

A sense of community





Online research communities offer businesses a means of getting closer to their customers, generating insight and validating research findings – but they can also foster connection and empathy in uncertain times.

Bronwen Morgan reports

23 March 2020 is a date that few British adults will forget. It was the day when, after weeks of uncertainty, the prime minister instructed us to stay in our homes to slow the spread of Covid-19.

For many, this was the point at which the threat of the pandemic suddenly became real on a human level. The business world had already been deeply impacted, however; most offices had closed, international travel was heavily restricted, and revenue was hanging in the balance. The future looked uncertain, and especially so for qualitative researchers, for whom travel and face-to-face meetings are lifeblood.

The restriction on reaching people came at a time when businesses, arguably, needed insight more than ever. How were customers feeling in these extraordinary times? What support did they need? How should businesses respond? The situation was unprecedented – there was no business model from which to work.

According to Graeme Lawrence, managing partner at InSites Consulting (online community specialist Join the Dots was acquired by InSites Consulting in summer 2019), most of his clients took one of two courses of action: some put an immediate stop to insight work, as budgets and business became unpredictable; others immediately doubled down on their efforts to understand how customers were feeling.

Once the initial shock had passed, says Lawrence, most settled on a need to understand what their customers were thinking and feeling, and online research communities became one of the key mechanisms for clients to get close to their audience.

“Across the spectrum, whether it’s organisations that have found Covid-19 tough – such as travel, tourism and hospitality sectors – or others, such as consumer healthcare and some FMCG organisations, they have all turned their heads to this idea of consumer empathy and consumer connection,” says

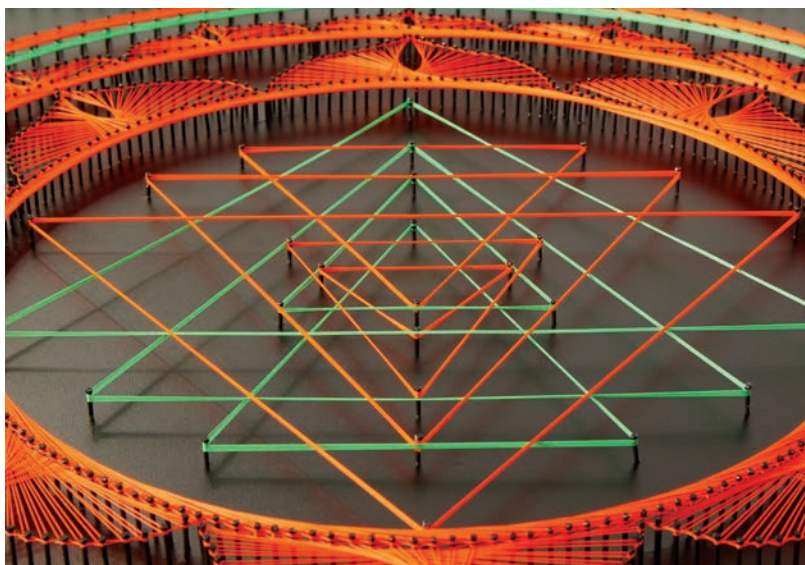
Lawrence. “Covid-19 has put an injection into what was already a bit of a trend around consumer-centricity. It’s added an extra catalyst.”

A return to form

For Lawrence, this emphasis marks a return to the core value of online communities. When they first emerged, in around 2008/09, online communities were representative of the Web 2.0 movement, he says – the move away from the internet being a very flat, one-directional place, to a more participative one. Online communities embraced the collaborative nature of this new space and, in doing so, took the approach to a different, more ethnographic place.

Then the financial crash and the subsequent recession changed the rhythm of what was building, and cost-effectiveness became the approach’s appeal.

“That upset me, because that participative, collaborative quality – that window into people’s lives – got knocked to the side slightly by this platform being quick and cheap,” Lawrence says.





Advancements in technology, plus a vast increase in the amount of time people were spending online, only served to make online communities even quicker and cheaper. However, the set of circumstances established by the pandemic, globally, has presented an opportunity for the customer-closeness benefits of communities to return to the fore.

“What Covid-19 has done, I think, is make a lot of organisations ask themselves if they’re really that well connected – and, if they’re not, how they are going to come out the other side of this,” says Lawrence.

