Made Marian

How sex surveys launched online qualitative research

| By Jennifer Dale

snapshot

A profile of the early days of online research, through the eyes of Marian Salzman, who was there from the beginning.

Not long after President George Bush vomited on the prime minister of Japan, a hip, young advertising professional changed the face of marketing research. In 1992, Marian Salzman found herself blazing a path through cyberspace that became the genesis of online marketing research. As she tells it, though, it was just one page in the diary of a year when "everything was going completely haywire."

"I found myself one day not knowing what the Internet was and the next day being in the Internet business," she says. By 1993, the virtual focus group facility Salzman launched was running 15 to 20 focus groups a week.

The serendipitous tale begins on a New York City day in early 1992 at the offices of advertising agency Chiat/Day, famous at the time for creating memorable ads for Apple, Nickelodeon, Benetton, Nissan, L.A. Gear and more. As president of BKG America, a trendy youth consulting firm operating out of Chiat/Day's New York office, Salzman was a young free spirit, anticipating the future and finding her niche in market research. She was also a rising star in the industry, well-known for her provocative sex surveys which were published by magazines like *Glamour* and *Esquire*.

A major challenge for Salzman at the time was finding people to answer her survey questions honestly. "One of the hardest things about doing sex surveys is you really can't find anyone to test the questions with," Salzman says. "Even your own friends are never going to tell you whether they would sleep on the wet spot."

As she pondered this seemingly insurmountable problem, her phone rang. On the other end was a respected acquaintance who was writing a book on the Internet. The only thing Salzman had heard about the Internet to that point was that it had something to do with army communications. "I remember putting down the phone and turning to my colleague and saying, 'Cindy, J.C. Herz is writing a book about the army!'," Salzman says.

Her ignorance didn't last long. A chance encounter a few days later with an investment

banker at *Rolling Stone* would ignite her bravado and launch the future of online qual. "This guy named Tom Cohen at *Rolling Stone* asked me which online service *Rolling Stone* should go with and I didn't want to admit I didn't know what an online service was," she says.

That evening, with no computer knowledge, she struggled to install the America Online (AOL) software for nine agonizing hours. "I'm sitting in my apartment trying to install this disk and I am in a complete, complete sweat, like a sweat I'd never worked up in the gym. I finally got the disk working at 4 a.m." Sure she would not be able to get a CompuServe or Prodigy connection working in such record time, Salzman confidently recommended AOL.

While *Rolling Stone* never went with Salzman's recommendation, she did meet Bob Smith, then general manager of AOL's community programming, in the process. "As he's walking out of the room, I said, 'By the way, I have a business plan for you. I want to have online market research ability.'" Keen on the prospect, Smith negotiated a deal and in just a few short weeks AOL had invested $35,000 to design a private chat room for conducting online focus groups for Salzman and her new partners, Cohen and Chiat.

Salzman's spontaneous request for "unreal real estate" changed the world of marketing research forever. On December 12, 1994, *Ad Age* reported that Chiat/Day was "going interactive in a big way" by hiring Salzman to run its new "Emerging Media" unit. Soon after, Salzman and her partners launched American Dialogue, later renamed CyberDialogue.

In high demand
With exclusive access to online research with people 29 years of age and under, and her own private chat rooms, Salzman was in high demand. "Five different ad agencies would let me work on the same pitch because I was the only way to do online focus groups. I'd be working for every single agency. We were doing 15-to-20 groups a week. My wrists should have fallen off."

With both reverence and sarcasm, Salzman explains: "I was at

a point where I should have been growing up but being online in the beginning made me revert back to my 20s. I was so psyched to be part of something that was really new and was really exploratory."

Admittedly, Salzman had a few things to learn. "When Steve Case and Ted Leonsis took AOL from 2400 to 9600 baud, as the market research partner I wrote Bob Smith this scorching e-mail saying 'Guys, you're destroying my business. No human can type as fast as you're speeding the modem up!'"

