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Market Research Online Community Panelists' Perspective

A Market Research Online Community (MROC) is a growing and interesting part of the Market Research Industry. Building and successfully running an MROC requires a careful combination of a variety of factors that researchers can affect — both directly and indirectly. In this whitepaper, we will be discussing a subset of those factors and putting forth future hypotheses for further consideration.

MROCs And Their Benefits

Let's start with a simple definition of what we mean by MROC: in this whitepaper an MROC is a group of participants who are brought together to interact and share their opinions for a company or brand. MROCs can be built in-house by brands or through the use of an agency that offers community-based research. Typically MROCs offer flexible data collection and member engagement methods. These include, but are not limited to, moderated discussions (similar to an online forum where participants discuss a variety of topics under the supervision and direction of trained moderators). They might also include 'exercises' in the form of short surveys, games, challenges or one-on-one discussion/chat with moderators.

Different groups within brands or corporate organizations may utilize the community to develop an understanding of the target consumer on an as-needed basis. Communities may start with a purpose that adjusts over time, or they can be focused on a singular issue or topic. In either case, successfully managed MROCs can produce high-quality insights that prove valuable to a company or brand.

Most often, the end-goal of an MROC is to obtain deeper insights from target consumers to drive brand decisions at scale and in a more time and cost-effective manner than traditional in-person methodologies, such as focus groups.

As a hybrid methodology solution, MROCs offer flexibility to researchers who desire a mix of benefits normally associated with traditional qualitative in-person methods and quantitative online surveys. For instance, in-person focus groups typically provide insight depth, but not always breadth, due to the usually low number of participants per group. Utilizing MROCs, a researcher can obtain deeper insights without requiring participants (or researchers and brand managers alike) to travel to a centralized location. Insights are usually gathered from a wider set of geographic locations, making MROCs a smart option. Additionally, recruitment is generally easier (via online) and could come at a lower cost than in-person focus group recruitment.

Researchers can build MROCs as either an ongoing program, or as an ad-hoc project with a defined timeframe depending on the business and research objectives of the brand. Participants will agree ahead of time to the incentive and will be expected to engage throughout the duration of the community. While there are various reasons to run a short-term or longer term community, maintaining healthy participation from members is a key success driver.

Overall, many factors go into the creation of a successful MROC, including the topic or category, well-defined member profiles and recruiting, a smart schedule for periodic refreshes to infuse new participants, a carefully thought out participant compensation plan, smart moderation and engagement plans, internal acceptance and socialization tactics, etc .

Challenges of Building an MROC

There are a number of challenges in building an MROC and we'd like to touch on a few here. These challenges can be overcome, though typically with a compromise in a different area. First, the cost can vary greatly based on scale requirements. Increasing the length and size or number of activities within the MROC will also increase the overall cost, similar to traditional methods (such as longer vs. shorter surveys or smaller vs. larger sample sizes). Deeper insights that require a higher level of engagement from both the participant and the

moderator also drive cost as they require either higher incentives or more moderation, and response-solicitation efforts from the moderator. These can have higher cost implications. Set up and ramp up time can also be a large constraint when developing an MROC project. Often, results are needed quickly – these are times when a traditional online survey might be wiser. Similar to in-person focus groups, MROCs can require additional time for participant recruitment, planning, and analysis of the moderator/participant interactions.

Compared to point-in-time surveys or focus groups, MROCs typically require more involvement from participants that is spread out over a defined period of time. Participants might be asked to test a product and return to the community within 24-48 hours to provide feedback. While a traditional phased survey approach can handle this as well, MROCs benefit from the live moderation and ongoing discussion aspect – the creation of iterative, real-time feedback. Additionally, community discussion is often driven by the participants and can evolve as the study progresses.

Another challenge is that MROCs lack physical interaction (consumer facial reactions, body language, etc.) Rather, MROCs should be thought of as a hybrid qualitative and quantitative approach that brings together some of the best elements of both methodologies.

A Data-Driven Approach to Building a Better MROC

Given the higher cost and engagement requirements, planning and appropriate management are critical components of a successful MROC. In the summer of 2017, DISQO was interested in learning how to improve the quality and level of insights gained from an MROC. Key questions to be answered included:
- What are some of the keys to a successful MROC?