In broad terms, an online research community is a digital platform where people are invited to interact on a variety of tasks over a period of time, which could be anywhere between one week and a few years. The size of the community can range from 10 people to thousands, though a typical long-term community, says Lawrence, has between 1,000 and 10,000 members. These members are sourced either from a brand’s existing customer database or recruited from a panel based on certain criteria – having a pet, for example. (See boxout, ‘Managing a successful online community’.)

Typically, InSites Consulting’s communities include ‘residents’ (a core target audience that is always present in the community) and ‘visitors’ (sub-targets recruited for specific studies).

One of the company’s clients, confectionery giant Mondelez, set up its community in 2017, when a change of leadership led to a push to put the consumer back at the heart of its business. Malakai De-Morgan, shopper insights manager, confectionery, Northern Europe at Mondelez, says the business saw a community as the perfect way to keep tabs on the UK’s ‘snackers’. It is now one of the business’s most-used insight tools.

“The richness and number of reactions we can get,

Managing a successful online community

In May 2020, Explain Market Research brought together nine organisations – including clients with customer, employee and stakeholder online communities – in a virtual environment, to share best practice and identify the most important ingredients in building and managing a successful online community.

The findings from its report, *Online communities: for research and engagement*, can be summarised across six key areas:

Content: content should be weekly, moderation daily, and always close the loop to make engagement meaningful

Recruitment: define your recruitment key performance indicators (KPIs) and strategy, decide on recruitment channels, and ensure the strategy is always ‘on’

Rewards: do not assume that one size fits all; make rewards bespoke to the member

Moderation: a moderator should let

conversation between members flow naturally and provide the space to allow that to happen

Embedding the community: always think about the online community when working in and on the business. What is the latest news, what can be shared, and what is important to report back to colleagues?

KPIs: be clear what you would like to report on at the start – what is important to your organisation – and set the KPIs to track your progress.

very quickly and very cost-effectively, means that it's our first port of call for testing hypotheses," says De-Morgan. "Whether it's new products or new categorisations, or things that we might want to invest in in the future, we'll use the community to gauge a reaction to potential ideas."

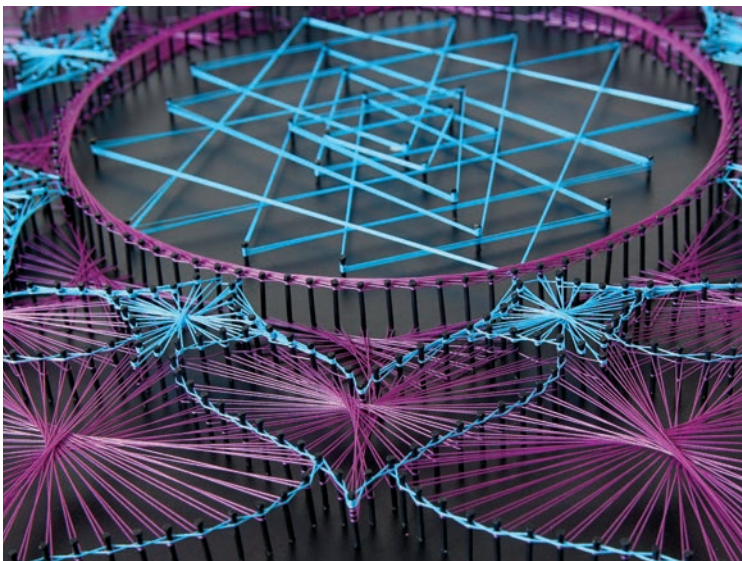
In the current circumstances, the community is taking on greater importance. Even before in-store research was rendered impossible as a result of the pandemic, regulations – such as the General Data Protection Regulation – had already made it a complicated affair, so Mondelēz started asking community members to carry out shopper tasks. Now, the community has more or less absorbed that strand of work.

Given the adaptability of the approach, brands and businesses use communities for a range of insight and innovation needs. Felix Koch, regional chief executive, EMEA & APAC at C Space, says this covers everything from explorative insight work to product and communications development using co-creation methods, through to evaluation and optimisation of propositions and services.

