**QUANTITATIVE, QUALITATIVE, AND PLURALISTIC RESEARCH**

The means of data collection during the research process can be classified into three broad categories: quantitative, qualitative, and pluralistic. There are vast differences between the first two methods, and it is necessary to understand their special characteristics in order to make the right selection. To start, we briefly define these two approaches and then we describe pluralistic research.

Quantitative research is the traditional mainstay of the research industry, and it is sometimes referred to as “survey research.” For our purposes in this chapter, quantitative research is defined as research involving the use of structured questions in which the response options have been predetermined and a large number of respondents is involved. When you think of quantitative research, you might envi­sion a nationwide survey conducted with telephone interviews. That is, quantitative research often involves a sizable representative sample of the population and a formalized procedure for gathering data. The purpose of quantitative research is very specific, and this research is used when the manager and researcher have agreed that precise information is needed. Data format and sources are clear and well defined, and the compilation and formatting of the data gathered follows an orderly proce­dure that is largely numerical in nature.

Qualitative research, in contrast, involves collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data by observing what people do and say. Observations and statements are in a qualitative or nonstandardized form. Because of this, qualitative data can be quantified but only after a translation process has taken place. For example, ifyou asked five people to express their opinions on a topic such as gun control or promoting alcoholic beverages to college students, you would probably get five different state­ments. But after studying each response, you could characterize each one as “posi­tive,” “negative,” or “neutral.” This translation step would not be necessary if you instructed them to choose predetermined responses such as “yes” or “no.” Any study that is conducted using an observational technique or unstructured question­ing can be classified as qualitative research, which is becoming increasingly popular in a number of research situations.

Why would you want to use such a “soft” approach? Occasionally, marketing researchers find that a large-scale survey is inappropriate. For instance, Procter & Gamble may be interested in improving its Tide laundry detergent, so it invites a group of homemakers to sit down with some of Tide’s marketing personnel and brainstorm how Tide could perform better, how its packaging could be improved, or discuss other features of the detergent. Listening to the market in this way can generate excellent packaging, product design, or even product positioning ideas. As another example, if the Procter & Gamble marketing group were developing a spe­cial end-of-aisle display for Tide, it might want to test one version in an actual supermarket environment. It could place one in a Safeway grocery store located in a San Francisco suburb and videotape shoppers as they encountered the display. The mar­keting group would then review the videotape and see if the display generated the types of responses they hoped it would. For instance, did shoppers stop there? Did they read the copy on the display? Did they pick up the displayed product and look at it? Qualitative research techniques afford rich insight into consumer behavior.

With the rush to online quantitative research that produces huge amounts of data, qualitative research is sometimes overlooked. However, it is our goal in this chapter to show you the value of qualitative research techniques and, as you will see very soon, to convince you of the need for qualitative research and quantitative research to work hand in hand.

Although there are proponents of both types of research, many marketing researchers have adopted **pluralistic research**, which is defined as the combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods in order to gain the advantages of both. With pluralistic research, it is common to begin with exploratory qualitative techniques as, for example, in-depth interviews of selected dealers or a series of group discussions with customers in order to understand how they perceive your product and service as compared to those of competitors. Even an observational study could be used if it is helpful in understanding the problem and bringing to the surface issues in the research project. These activities often help crystallize the prob­lem or otherwise open the researcher’s eyes to factors and considerations that might be overlooked if he or she rushed into a full-scale survey. The qualitative phase serves as a foundation for the quantitative phase of the research project because it provides the researcher with firsthand knowledge of the research problem. Armed with this knowledge, the researcher’s design and execution of the quantitative phase are invariably superior to what they might have been without the qualitative phase. With pluralistic research, the qualitative phase serves to frame the subsequent quan­titative phase, and in some cases, a qualitative phase is applied after a quantitative study to help the researcher understand the findings in the quantitative phase.