- What are participant expectations?
- How can MROCs be optimized?
- How do we, as researchers, drive engagement and participant satisfaction?

"Research-on-research" was conducted to answer these questions. The goal was to provide insights into building and maintaining a healthier and more sustainable MROC.

An online survey was conducted among 713 respondents from DISQO's consumer research panel. The sample composition had quotas by age, gender and income that generally resembled the US Census.
- Of all study participants, 21% have heard of an MROC before this survey. A general definition of MROC was used in this survey.
- For the other 79%, this was the first time they had ever heard of MROCs.

MROC Awareness (Among Total)
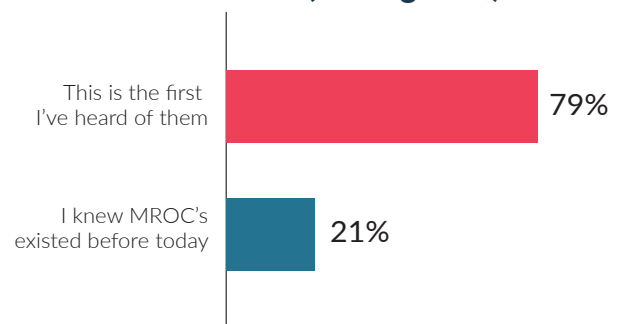
- Of the 21% who had heard of MROCs, 47% had been invited to an MROC at some time in the past, with 69% of those agreeing to participate.
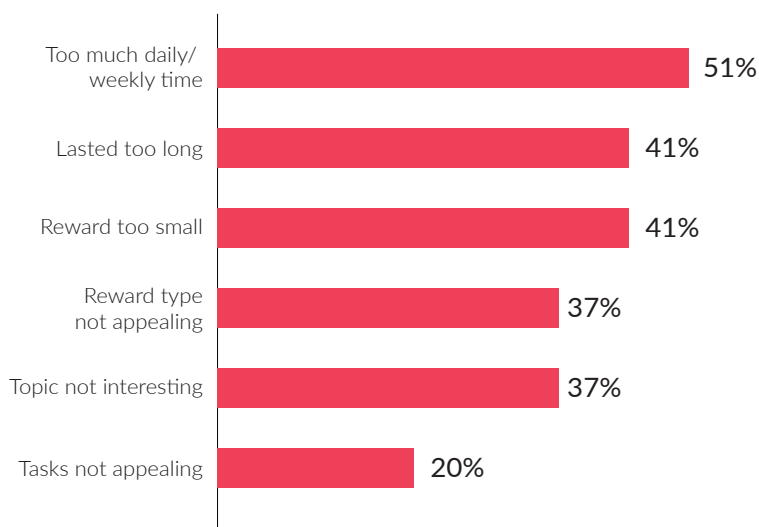- Overall, just under 7% of respondents had participated in an MROC.

MROC Past Invitation
(Among Those Aware, n=148)
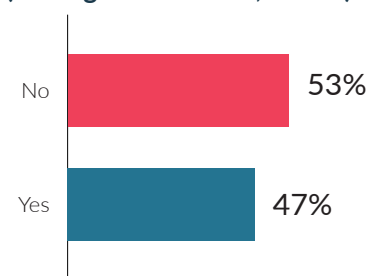
One of the main challenges in building an MROC is recruitment – both at scale and with high quality standards. More than half (59%) of these participants who have been invited to an MROC in the past report declining participation due to specific reasons.

- The top barrier for about half (51%) of the surveyed participants to become part of an MROC is "study required too much participation time on a daily or weekly basis."
- Next, for 41%, the MROC lasted too long and the reward/incentive was too small.
- Unappealing incentives and lack of interest in the topic deterred more than a third (37%) of the surveyed participants from joining MROCs in the past.

Reasons For Non- Participation
(Among Those Declining, n=41, Caveat: Small Base)

Too much daily/ weekly time	51%
Lasted too long	41%
Reward too small	41%
Reward type not appealing	37%
Topic not interesting	37%
Tasks not appealing	20%

Looking at these numbers, we can see that two of the biggest reasons why invitees decline an MROC invitation are the time commitment and the incentive, even if topics that consumers find interesting could potentially increase participation. With a higher time commitment, a higher incentive must also be offered .