"In the end, it's about helping our clients grow through the inspiration of their customers," Koch says. During Covid-19, C Space's clients have been relying on communities to make a range of decisions, including around trend forecasting: understanding what trends its customers are observing or participating in, and which they think will stay or go. Clients have also been asking questions around how they should go about reopening their businesses.

"They want to know how to communicate to both customers and employees during this crisis, and are looking for answers to how to meet the new, unmet customer needs," says Koch.

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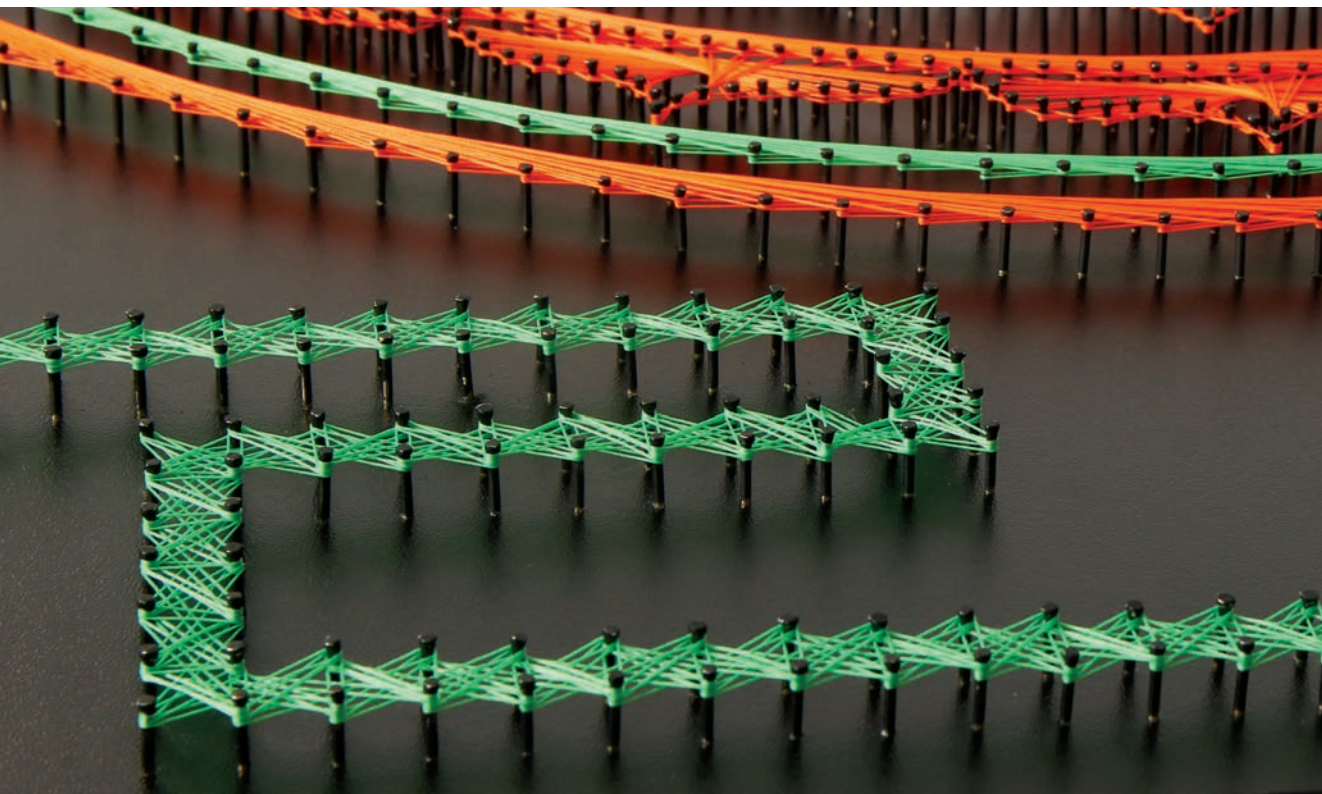
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It's not always necessary to prompt community members to offer up their thoughts. De-Morgan admits he's lucky to work in a space where people love to talk, and members do so among themselves outside of project requirements. These conversations have taken a shift in tone in recent months, however.

"People are very heavily invested in snacking," he says. "Historically, what we saw was quite general discussion about things such as holidays and activities – what people found themselves trying when they went away.

