



Voxco Command Center

As we continue to watch the rise and rise of online research, there are some signs that the pace of the shift from CATI to Web is now easing, at least in North America. While CATI's slice of the pie may continue shrinking in the years to come, it is going to remain an important channel to respondents for the foreseeable future. Like it or not, the future of research is shaping up to be resolutely multimodal, and so too must be the tools used to collect data.

For some time now, software providers have been laying claim to providing multimodal interviewing software solutions, though the degree of integration has often left much to be desired, in my view. In 2003 I put together a framework of

10 key desirable capabilities in a paper I presented at the ASC International Conference (see box). Not one of the market leaders was able to check all 10 boxes, and several managed only a handful. A particular stumbling block then, as now, tended to be the lack of integrated multimodal management capabilities - having that single cohesive vision of what is going on, and the means to crank the handle when all is not going to plan.

Voxco was certainly better than some for its mixed-mode capabilities when it launched its "Virtual CATI Center" solution Interviewer VCC. This extended CATI interviewing to a Web-based environment, which was ideal for remote

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interviewing sites or even home-working CATI interviewers. It also provided the means to mix CATI and Web within the one tool at a basic level, but did not really address the complexities of managing surveys across multiple sites and modes. It is this area that the firm's newest offering, Command Center, sets out to address, and it does it in rather grand style, leaving no box on my list unchecked.

The new product sits alongside Voxco's other existing tools for data collection in CATI, CAPI, Web and IVR (automated voice interviewing). It does not actually add any new interviewing or analytical capabilities but provides a dynamic cockpit offering a 360-degree real-time view of all your research activities, regardless of location or mode.

Command Center centralized Web control system for multimode data collection from Voxco (www.voxco.com)

Pros

- Location-independent interviewing
- True multimodal interviewing
- Sophisticated permission system
- Excellent range of information and status reports

Cons

- No Web-based authoring support
- No panel management module or the full tabulation module
- Not yet integrated with Voxco crosstab module

From here you can create new surveys using the authoring tool, and the same script can be deployed in all modes - of course subject to the logical constraints of the kinds of questions you can ask in each mode. You can define sample, define quotas, assign interviewers if the mode requires it, similarly create e-mail invitations or voice prompts for IVR, test launch or deploy the survey.

A clean, easy-to-follow Web-browser interface provides access to all the components of the suite. In its navigation area, you are presented with a tree structure of all your projects. Here you can initiate new projects, access the questionnaire authoring tool and manage files. The very tight integration means Command Center offers what, for me, is the Holy Grail when authoring, in that what the survey will actually look like in each different mode is always just a single mouse-click away.

With authoring, Command Center actually hands you over from Web browser to a Windows desktop tool. Currently, there is no Web-based authoring, and the developer is hesitant to pursue this due to the better performance obtained with a native Windows application, compared to the somewhat sluggish performance that most Web-browser authoring tools offer. I admit to being somewhat on the fence on that one. However, it is one area where it would be possible to get out of step with file management, if authoring at a remote site.

Once a survey is live, the tool provides a very rich offering of information and reports on the state of progress of your survey from the dashboard area. This brings drill-down management reporting to researchers, fieldwork managers and even clients. The dashboard presents all the live surveys (or at least those you have permission to view), and a series of buttons at the top of the window

call up different snapshot views, with the option to burrow further into the data if you need to.

Distribute work

For anyone wanting to distribute work to satellite contact centers, homeworkers or to collaborate with fieldwork agencies in other countries on international projects, the tool lets you achieve this efficiently and reliably. This has been the experience at Chicago research firm Leo J. Shapiro & Associates (LJS). "We have been using Voxco for many years, but we started using Command Center last August for online and CATI work," says Joel Margolese, data manager at LJS. "It has been invaluable on a global study we have been working on with another company in the U.K."

The interview contained both telephone and online segments, in sequence and in parallel, and while LJS performed U.S. fieldwork, the U.K. company carried out all of the telephone interviews in multiple languages outside of the U.S. using the same system. "Several things were particularly valuable to us. First, the distributed interviewing. Then, the fact that all the translations are entered into the same survey so we know there is only one version. And, the CATI operators in the U.K. are hooked up to our system, so it is all one interview system, but they are doing all the management of the local quotas and people's time. They operate as an independent call center, but because we are using the same software, and literally viewing the same interviews, we see what is happening too. It gives us a great sense of control," Margolese says.