Among those who have previously joined an MROC, there are themes that can be leveraged to increase participation. When asked an open-ended question about what they liked about participating in an MROC, many said that they like to give their opinions and to do so in their own words (vs. traditional structured surveys.)

"I felt that I was able to give more thoughtful opinions on the product that we were reviewing. I enjoyed the challenge of thinking more deeply about my opinion besides simple multiple-choice responses. Usually with surveys I find that my opinion doesn't quite fall within the realm of the choices given."

Others felt satisfaction from the feeling that their opinions were truly being taken into account and would likely be used in the future development of products or services. MROC moderators and brands are able to provide direct feedback to participants and foster this sense of satisfaction.

"I liked that I was having a direct impact on the product(s) that were being released soon or that were being altered. I liked feeling as if my voice mattered on a product I buy."

Beyond sharing opinions, many still feel that the incentive was an important part of their participation based on their open-ended commentary. Some mentioned not only the final compensation received, but also things like the food, beverages or samples received during the research.

On the flip side, there are several things that respondents dislike about participating in MROCs. The most frequently mentioned complaint is the involvement level: the length of time commitment, intensity of activities, or the frequency expectations.

"Sometimes moderators ask too much from members and take advantage of them."

Additionally, some stated they had difficulty remembering to stay involved. Researchers can combat these pitfalls by utilizing reminders to help participants stay involved and active on a regular basis. Email and text are the two most common participation reminders used.
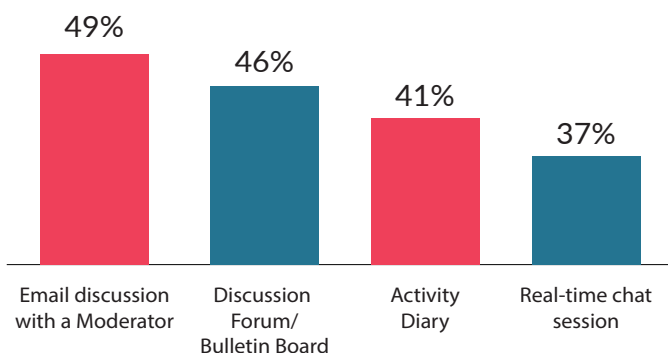
"[I disliked] remembering to participate on my own. I would have liked an app to remind me of tasks and such."

Activities and Exercises

Content in terms of activities and exercises is naturally also a critical lever in managing MROC success and keeping MROC participants highly engaged. A variety of activities with differing levels of involvement should be offered. Beyond varying the amount of time required to participate, another recommendation is that multiple activities be available at any given time – allowing participants a choice of tasks to complete as their time allows.

When it comes to different MROC activities (assuming participation), people preferred asynchronous activities like email or forum discussion over real-time chat. For this survey question, the chat session was described as an activity where community participants get online at a certain time and the moderator asks direct questions for real-time interaction. While an activity like real-time chat may be extremely beneficial to researchers, participants see them as high-effort. As such, their use should be balanced with other activities to maintain the highest levels of engagement.

MROC Activities Likely To Participate In
(% Extremely/Very Likely, Among Total, Varying Base Sizes Due to Those Responding)