"But, in the past couple of months, we've seen a bit more emotion coming into it. Whereas before it was quite functional, now there almost seems to be a concern for other people within the community. People are checking in on other members and seeing how they're doing – asking not just about each other, but about each other's families.

"When there are new products, it provides an outlet of joy. All of a sudden, a new product from Cadbury is really exciting; it provides them with happiness and emotion that perhaps the external world isn't giving them."

InSites Consulting has run a number of Covid-19-specific communities, both on behalf of clients and for its own proprietary insight, and Lawrence agrees that

he's seen a higher level of interaction than normal. This makes sense: people were at home more, and therefore spending significantly longer online. According to UK Online Measurement (UKOM)-approved Comscore data, time spent online went from 3hrs 26mins per day in January to 4hrs 2mins per day in April. Julie Forey, director of insight at UKOM, says change of this magnitude is highly unusual. "Typically, when I look at the data, it doesn't change very much from month to month; it might be about five minutes' difference," she says. "Half an hour is a big leap."

There's been an increasingly personal feel to the exchanges in communities, says Lawrence. "People are thinking, 'I wouldn't mind talking to people that aren't just my family. Maybe they're going through some of the same things as me; how are they finding online shopping? How are they coping without the hospitality industry? What are they worried about in terms of healthcare, etc?'"

According to media psychologist Dr Pamela Rutledge, there can be a particular comfort in having these kinds of conversations. "When you're talking to a stranger, you don't have the emotional obligations that you do to your family," she says. "You don't have to worry about the interpersonal dynamics or



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Community case study: Airbnb

Founded in 2008, Airbnb has a community of four million hosts around the world, and its global community center was established five years ago, managed by Airbnb and community specialists Standing on Giants.

Alongside opportunities for gaining insight into the needs of its hosts, the community center aims to encourage more personal and meaningful connections, offering access to content and discussions that will help members to host better.

When the pandemic hit, the business was immediately under threat: guests were unable to travel, income disappeared and hosts' livelihoods were at risk. Airbnb decided to use this as an opportunity to adapt its business.

The objectives of the community shifted to support two key priorities:

- Create opportunities and a space for hosts to stay connected with Airbnb and each other. Prioritise helping them navigate new types of business, best practice, and tackling the loneliness and isolation associated with lockdown.

- Support hosts to safely execute 'frontline stays' – the company's initiative to accommodate 100,000 health workers who needed to isolate from their families.

Airbnb opened a dedicated space for hosts to focus on Covid-19 discussions, centralising related questions, and left other areas of the community free for other conversations. The company successfully housed 100,000 health workers safely within two weeks.

Robbie Hearn, co-founder of Standing on Giants, says: "In times of crisis, an online community really can be more than a collective of your customers; it can be a lifeline for your business.

"In Airbnb's case, it became even more than that. The company could work with its community of hosts to achieve something that neither they, nor the hosts, could have done on their own. The deep value of the community became clear for all to see."

managing those relationships. In that sense, it can be like going to confession if you're Catholic. It's a non-judgmental expression, and it can be cathartic to get things off your chest."

These more personal conversations are also taking place in communities in very different sectors. Dominika Wintersgill is research manager at National Employment Savings Trust (NEST), a workplace pension provider, and another of InSites Consulting's clients. NEST has three core audiences: employers, members (pension-holders), and intermediaries (financial advisers, pension administrators and accountants). Its research community consists of more than 2,000 members and has been running for almost a year.

While community members have always interacted with each other to some degree – starting threads to ask questions or offering tips around organising their finances – Wintersgill says it has, typically, been fairly limited. As a professional organisation that looks after people's money, it's important for moderators to maintain a certain professional tone in discussions. However, the organisation did some work with its community on Covid-19, and people have been very



candid. “Some are going through very difficult times at the moment, losing their jobs and so on, and they were happy to share with others,” she says. “In fact, they found it useful; quite a few people said it was nice to be able to talk about how they were feeling and what was going on with them, especially when they’re stuck at home.

“In this country, it’s not the done thing to discuss finance at the dinner table. I could tell just from reading the posts how important it was for them to have somewhere to share their thoughts.”

While part of the appeal for NEST of starting a community was speed and value for money – those benefits will always be a core appeal, it seems – it was also mostly a move to better engage stakeholders around the business.

