



Automated Feedback Tools Increase the Value of Product Trials

Organizations can spend a great deal of time and resources in the planning and design stages of the product development process, but these efforts frequently fall short when the time comes to conduct product trials. Many times, conducting product trials can be an unstructured process, where feedback is collected on an ad hoc basis via interviews with product testers near the end of the trial period. If product feedback is collected by a variety of organization members using different methods during the trial period, it can become difficult to coordinate the exchange of tester feedback, consolidate results across several series of trials and utilize the information to its fullest potential. The product trial process becomes cumbersome and labor-intensive, and too many times valuable information is overlooked, or never captured in the first place.

These pitfalls can be avoided by introducing tools that automate the exchange of feedback and structure the response process used by product testers, engineers, and other project coordinators. Depending upon an organization's objectives and resources, automated, structured product trial processes could be implemented in several ways: email-based systems, interactive voice response (IVR) systems, or web-based systems could all be successful alternatives to more manual, labor-intensive feedback collecting practices. Regardless of the method chosen, incorporating a more structured, automated process can yield several advantages.

A more structured, automated trial process creates efficiencies in data collection and information sharing. Data can be collected real-

time from testers and can be automatically entered into a database, thus reducing the time it would take to compile this information manually as well as reducing the likelihood of data errors.

The quality of information collected from testers is improved. Because the product testers' responses can be recorded directly and housed in a central location, the risk of bias is reduced when compared to product trial processes in which information is collected via person-to-person interviews. Also, by using a system in which testers enter information on a regularly scheduled basis, details such as time of day and conditions under which specific problems with the new product occurred can be collected — important details which could easily be lost if testers were only asked for feedback during one or two post-trial interviews.

Making the case for product changes becomes more defensible. If significant changes are required to a new product based on feedback gathered during the trial period, defending these decisions becomes much easier when it can be shown that the information used as the basis for making these decisions was collected systematically, thoroughly, and accurately.

A more structured trial process helps coordinate internal project teams and improves communication. An automated process allows engineers and project coordinators to quickly exchange information about tester feedback and any critical product fixes at their convenience. Product updates and notes entered into a central log can be accessed at any time by

those granted the necessary privileges. Automated tools can also be used by the project team to communicate directly and efficiently with the product testers.

Choosing the best platform requires an understanding of the new product itself, the sophistication of its target customers, and the resources and

capabilities of the organization. The following are just a sampling of questions that should be answered as a first step in determining what kind of automated process would best fit in your organization:

- How much effort is currently being expended to manage and disseminate information using the existing, non-automated product trial process?

RSG Case

Consumer Telecom Manufacturer Improves New Product Field Trials Via Web-Based System

A global manufacturer of telecommunications equipment and software was frustrated by the arduous, manual process it had in place for conducting product trials. Seeking to decrease the burden of its trials while increasing their value, the client testing group enlisted the help of RSG to design and build an automated system for collecting, reporting, and managing product trial information. RSG built the web-based system to provide structured, real-time feedback to the Coordinators (who organize and manage trials across all product lines), Engineers (who are responsible for specific products), and other managers.

Once the new system was built and tested, it was released to the individuals who were recruited as Testers for the new products and used as the main communication link between them and the client's product team. Each day, the Testers recorded experiences with the new product in an online journal, including both structured input and open-ended comments. Engineers had the ability to review this feedback in the form of event reports and update a problem log as solutions were introduced. The Coordinator could review events within and across product trials and change the status of a problem if it had not been addressed satisfactorily. The Viewer (any manager given access to the feedback site) could monitor the results of current and past tests according to predefined privileges. Summary

reports could be generated for specific trials, as well as across trials over time.

The system has proved invaluable over many product trials in terms of time and cost savings. In one case, an abundance of negative feedback early on in the trial led product engineers to uncover serious problems with the product. As a result, the trial was stopped early and the product was returned to the engineering stage for the necessary improvements. During another trial, feedback was so consistently positive that the project team determined it was not necessary to continue the trials for the full scheduled time period. The trials were ended after several weeks, saving valuable resources and speeding up the product's release to the market.

As multiple trials have been executed, results have been compiled across trials and reported to product managers in order to help create a broader perspective on the trial process and user experiences, and generate greater efficiencies for the product teams, as well as for the organization at large. Also, information captured from earlier trials has been used later to streamline the trial process of other similar products; for example, during a series of trials engineers encountered problems with a certain product's design and were able to correct for these problems upfront when developing future products of a similar design.

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- Could resources be used more effectively elsewhere if the burden of collecting and analyzing product feedback was eliminated?
 - What are the most frequent causes of bottlenecks in the product trial process?
 - How technology-savvy are the target users who will be testing the new product?

Once resources and needs are identified, the next step is to select and implement the appropriate automated tools. As the accompanying Case Study illustrates, one organization successfully streamlined their product trial process using a web-based feedback tool. In practice, a variety of options exist

that can be selected and customized based on the sophistication and requirements of the organization and the product testers.

A structured product trial process can help an organization realize significant benefits, including time saved during the trial period and higher quality feedback from product testers. This increased efficiency and improved quality allows for a more thorough, targeted product analysis by project team members, especially engineers; the end result is a superior product that meets the expectations of customers and can be introduced to the market ahead of the competition. 🏡

RSG, Inc. is a leading consulting and market research company that was established in 1986 to advance the state-of-the-practice of market research while providing reliable, fact-based market intelligence. Headquartered in White River Junction, Vermont, the firm has conducted several hundred market studies throughout North America, South America, Europe and Asia. RSG is comprised of five practices that share a core quantitative competence and common analytical tools, with specializations in market-based business consulting, advanced market research, transportation, technology, and the environment.

For more information on how RSG can help your organization improve its product trial process, please contact:

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