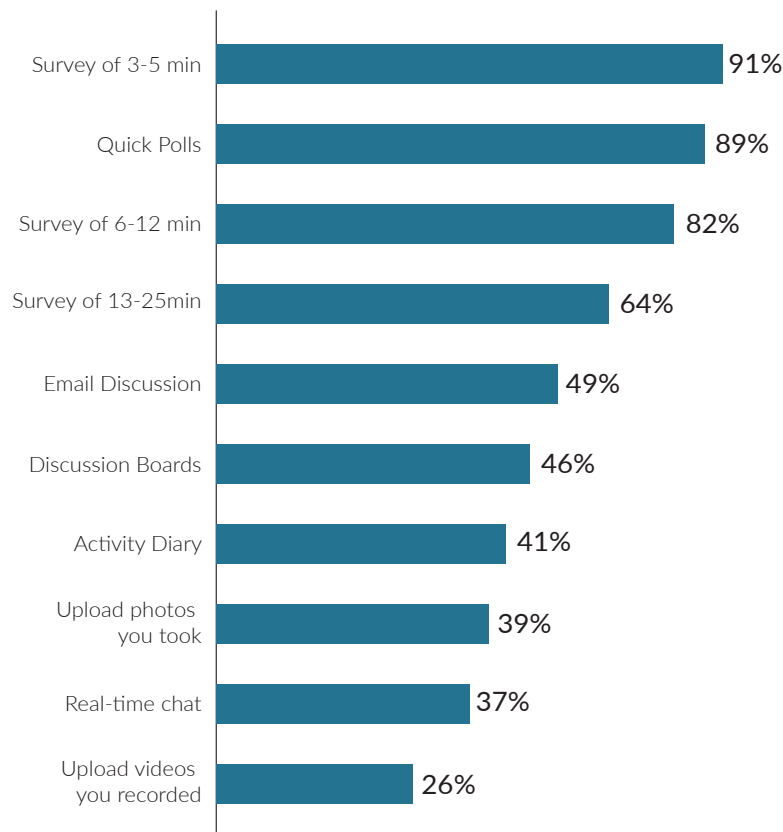| Activity	%
Email discussion with a Moderator	49%
Discussion Forum/ Bulletin Board	46%
Activity Diary	41%
Real-time chat session	37%

Interestingly, respondents in this survey strongly preferred activities that they could complete individually and on their own time. The open-ended commentary suggests that consumers prefer

less time-dependent activities. In other words, members should be given a sense of choice as to when they want to respond and in what activities they should participate.

A full list of explored activities appear below .

Likelihood to Participate in Activities
(% Selected, Among Those Positive To Participation)

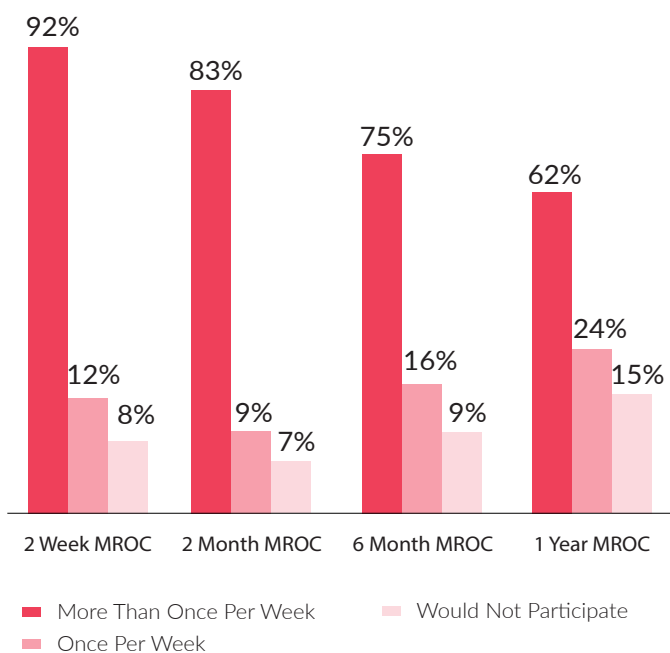| Activity	%
Survey of 3-5 min	91%
Quick Polls	89%
Survey of 6-12 min	82%
Survey of 13-25min	64%
Email Discussion	49%
Discussion Boards	46%
Activity Diary	41%
Upload photos you took	39%
Real-time chat	37%
Upload videos you recorded	26%

Frequency of Participation

An important consideration for any MROC is the length of time it needs to run. As mentioned earlier, a brand can choose an MROC to run for as short as 2 weeks or as long as a year (or longer) -- largely depending on the nature of the category, research and business objectives, available resources, etc. In this research, we explored the length of total time for an MROC with participants to gain a high-level understanding of their expectations, albeit without the benefit of a lot of context (such as topic, brand, etc.)
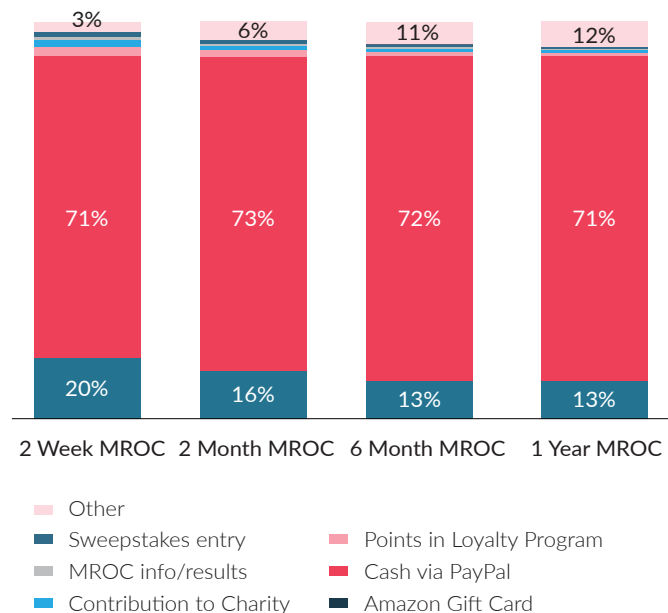Overall, there is a healthy level of interest in