“When someone says to you on a Monday, ‘I’m not sure about this’ or ‘I wonder what members are thinking’, and you can give them an answer on Friday, it’s fantastic. Stakeholders get used to it, and they keep coming back,” says Wintersgill.

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“Normal assumptions no longer apply... so I can’t just use my old heuristics to understand behaviour”
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Now NEST uses its community for almost everything, from testing communications to uncovering specific needs, beliefs and attitudes around pensions, retirement and money. It is also used to validate responses from its other research activity, including its voice-of-the-customer trackers and surveys prompted by member activity. As communities can sometimes be dominated by the

thoughts of a few forthcoming members, it’s important to corroborate findings in the other direction, too, says Wintersgill.

“You can have a few really loud voices in a community, so you need to check on the situation statistically,” she says. “We add these all together to get the full picture.”

This validation approach is especially important in circumstances such as those we’re currently facing, according to Dr Rutledge.

“This is a once-in-a-lifetime event, so normal assumptions no longer apply,” she says. “Where previously people knew what they liked to do, now they have to make decisions based on a new set of circumstances and new information. So, as a business, I can’t just use my old heuristics or assumptions to understand behaviour.

“This is why research in these communities is so important – you’re looking for the narrative behind the numbers so you can see if, and why, the stories are shifting.”

Tools of the trade

The core approaches used with communities include forum discussions, text live/web chats, video chats and focus groups. InSites Consulting’s platform, The Square, includes more than 100 tools, including many inspired by popular apps. Its swipe tool, used to screen concepts, was modelled on dating apps such as Tinder, while another tool aims to sharpen responses to open-ended questions by restricting them to 140 characters.

While these tools can improve short-term response rates, offering community members ways to share feedback that feel intuitive is vital for both accuracy and long-term community engagement.

“I’ve had a feeling since I was a young exec, going door knocking, that market researchers have always been good at getting people to participate on our terms, and not on their terms,” says Lawrence. “I think it would be so exciting for us to get a bit smarter around getting people to participate in ways that feel right for them.

“For example, in research, we talk about representative samples and these kinds of constructs,



but we should be thinking about other things, such as: are they a creative kind of person or a validating kind of person? Are people happy to interact via video or would they prefer to do a quick mobile survey?”

The fact that community members are able to interact, bouncing off each other and stimulating each other’s comments, takes the dynamic into a more adult-to-adult exchange, adds Lawrence.

“A lot of research in the past has had that parent-child psychology behind it: I ask you a question and, because you think I’m an important person, you give me an answer. But that’s a different dynamic from us just chewing the fat as adults. It gets you to a different understanding of consumers’ lives.”

This more discursive approach not only uncovers fresh insights, says Dr Rutledge, but also allows us to make meaning out of things in a different way, which carries psychological benefits.

“It’s why brainstorming with others is more effective than brainstorming by yourself – because, when you say things out loud, you hear them differently; it sparks a different set of ideas, and allows you to create new meaning and make sense out of things,” she says. “Generally speaking, it moves you forward in a positive direction, especially in times of stress. It’s a great opportunity, because people are feeling vulnerable and in need of expression.”

Executive immersions

A side-effect of social-distancing restrictions has been that more of us are now much more comfortable talking to strangers and loved ones over video chat (Comscore’s data also revealed that Zoom added 12.3m users between January and April – the highest growth in unique visitors across all online categories). This includes senior executives in client businesses, who not only have more time, but more desire to connect directly with customers.

According to Lawrence, while InSites Consulting UK (as Join the Dots) had run occasional programmes connecting senior executives to customers, there has been an increased desire for this kind of approach in recent months.

“The interesting thing that’s happened is that people are at home. I use the term ‘people’ deliberately, because senior executives have become more like people,” says Lawrence. “They’re not walking into their organisation and seeing the corporate sign above the door; they’re at home with their families. They have a better understanding of what everyone else is going through.”

When a senior executive talks over video chat with a customer, both are in their own home environment, and they are likely to be dressed casually, so the dynamic is again more of an adult-to-adult exchange.

Senior clients have also been more present in other types of community research. Lawrence explains that a recent digital workshop – which would ordinarily have happened offline – had an audience of senior executives stay for the duration. In other circumstances, he would have expected to lose this audience at different points, to a meeting or a phone call.

