course of these short exchanges with our stakeholders:

"The most fundamental way in which my views of Philips has changed is to discover the scope and range of products they have developed in the health/wellbeing sector. I simply didn't know this before." (Opinion Leader)

The exposure to campaign activities and overall company strategy has generated a growing group of advocates for the Philips brand, increasing the buy-in and credibility of our company as a thought leader in Health and Well-being.

The inherent risk is that we are exposing key elements of our brand strategy to business influencers, which, if it is not credible to them, could ultimately damage our brand equity. If not properly managed, both in terms of content shown, and in the frequency and quality of interactions, the research program could open us up to a negative reaction beyond the Online Bulletin Board program itself. Many social platforms fail at the point of maintaining interest for participants and with internal stakeholders. As such, this research tool must be properly managed – from securing senior moderators who we trust to interact with our stakeholders in a way that is not harmful to Philips, to being consistent in our messaging so that we remain credible, to dialoguing with our respondents regularly and with inspiring content to maintain their interest over the course of time and, importantly, not to demonstrate any commercial intent behind our discussions with them.

Not a replacement for traditional Qualitative Research

It must also be noted that while the Online Bulletin Board program has proved its value in delivering timely insights for our campaign related activities, it is a complementary means of testing campaign ad copies and not a replacement for traditional methods in the early stages of advertisement development.

PART 1 / 2010 AND BEYOND: GENERATING INSIGHTS

Overview

From its original objective of gauging perceptions of Philips' campaign activity among business influencers, the Online Bulletin Board has become an integral component both of the campaign and of stakeholder management strategy itself. It is a 'living lab' experiment that, with our agency partner, we are constantly trying to improve and we are continually searching for new ways to interact with participants to maintain interest over time. Respondents feel part of a 'virtual boardroom' for Philips where they essentially participate in our brand strategy and generate ideas that can be reflected in what we communicate externally around the brand.

IN CONCLUSION

It is beyond doubt that Online Bulletin Boards will become one of the preferred qualitative research methods going forward. They are not a replacement for existing qualitative methodologies. But we believe that they have 'come of age' and, for exploring the right questions with the right audiences, are an ideal solution. The methodology is applicable across a wide range of industries, having particular relevance in the healthcare field, especially research involving senior knowledge leaders (physician experts and senior hospital management). Moreover, we believe that membership of ongoing online 'Advisory Panels' will become something to which senior business leaders aspire, in order to make their voices heard as well as to enjoy the opportunity to interact, in their own time, with their peers at a global level.

"I found it a really interesting experience and enjoyed reading other viewpoints. I think this kind of forum with like-minded business people must surely be a great way for companies to gain useful insight." (Senior Business Leader)

For Philips the methodology is genuinely contributing to corporate strategic planning and will be rolled out further over time to support decisions in a variety of areas across the company moving forward.

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