participating in communities even at longer periods of time, although some participants will lower their frequency as the community length increases. This suggests that brands can optimize frequency by manipulating length of time, incentives and a host of other factors some of which we touched on in this white paper.

**Expected Participation Frequency
by MROC Length**
**(Among Total Respondents,
Varying Bases Due to Those Responding)**

Legend:
- More Than Once Per Week
- Once Per Week
- Would Not Participate

Incentive Type and Value

Incentives are one of the most influential levers that a researcher can use to generate MROC engagement. Both type and amount of incentive are at play and should be considered. In this survey, when asked about type of incentive, the vast majority (70%+) of survey respondents said that they prefer cash via PayPal and less than one-fifth said that they prefer Amazon gift cards — across all MROC lengths.

Preferred Incentive Type
**(Among Total,
Varying Base Sizes Due To Those Responding)**

Legend:
- Other
- Sweepstakes entry
- MROC info/results
- Contribution to Charity
- Points in Loyalty Program
- Cash via PayPal
- Amazon Gift Card

Not surprisingly, incentive expectations increase with MROC length. As a guideline, longer MROCs will generally require a larger incentive. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of respondents feel that an incentive value of $200+ would be appropriate for an MROC that lasts one year, where participation is required multiple times per month. On the other end of the spectrum, over half of survey respondents (55%) feel that an incentive value of less than $50 is appropriate for a two week MROC. We hypothesize that depending on the topic affinity and MROC experience, these guidelines and actual incentives will likely vary.

Stated "Reasonable and Appropriate" Incentive Value
(Among Total, Varying Base Due To Those Responding)

Legend:
- $200.00+
- $100.00 - $199.99
- $50.00 - $99.99
- $20.00 - $49.99
- $6.00 - $19.99
- $0.00 - $5.99
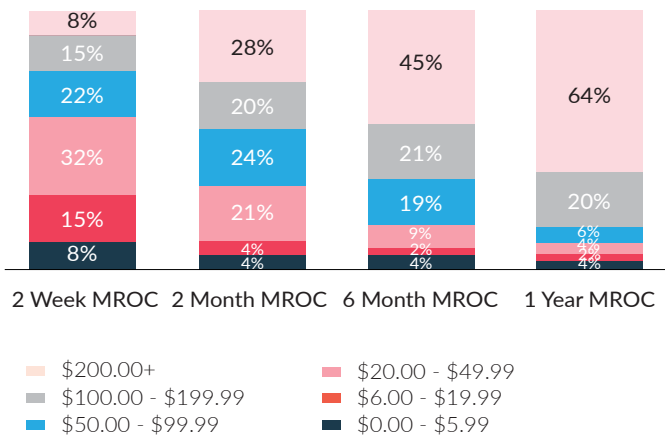
The increase in expected incentive amount with increased time commitment can be seen through the average appropriate incentive amount. On average, respondents feel that just over $500 is the appropriate amount for an MROC that lasts for one year. Depending on the amount of participation required, it is recommended that a one-year MROC pays out a minimum of $300, which theoretically should keep about half of participants satisfied. Depending upon the specific situations, this may retain enough people to achieve MROC goals. For a one-year MROC paying $200, a researcher could expect around 43% of respondents to feel motivated by the incentive (again, not taking into account other factors like topic affinity, etc.)