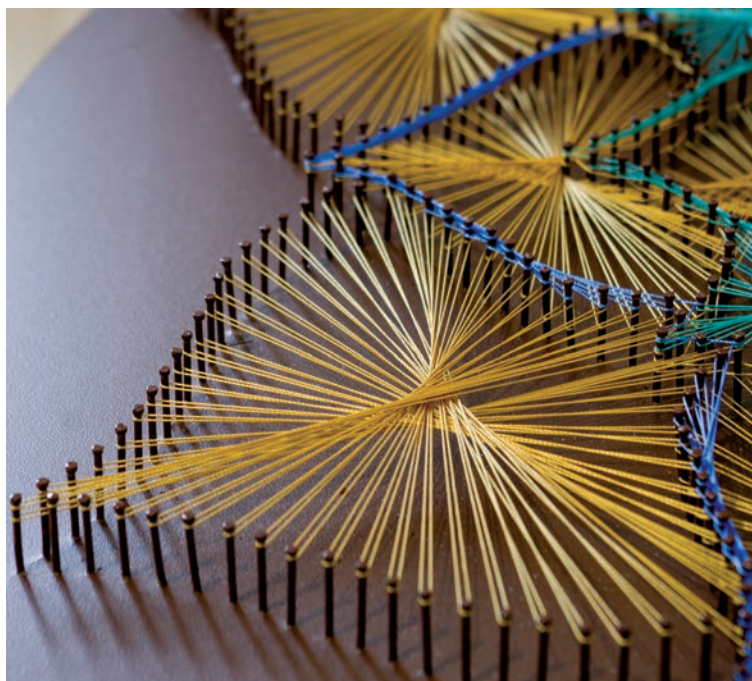
“They’re committing time to understanding customers – in part because they’re becoming a bit more consumer-obsessed, but also because the distractions are a bit different,” says Lawrence.

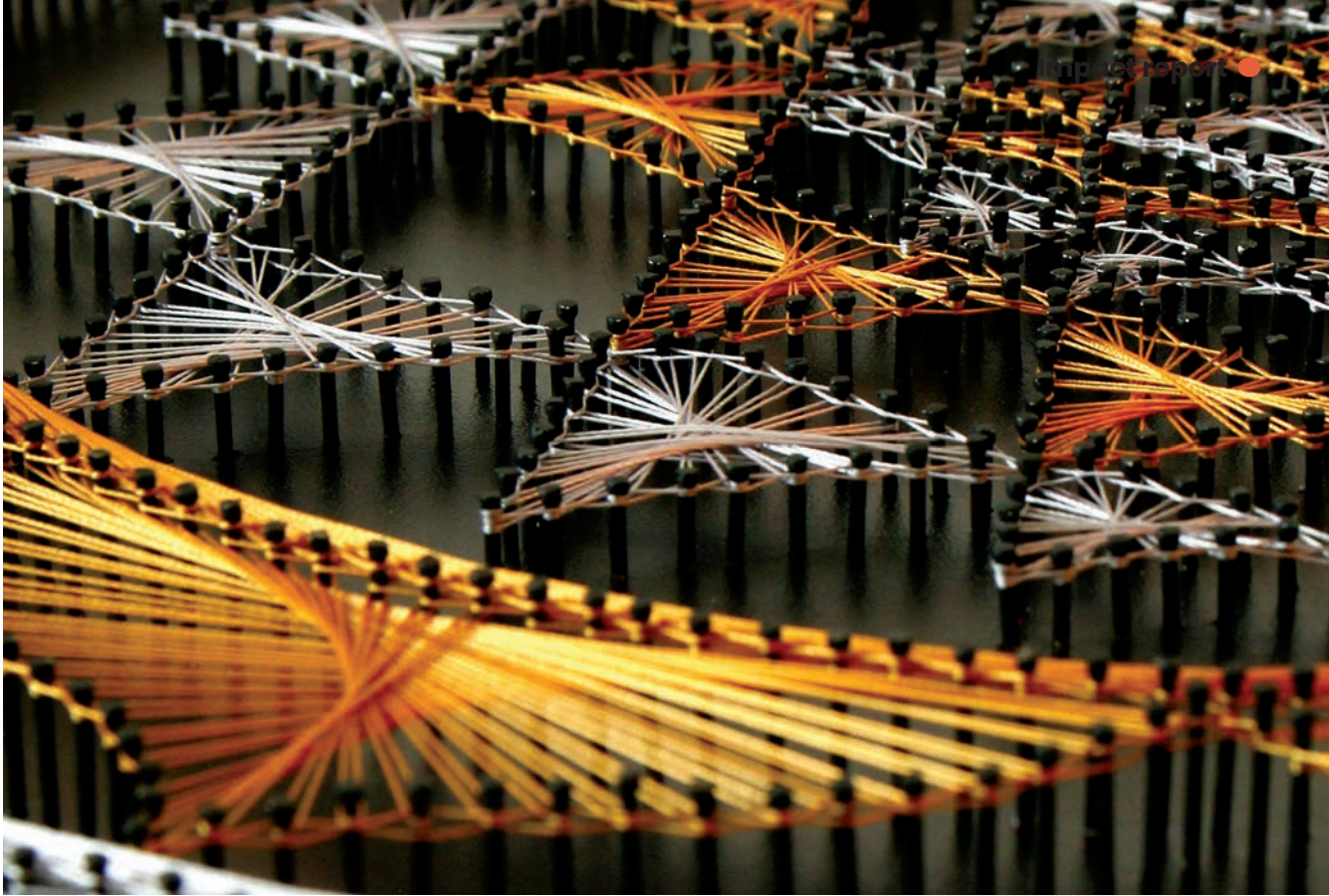
Ed Herten, who runs the customer closeness proposition at C Space, agrees that there has been a massive shift in attitude towards customer closeness among senior executives.