The pluralistic approach is becoming increasingly popular, especially with emerging and complex marketing phenomena. We have provided Marketing Research Insight 8.1 that shows how a pluralistic program combined qualitative and quantitative research techniques to yield an understanding of the differences between men and women online as well as identifying different online segments with each gender. Speaking of online, the flexibility of Web-based research facilitates pluralistic research. For example, *The Arizona Republic* has a research system in which on line focus groups are used for brainstorming, and the outcomes of these sessions are then expanded into online surveys. Through this pluralistic approach, *The Arizona Republic* has identified local news and happenings and transportation issues/infor­mation to be the most important topics to its readers, whereas politics and sports are the least important topics. It has responded with its content accordingly.

**OBSERVATION TECHNIQUES**

Qualitative techniques include the class of **observation methods**-techniques in which the researcher relies on his or her powers of observation rather than commu­nicating with a person in order to obtain information. Observation requires some­thing to observe, and because our memories are faulty, researchers depend on recording devices such as video tapes, audiotapes, handwritten notes, or some other tangible record of what is observed. As we describe each observation technique, you will see that each is unique in how it obtains observations.

**Types of Observation**

At first glance, it may seem that observation studies can occur without any struc­ture; however, it is important to adhere to a plan so that the observations are con­sistent and comparisons or generalizations can be made without worrying about any conditions of the observation method that might confound the findings. There are four general ways of organizing observations: (1) direct versus indirect, (2) disguised versus undisguised, (3) structured versus unstructured, and (4) human versus mechanical.

**Direct Versus Indirect**

Observing behavior as it occurs is called **direct observation**. For example, if we are interested in finding out how much shoppers squeeze tomatoes to assess their freshness, we can observe people actually picking up the tomatoes. Direct observation has been used by Kellogg to understand breakfast rituals, by a Swiss chocolate maker to study the behavior of “chocoholics,” and by the U.S. Post Office’s adver­tising agency to come up with the advertising slogan “We Deliver.” It has also been used by General Mills to understand how children eat breakfast, leading to the launch of “Go-Gurt,” a midmorning snack for school children.

In order to observe types of hidden behavior, such as past behavior, we must rely on indirect observation. With **indirect observation**, the researcher observes the effects or results of the behavior rather than the behavior itself. Types of indirect observations include archives and physical traces.

**Archives** are secondary sources such as historical records that can be applied to the present problem. These sources contain a wealth of information and should not be overlooked or underestimated. Many types of archives exist. For example, records of sales calls may be inspected to determine how often salespersons make cold calls. Warehouse inventory movements can be used to study market shifts. Scanner data may afford insight on the effects of price changes, promotion cam­paigns, or package size changes.

**Physical traces** are tangible evidence of some event. For example, we might turn to “garbology” (observing the trash of subjects being studied) as a way of finding out how much recycling of plastic milk bottles occurs. A soft-drink company might do a litter audit in order to assess how much impact its aluminium cans have on the countryside. A fast-food company such as Wendy’s might measure the amount of graffiti on buildings located adjacent to prospective location sites as a means of estimating the crime potential for each site.

**Disguised Versus Undisguised**

With **disguised observation**, the subject is unaware that he or she is being observed. An example of this method might be a “secret shopper” who is used by a retail store chain to record and report on sales clerks’ assistance and courtesy. One-way mirrors and hidden cameras are a few of the other ways that are used to prevent subjects from becoming aware that they are being observed. This disguise is important because if the subjects were aware of the observation, it is possible that they would change their behavior, resulting in observations of atypical behavior. If you were a store clerk, how would you act if the department manager told you that he would be watching you for the next hour? You would probably be on your best behavior for the next 60 minutes. Disguised observation has proved illuminating in studies of parents and children shop­ping together in supermarkets. With direct questions, parents might feel compelled to say that their children are always on their best behavior while shopping.

Sometimes it is impossible for the respondent to be unaware of the observation, and this is a case of **undisguised observation**. Laboratory settings, observing a sales representative’s behavior on sales calls, and people meters (a device that is attached to a television set to record when and to what station a set is tuned) must all be used with the subject’s knowledge. Because people might be influenced by knowing they are being observed, it is wise to always minimize the presence of the observer to the maximum extent possible.

