

WHEN AND HOW TO REENTER FACE-TO- FACE QUALITATIVE: SPRING 2022

An Ipsos Point of View

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GAME CHANGERS



KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- To truly understand the people they serve, companies must meet them where they are, which increasingly may mean out in the world.
- In-person research may be appropriate depending on the target, objectives, and market conditions.
- Careful planning and agility are keys to success.

As Americans glimpse the light at the end of the COVID tunnel, they are beginning to reenter the world. While this return may not be a predictable, straight line, it does represent a big change in consumer behavior. And because qualitative research is at its best when connecting with consumers in a natural way, teams should consider what this behavioral shift means for their learning plans.

We wrote the paragraph above in April 2021, before delta and omicron, and could say the exact same thing today. That said, as we enter the endemic phase, it's time to update this document. Many of the principles still apply, but the environment has changed dramatically. If the trend continues, we anticipate an even greater return to in-person research.

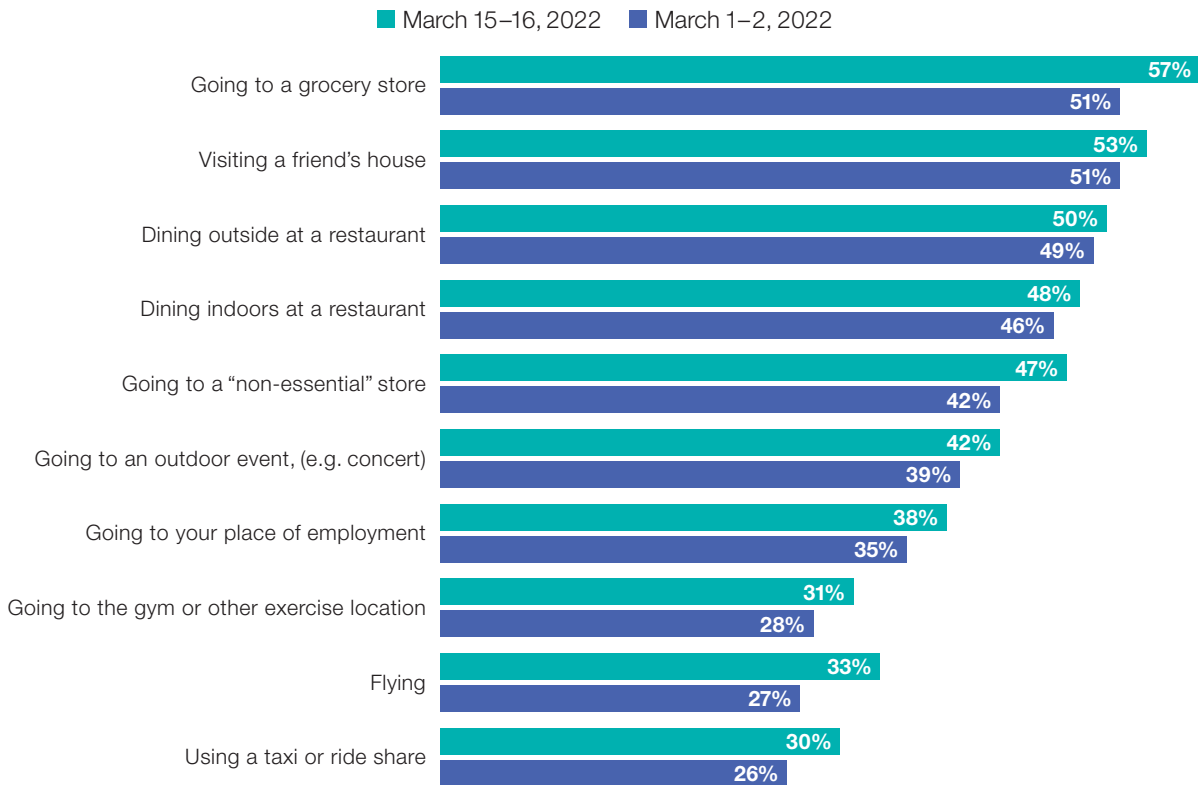
That's not to say we should flip a switch and move all qualitative back to face-to-face. There's no need to jettison highly effective digital techniques, and not all consumers and companies are ready to go back in person. So, in what circumstances should you choose in-person qualitative, and how do you ensure it's a success? We offer an updated framework.