“The thing that I saw right at the beginning [of Covid-19], and I’ve been watching ever since, is that the demand for direct, immediate customer insight has been incredible,” he says.

Most of Herten’s clients are now presenting customer updates to their executive team once a week, which would have been highly unusual just a few months ago. “One thing we’ve been told by every single client is that the speed of decision-making has just gone through the roof,” he says.

“We slide back in a lot of things as a species, but we don’t tend to slide back much when it comes to speed. Once we have got something fast, we don’t like it slower.”





Community research your way, at your pace

While our doors have been closed for the past few months, our minds have had to remain fully open. Open to finding new ways to connect and collaborate with diverse audiences; open to observing changing consumer habits, needs and behaviours; open to re-evaluating what people want from a brand.

Since their inception 15 years ago, market research online communities (MROCs) have evolved to survive the ever-increasing pace of change in the world, and provide an open and ongoing dialogue between people and brands. Communities are versatile; they can be large or small, ongoing or pop-up, and run by agencies or clients. They allow you to conduct research your way, at your pace – any type, any topic, any time.

Flexibility in how to connect, and with whom, fosters the best type of collaboration. Brands must collaborate with mainstream audiences to understand unmet

needs, explore untapped behaviours, and evaluate ideas, concepts and experiences. However, if we apply the 90:9:1 principle that originated with Bradley Horowitz, vice-president at Google, these mainstream consumers (representing 90% of the population) are equipped only to validate and evaluate ideas. So, brands must also collaborate with creators (1%) and curators (9%) to achieve richer, more diverse insights. To facilitate this, we use eYeka – our global network of more than 425,000 creatives – to develop or activate original ideas. We also use our Illume Network of leading-edge consumers to uncover emerging trends and optimise solutions in a particular category or market. The power of collaboration, therefore, is in the mix.

In today's unpredictable business environment, brands must harness different voices, and enter a mode of agile and fast decision-making to

survive and even thrive. To do this successfully with an online community, I'd recommend brands:

- Choose a community platform that suits your service needs, be that self-service, full-service or somewhere in between
- Think about residents (your core target) and visitors (sub-targets) to establish the size of your community
- Define the duration of your community, based on objectives – pop-up for agile co-creation and innovation v structural for ongoing connection and collaboration
- Invite the right people to take part in research by acknowledging the 90:9:1 principle.

Whether exploring branding, innovation or customer experience, online communities foster collaboration and trust, so that people and brands can shape the future better, together.

Andy Cumming, managing director UK, InSites Consulting