AOL at the time was building relationships with Time Warner, MasterCard and other companies to expand their user base and saw American Dialogue's database of research panelists as another way to increase membership. Existing panels, once migrated to AOL, became online consumers ripe for the asking.

Intense scrutiny
Just who was on the Internet, how they behaved and whether people were presenting themselves falsely was a subject of intense scrutiny. "I remember with Marriott, I had to actually do a face-to-face group and then a cyberspace group to prove that they were the same kind of people." It wasn't until Salzman attended an AOL mixer that she discovered the truth. While "online, every woman was Sharon Stone and every guy was Kevin Costner," real-life encounters confirmed that Salzman was tapping into the average American.

While working with Lee Clow, Chiat/Day's creative director, Salzman discovered a surprising truth. "At that point, the average American woman had become a size 14. She was 5-foot-4-inches and weighed 168 pounds. We were able to quantify that a woman on AOL was no different. She really was America."

While Salzman and her colleagues knew they had a pulse online, they also knew who the participants really were. Participants were compensated for their time and she always had their personal contact info and Social Security numbers to verify identities.

While the energetic pioneer typed on, consumers eagerly shared their experiences. From automobiles to zit

cream, Salzman was getting it all. "We had a lot of very cool, interesting projects," she says.

Promotion on AOL's front screen gave Salzman even more opportunity to grow her valuable panel. "I didn't have to stumble around and look for people to work on questionnaires. I could find somebody 24 hours a day, seven days a week to talk to and ask questions of."

By 1994, Salzman had teamed up with others to conduct the first benchmark study of Internet users. Proprietary and never published, the Citizens of Cyberspace study looked at early Internet users and led Salzman to predict both the growing use of online and the "revenge of the audio-visual nerds."

The forefront of social media
In all the hubbub, Salzman also found herself on the forefront of what today is called social media. "I hosted the first-ever online wake after Kurt Cobain died [in 1994]. We filled the largest room at that point and Courtney Love came in ranting and raving. I had no idea I was making history."

Not only was Salzman able to elicit in-depth perspectives from participants, she also found new freedom. "I could do my work from anywhere at any time, as long as I could plug my computer into a phone line."

Despite celebrating alongside AOL when it reached one million members, Salzman and partners sold the company for "less than $250,000" after just three short years, profiting little, if at all, from the sale. Understanding why Salzman decided to sell, both early and low, is a challenge, even for her. "I can't explain to you why. It's so dumb in hindsight. Because we didn't think there was a future in it…"

Ironically, while Salzman was tiptapping away on her keyboard, the line of people who would eventually get rich off her ideas was growing. "I was living the change, I didn't realize how important the change was. It was such a part of my life."

Without giving much thought to her future investments, Salzman eagerly accepted an opportunity to work in the Netherlands for TBWA/

Chiat/Day's Europe/Middle East/Africa operation, where she lived until returning to New York in 1998. "It was boring after a year and a half. They asked me if I wanted to move to Europe and be in charge of new media and that sounded really cool."

Salzman's experience in Europe was similar to the U.S., but progressed much faster. "When I first got to the Netherlands in 1995 they would say 'She's Internetting.' People would gather around my desk and watch me send an AOL instant message. By the end of '97, I think there was 50 to 60 percent Internet penetration in Amsterdam. It became mainstream very quickly."

When asked how AOL communities of years past compare to social media today, she nails the distinction with ease. "On AOL, people felt anonymous. Today everyone is online. Facebook is your offline life brought online."

Salzman identified the challenges of online panel management early and restricted participation in online focus groups as a result. "We would only let you do two groups a month and we would only leave you in the panel for nine months."

Greet us at the door

Thoughtful and insightful, Salzman scoffs at Second Life, sees a future in real-time research and envisions researchers using images more online. Today you'll find her using Facebook "begrudgingly" and replying to e-mails in brief, tweet-like fashion. Whatever the future holds, my money's on Salzman being there to greet us at the door. ⓞ