Denver-based GutCheck helps clients ranging from small B-to-B companies to large CPG brands such as Colgate, BMW and Toyota gather online qualitative data via its on-demand survey tool, aiming to be the leader in DIY qualitative market research and bring qualitative research to the masses.

Marketing News caught up with GutCheck CEO Matt Warta to discuss the service, the role that online panels like GutCheck play in companies’ overall research strategies, B-to-B uses for social media listening devices and the future of online panels.

Q: Your company is aptly named. You’re all about allowing companies to access quick-hit qualitative insights online. Tell me about your service.

A: If you look at the qualitative research world, it’s primarily that of bigger companies with bigger budgets just because qualitative research has historically been pretty expensive. When we went out to address this market opportunity, we looked at what the drivers of cost and time were in terms of conducting qualitative research, and we quickly found out that it’s the recruiting process that consumes a lot of the time and a lot of the money. Our premise has always been, from the get-go, that if we can automate that recruitment process, then we can drive a lot of value within this world, we can save people a lot of time and money, and we can also avail this very powerful methodology for a lot more people. You don’t have to be a big brand or a big company anymore to access qualitative research. We’ve created a service where the customer can come on our service, whether they are an agency or marketing consultant, or research and insights person, and they can very quickly identify, through our Web application, who they want to interview. They tend to base that on demographic profiling as well as behavioral questions that they’ll ask. We’ll go out to our panel in real time and recruit those people in the moment that the customer wants to interview somebody. We’ll recruit that very specific respondent into a session and make a live synchronous connection with our customer so they can interview them either in an exploratory way, or ask specific questions that they want very specific answers for. … At the end of the day, you can download those transcripts and share them with your peers, if you like.

Q: GutCheck draws from a panel of more than 5 million U.S. consumers, with less than five minutes to connect to a client’s target market online. How does this work?

A: We’ve been fortunate enough to work with a couple of panel companies that are really on the cutting edge: uSamp and Opinionology. We’ve integrated our technology with theirs, where we can take a real-time peek into their panel to see whether the people that our customers want to interview are available to be interviewed right now. That’s fundamentally different than any other kind of recruiting technology that’s out there. Most recruiting technologies are e-mail- or phone-based, which are kind of hard to drive a synchronous connection like we do. We’ve been able to integrate in a real-time way with any number of panels and be able to recruit their respondents off the Web in real time.

Q: Are some demographics more willing to be surveyed or queried in real time online than others?

A: The answer, at a high level, is yes, but all the people we recruit into our surveys today have opted in to do the research. Once you’ve opted in to do research, you’re going to be pretty responsive to survey opportunities because you’ve already opted in. It’s more a question of how many people are out there in a given segment to take these surveys. It doesn’t matter if somebody’s trying to recruit a soccer mom or a business traveler; once we get them into one of our surveys, they behave in a pretty similar fashion.

Q: Your website says that you want to make qualitative research accessible to the masses. Who are you working with?

A: We want to open up qualitative research to other people, not just big brands and big agencies. There’s a lot of people out there who want to do qualitative research; they just don’t have the budgets or the time to do it. When we open to the masses, we’re opening up to other researchers and other marketers that heretofore maybe didn’t have those resources. We’re really fortunate to have a diverse and interesting set of customers with us. Some of the bigger customers that we have, they’re house-hold CPG brands that are in every kitchen and
every pantry in the United States. That ranges all the way down to small agencies that value marketing research because they worked for a bigger agency or brand before they started their agency. It’s a diverse and nice mix of customers.

Q: How do the quick-hit qualitative insights gleaned from online panels like yours meld with your clients’ general market research? What kind of insights are they typically after? And what role do such insights play in your clients’ research strategies? Are they starting points for deeper-dive research projects? Benchmark creators? Temperature takers? All of the above?

A: It goes back to the power of our platform, which is because you can be a big brand that accesses us and because you can be a smaller firm or agency that accesses us, we are being used for different things. If you’re a smaller firm, this might be the only qualitative research you do. You come on our service and you do 20 interviews because you want to understand how people are going to react to a new product or react to some packaging claims that you put on a new package you’re doing. Whereas, if we go to one of our big-brand firms that’s doing concept testing, they’ve likely done focus groups well before they put their concepts together, and they’re going to take those concepts and do a series of GutChecks on them to further refine those concepts before they go into quantitative testing.

The bigger firms will have a well-defined process and we’re part of that process that’s going to have other research being done, either before or after. And if you’re a smaller client, we might be the research you do for a project.

Q: It seems like a more organic fit for B-to-C marketers to turn to social media and online panels for research, since a vast number of consumers often discuss B-to-C brands online in regular interactions with their peers. There’s a lot of B-to-C-related data out there for the taking in social media. How can B-to-B marketers use such channels for research? Do they have to rely more on prompted discussions in proprietary panels like yours, rather than turning to social media listening devices, for example?

A: I don’t know how much social media listening devices are being used on the B-to-B side. I’m guessing if you looked at the consumer base out there for a Radian6 or something like that, it’s going to be very B-to-C. I think the reason why is, when you have millions of potential customers for your brand or your product, that is a fire hose of information and you need some way to sift through a lot of information to gain some insights, whereas, from a B-to-B perspective, if your customer base is potentially 1,000 customers, or 2,000 or whatever, it’s not as important. When you are in that ‘millions of consumers’ kind of universe,
there are going to be segments out there that you need to understand and understand how those personas are different than the other segments that you can cater to that are in the 'millions of people' crowd. In a B-to-B audience like ours, I can have 20 or 30 conversations with people at a trade show and you get a good feel for what's going on in the market. I suspect that social media listening platforms are much more focused on serving B-to-C markets because of that.

Q: You offer DIY options, but you also consult on and moderate clients’ online qualitative efforts. Do most of your clients go the DIY route or do they want more hand-holding?

A: It's a pretty good mix depending on what kind of customers we're serving and what the needs are at that given time. It's one of the great things about what we offer is that we give our clients the flexibility so they can either do things on their own, or we can help them out with it. It's going to depend on that customer base.

Because of our platform, even if we do [the research] for them, we can turn it around incredibly quickly. We can turn around a really good-size product in less than 48 hours and that's impossible to do with any traditional research services that are out there. It's because of the real-time recruitment that our platform is able to do.

Q: What's next for online panels, in your opinion?

A: That's a question we think a lot about here at GutCheck. My vision of what's going to happen with online panels—and I think we've seen this with other markets—is just the micro-segmentation that has to happen. What that means to me, from a qualitative perspective, is that my clients want to speak to really engaged respondents that are really passionate not only because they're doing research generally, but that they're really passionate about that person's brand or product area. Just because a person is very passionate and responsive around dish soap liquid, it doesn't mean they're going to be a great respondent also.

One of the things we're going to be able to do over time is understand which respondents are best for which surveys and go back to those respondents so that our clients can get some really great, valuable information that drives unique insights.

That's where I see panels going: not only being able to characterize people at a high level in terms of demographics and behavioral elements, from a qualitative perspective, but really understanding where they're a great respondent.