From the Command Center you can also view and modify quotas across all modes. As CAPI works asynchronously on BlackBerries and wireless-enabled devices - provided they are in range - even personal interviews can be quota-

10 essential requirements for a multimodal interviewing solution

Source: "We seek them here..." Tim Macer, ASC International Conference paper, 2003, www.meaning.uk.com/articles_papers/asc_2003_paper.pdf

1. A common survey-authoring tool that generates a single survey instrument for all modes.
2. Independence between design and execution, with mode-specific templates and rules.
3. The ability to define mode-specific texts in addition to foreign-language alternatives.
4. A single, consolidated database for all survey data, updated in real time.
5. The ability to determine the mode of initial contact from the sample subject's stated preference.
6. Efficient switching between modes, initiated by the script or by the respondent.
7. Ability to conceal all interviewer-recorded data when switching to self-completion modes.
8. Support for reminders and fall-back strategies to revert to a prior mode if still incomplete.
9. Single view management and reporting, which identifies response by mode.
10. Quota controls implemented across all modes in real time.

checked in real time. The same applies to callback rules, which can also be defined or refined from Command Center and actioned in real time for specific modes and across all modes.

The monitoring function provides capabilities for monitoring interviews or playing back recordings, if used with Voxco's Pronto telephony solution, either in the office or out and about, and many other supervisory capabilities. Regardless of which mode is being used, as soon as the interview is complete, the data are all in the one place, accessible wherever you are.

“A big thing for us is the back end,” says Margolese. “When you move data you run the risk of damaging it. Checking and correcting it takes time and money. To know that everything is in one place from the beginning and is all intact and consistent is worth a fortune to us.”

Permissions capability

Perhaps the most powerful new feature is the permissions capability, in the set-up area. You can define permission sets, which determine the tasks you can perform, from simply looking at reports to defining surveys or setting permissions for others. And you can define profiles, which define which projects or sets of projects you can work on. By defining just a handful of permission sets, and a similar number of profiles, the same tool can be used by everyone from CAI programmers to supervisors to clients.

“One of the nice things they have put in is the very fine level of permissions,” says Margolese. “You can basically restrict what people can see so they only need to see those things which are relevant to them. It simplifies training and reduces the chance of someone pressing the wrong button.”

Behind all this is a very open database, and Command Center

provides direct access to this too, if desired. This is definitely something you would want to restrict access to in the permissions area, as it also gives you the potential to do a great deal of damage if you don't know what you're doing. It may look simple, but don't be fooled by appearances, as the developers have done an excellent job at hiding the complexity from end users. This makes it relatively straightforward to integrate Voxco's well-established data collection platform with other third-party or in-house applications.

Integration

Integration was a key driver in adopting Command Center at Canada-based Decima Research. Decima's CIO Michel Lucas describes the challenge: “For us, telephone is still king, though online is coming on very strong – we are one of the largest panel providers in Canada, so we definitely want to see online grow.”

Command Center has allowed Decima to dismantle some of the remaining obstacles to integration in the flow of work and data around the company, and work seamlessly with both its own panel management database and its accounting systems.

“What is important for us about Voxco is that the tools are com-

pletely integrated with their dialing solutions,” Lucas says. “With Command Center we now get all the other tools included too. We like the way that all the data are in a Microsoft SQL database. It integrates with our accounting system. Our approach to panel development has been to use strong near-financial incentives, so the ability to integrate with our points database, with telephone interviewer payments, and our accounting database is a tremendous advantage. This makes it so much easier to extract and share the info with everyone who needs to see it.”

Command Center is offered as an optional add-on to its very comprehensive data collection software, but all the existing tools will continue to work in standalone mode without it. Given the ease it brings to the whole complicated business of multistream and even multisite interviewing, it's hard to know why anyone using Voxco for data collection would not want to upgrade to Command Center. For the future, integration is promised with a new crosstab package from Voxco which, with all of the built-in permission structure and Web-based delivery options already in Command Center, opens up possibilities for it to be an end-user platform for building complex client data portals too. | Q