Appropriate Incentive Amount by Length

Legend:
- Mean
- Median
- 75th Percentile
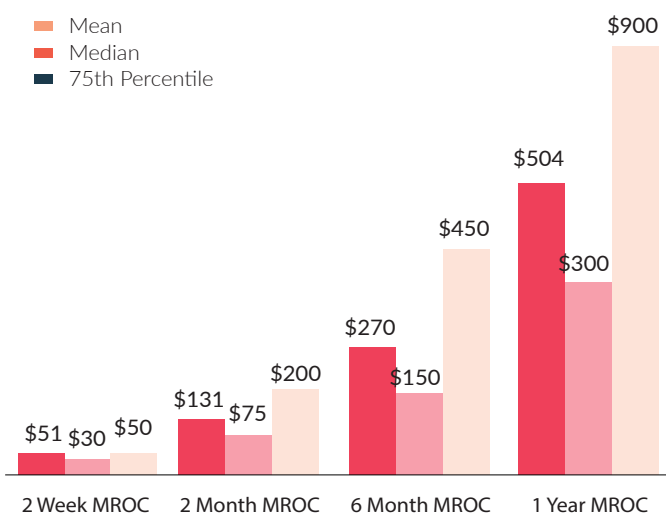
Conclusion

As evidenced in this research, when initiating MROCs, researchers have room to optimize an MROC design by acting on some key factors. Optimizing MROC design sets researchers up for healthier levels of user engagement and greater research efficacy while generating the highest quality insights. Some of the key levers investigated in this "research-on-research" (by no means exhaustive) includes overall MROC length, participation requirements and incentive type/value. Other variables (not covered in this research that may require more research) include affinity for a brand or a topic, moderation quality, brand commitment to consumers, look and feel of the interface, among others.

Recruitment should first focus on the brand's business objectives and target audience. Balancing a target consumers' (or segments') intrinsic interest in a topic with budgetary considerations for recruitment and participation incentives is necessary. Is there a happy balance that a brand can achieve?

Recruitment communications and activity publishing communication should be tailored in a way that speaks to intrinsic interest and motivators to maximize participation. Hence, the quality of moderation. This reminds us of the classic "research is both an art and a science" adage and we suspect that a good amount of "art" will go into making these decisions given specific situations. Future hypotheses to explore might include studying the relationship between recruited sample sizes and affinity to different types of brands.

Incentives should be set appropriately for the length of the MROC and the involvement levels expected per and across activities. Generally speaking, high-involvement activities (such as real-time chats) could be more challenging in terms of response rates than asynchronous forums and email communication which can happen "on my own time." If engagement is declining, it might be important to reduce high-involvement activities in

favor of shorter ones. It appears motivation is high among potential participants, so having a good mix of scheduled and unscheduled, as well as high and low involvement activities will be absolutely beneficial for retention.

This research supports the notion that cash is highly appealing to potential participants and helps their willingness to participate for longer MROCs. Future hypotheses may include seeing whether consumers will accept different incentives such as intangible incentives due to brand passion or category affinity.

Length of time for an MROC to run is also a good way to improve and optimize MROC success. It is recommended that, if applicable, the length of an MROC be as short as needed to answer all business questions – with the possibility of growth, if that makes sense in the business context. Longer term, MROCs should plan on refreshes and depending on specific situations, a balance should be struck between the amount and frequency of refreshes vs. participant retention. Refreshes play a large role in the minds of potential members and should be used as a strategic lever in driving overall retention.

Overall, while pre-planning and forethought around the MROC are important prior to its creation , it is also important to be agile, flexible and open to adjusting parameters on an ongoing basis. MROCs have proven to be a valuable methodology for insights professionals and corporate decision-makers alike. Of course, additional factors are involved but to achieve success, MROC management is critical. This includes selecting the right combination of length, activities, participant requirements, and incentives – as some of the fundamentals. Carefully considering and managing each of these levers can help create an MROC that produces considerable insight and value to corporations.

About DISQO

DISQO provides Opinion and Behavior data to deliver the most complete view of the consumer. DISQO empowers its clients with accurate and reliable first-party data to improve business decisions, drive insight, strategy and overall value. It has developed the highest quality single-source consumer research panel which utilizes a human-centric approach that engages people to share data. The company provides data to the world's largest market research and analytics companies to help them discover the "Why" behind consumers' opinions and behaviors.
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