

Hurtling the Barriers to Qualitative Research

Marketing News Volume 31 Number 7, March 31, 1997

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The power of marketing research comes not from numbers, nor in confirming what has already taken place. Rather, discerning an underlying truth is its raison d'être. Insight is the spice that wakes up the whole marketing plan, blowing away bland, middle-of-the-road offerings.

Of course, penetrating the barriers to understanding is more difficult than it sounds. The pitfalls of qualitative research are many, but almost always include recruiting the wrong type of people and failing to provide people with the proper tools.

You need to separate able-minded people from those who are merely demographically correct. Some people are just more creative, or open to being creative, than others. It is difficult to recognize, much less put into words, the attachments we all have, or the imagery we associate with a given brand.

That's why you must place almost as much emphasis on recruiting participants as you do on study design. Our typical screener for a qualitative study includes a battery of attitudinal statements:

1. I like to use my imagination.
2. I always need to know all the facts about something before I'll begin to consider it.
3. I enjoy solving puzzles and word games, and I like to figure out how to do things.
4. I think the tried and true works out best, so I don't really like new ways of doing things.
5. I am comfortable expressing my thoughts and feelings in the company of others, even if we just met.
6. I tend to be rather introverted and quiet in the company of people I've just met. At first, I tend to let them do most of the talking.

In the above example (for a new product concept test), we'd terminate if the individual didn't answer affirmatively on statements 1, 3 and 5 and negatively on 2, 4 and 6.

The second pitfall is failing to provide the group with the proper tools. You need to empower people to reveal things they don't even know exist within them.

Marketing Lesson

- ✓ Of the many pitfalls of qualitative research, recruiting the wrong people and failing to provide participants the right tools are the most prevalent.
- ✓ Emphasizing screening should take care of the first problem, and allowing focus group participants to "play games" should handle the second.
- ✓ Remember, though, creativity is not an end in itself; it's only a road leading to your research goals.

A broad array of creative problem-solving techniques are designed to unlock underlying attitudes, perceptions, emotions and motivations.

An apt analogy is the role exercise plays before participating in sports. The role of the focus group moderator is to limber up the group with warm-up exercises, gradually honing their ability to reveal previously hidden nuggets.

A case in point is the difficulty market researchers face in getting people to relate the subject of the study to their daily lives. For example, how do you prompt people back to what they had for dinner last Tuesday? Although the old-school rule is to never reveal the subject of the study ahead of time (in an attempt to capture top-of-mind thinking), there's a way to break the rule and increase group productivity.

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What we do is send out a "homework" assignment, such as a daily diary tracking their consumption of the product category for the previous week, once a participant has been recruited. To bolster participation we put it into playful language and attempt to have some fun; for example, "What was your family's reaction to the meal? How would they rate it from 1 to 10, where 10 was licking the plate clean and 1 would mean they'd feed it to the dog under the table?" A homework assignment bolsters group productivity by having participants put their energy into the creative games, compared with conjuring up answers based on what they think you want to hear about their past week's consumption. Plus, their answers are reality-based.

Another common assignment we have is getting people to help rate different packaging designs. This is nothing more than passing out blank paper

and crayons and asking people to revert to first grade. While we've never had any of our "kids" beat out the prototypes, we have gained valuable insight into the packaging elements considered most important.

One of the more daunting tasks is to get consumers to invent new products or services based on their wants and needs.

We ask participants to visualize a magic box that contains the most fantastic product. Before opening the box, they are asked to describe everything about the product: what it does; how it works; how it smells, feels or tastes; how it is packaged; and why it is better.

This exercise gives people permission to invent free of boundaries, because imagination doesn't flourish within rigid parameters.

If you pay attention to overcoming the two common pitfalls, you are well on your way to ensuring a productive research study. However, your task isn't necessarily complete. Now, it is time to question what you are trying to accomplish, and the role that research should play.

Too often we get caught up in a kind of myopia. Because we set out to find answers to a finite number of questions, we stop when we have developed a study that will answer them.

We often surprise prospective clients when we start off the initial meeting with a discussion of creativity in marketing research. They are accustomed to challenging ad agencies and graphic design firms, not marketing research firms, to break the mold. After all, creativity in research is not a goal in itself.

However, it does pay to push yourself and your marketing research team to think creatively. If you are successful in empowering consumers to think about ordinary, everyday things in a new light, it can add spice to your marketing mix.