1. Understand where your target is, physically and emotionally

As omicron receded into the rearview mirror, more and more Americans became comfortable reentering the world. While this trend could always change with future developments, it doesn't seem significantly rattled by the emergence of the BA.2 variant.

We think it's safe to go back in the water

Q: Are you more or less comfortable with the idea of doing the following now than you were a month ago?
— More comfortable



Source: Ipsos Coronavirus Consumer Tracker, fielded March 15–16, 2022 among 1,154 U.S. adults.

That said, as seen throughout the pandemic, not all people are in the same place. If your respondent target is already going to the grocery store, it may be perfectly appropriate to join them for a shop-along. On the other hand, if your target is immunocompromised or just cautious, they may not be ready to meet you in person. And, of course, a new variant, treatment, or other change in the situation could prompt a change in comfort level for some. It remains important to consider who you are targeting and whether in-person research at a given time and place is right for them.



2. Consider your objective

Observation is one of the superpowers of qualitative researchers. While observing, we efficiently take in information about the environment and people's emotions, identifying areas to explore. It can be difficult to know what is really happening in the home (or store, bank, or other location) unless someone is there as an impartial observer.

In our last update, we shared the example of a respondent who didn't think to mention that there was a pet chicken in her Manhattan apartment. The pet chicken illustrates the broader point that, while we've all developed innovative virtual methods, sometimes there is no substitute for being there. When we connect virtually, we see what respondents show and tell us. We can ask a respondent to tell us about her family budget and to show us her lists and spreadsheets, but we can miss things, like her spouse's new motorcycle in the driveway. We might miss a flicker of an expression signaling that what the person is saying may not match how they're feeling. Because of this, we are seeing a return to some in-person research for **observationally driven objectives**, including foundational work to uncover unarticulated needs.

After two years of zoom fatigue, many of us accept that there is a richness to in-person interactions that can't be fully duplicated online. Could that also lead to richer insights? There is [some evidence](#) that it may, so when **deep human insights** are the goal, in-person research should be considered.

[New research](#) has also confirmed what many have intuited: creative idea generation is more effective when people are together in the same physical space. That means virtual ideation or co-creation may come with a cost.

The other key need leading the return to face-to-face work is **stimulus that is best experienced in person**. We've conducted in-person research around sensory experiences, prototypes, concept stores, and packages, for example.

3. Plan for safety and success

- **Choose markets carefully:** While much of the U.S. and world are returning to something approximating "business as usual," market requirements and conditions can still vary. Local regulations can range from vaccine or mask requirements, to prohibitions against vaccine or mask requirements. Some markets may be open for some in-person methods, like central location, but not others, like in-home research. Because conditions and regulations can change, you must stay close to market conditions during the time leading up to research.
- **Mind the COVID details:** As the pandemic continues to evolve so will its precautions, such as checking for COVID-19 exposure in screening and upon arrival, or arrangements for meals or snacks. Research clients should communicate their company's and/or personal requirements for COVID safety, to ensure the plan aligns to these needs.
- **Prepare to pivot:** The world has changed throughout the pandemic and continues to be unpredictable. While conditions look pretty good at the time of this writing, it still helps to have a backup plan. For example, each activity you have planned may not work the same way as pre-COVID, you may have a consumer who wants to move outside, and/or you may need to re-book your ticket to conduct more interviews given some of these other disruptions.

In qualitative research, it's important to meet people where they are. If they are ready for in-person contact with others, we can consider when and how we can be there, too.



WHAT'S NEXT:

- In an ever-changing pandemic, it's more important than ever to stay in close contact with the people you serve.
- Companies can work with qualitative research partners to consider whether in-person research is right for their respondent target, objectives, and market.
- Clients and suppliers should maintain open communication about COVID concerns and requirements to build a successful plan.

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