The use of observation raises ethical questions. Should people being observed be informed of the observation, and, if so, what changes might they make in their behavior in order to appear “normal” or conform to what they think is expected? The researcher wants to observe behavior as it actually occurs even if it is unusual or out of the ordi­nary. However, people being observed might feel uncomfortable about their habits or actions and try to act in more conventional ways. For instance, if a family agrees to have its television set wired so a researcher can track what programs the family watches, will the parents make sure that the children watch mainly wholesome shows such as those on the Disney Channel? Sometimes researchers resort to deceit in order to observe peo­ple without their knowledge, but this is an unethical practice. The ethical practice is to inform people ahead of time and give them an “adjustment period” or, if such a period is not feasible, to fully debrief them of the observation afterward.

**Structured Versus Unstructured**

When using **structured observation** techniques, the researcher identifies beforehand which behaviors are to be observed and recorded. All other behaviors are “ignored.” Often a checklist or a standardized observation form is used to isolate the observer’s attention to specific factors. These highly structured observations typ­ically require a minimum of effort on the part of the observer.

**Unstructured observation** places no restriction on what the observer would note: All behavior in the episode under study is monitored. The observer just watches the situation and records what he or she deems interesting or relevant. Of course, the observer is thoroughly briefed on the area of general concern. This type of observation is often used in exploratory research. For example, Black and Decker might send someone to observe carpenters working at various job sites as a means of better understanding how the tools are used and to help generate ideas as to how to design the tools for increased safety.

**Human Versus Mechanical**

With **human observation**, the observer is a person hired by the researcher, or, perhaps, the observer is the researcher. However, it is often possible, desirable, and eco­nomical to replace the human observer with some form of static observing device as in **mechanical observation**. This substitution may be made because of accuracy, cost, or functional reasons. Auto traffic counts may be more accurate and less costly when recorded by machines that are activated by car tires rolling over them. Besides, during rush hour, a human observer could not count the number of cars on most major metropolitan commuter roads. Nor would it be possible to count the number of fans entering a gate at a professional football title game, so turnstile counts are used instead. Scanning devices are used to count the number and types of products sold (see Chapter 7). Mechanical devices may also be used when it is too expensive to use human observers. For example, a people meter is used instead of a human observer to record families’ television viewing habits. As these examples illustrate, mechanical observation has moved into the high-technology area recently, and the combination of telecommunications, computer hardware, and software programs has created a very useful research tool.

**Appropriate Conditions for the Use of Observation**

Certain conditions must be met before a researcher can successfully use observa­tion as a marketing research tool. These conditions are the event must occur in a short time interval, the observed behavior must occur in a public setting, and when the possibility of faulty recall rules out collecting information by asking the person.

Short time interval means that the event must begin and end within a reasonably short time span. Examples include a shopping trip in a supermarket, waiting in a teller line at a bank, purchasing a clothing item, or observing children as they watch a television program. Some decision-making processes can take a long time (for example, buying a home), and it would be unrealistic in terms of the time and money required to observe the entire process. Because of this factor, observational research is usually limited to scrutinizing activities that can be completed in a rela­tively short time span or to observing certain phases of those activities with a long time span.

Public behavior refers to behavior that occurs in a setting the researcher can readily observe. Actions such as cooking, playing with one’s children, or private worshipping are not public activities and are, therefore, not suitable for observa­tional studies such as those described here.

Faulty recall occurs when actions or activities are so repetitive or automatic that the respondent cannot recall specifics about the behavior under question. For exam­ple, people cannot recall accurately how many times they looked at their wristwatch while waiting in a long line to buy a ticket to a best-selling movie, or which FM radio station they listened to last Thursday at 2:00 p.m. Observation is necessary under circumstances of faulty recall to fully understand the behavior at hand. For instance, an observation technique called “actual radio measurement” using a high-­gain antenna, digital frequency scanner, and computer can be used to determine which radio stations were listened to by commuters in their cars.

**Advantages of Observational Data**

Ideally, the subjects of observational research are unaware they are being studied. Because of this they react in a natural manner, giving the researcher insight into actual, not reported, behaviors. As previously noted, observational research meth­ods also mean that there is no chance for recall error. The subjects are not asked what they remember about a certain action. Instead, they are observed while engaged in the act. In some cases, observation may be the only way to obtain accu­rate information. For instance, children who cannot yet verbally express their opin­ion of a new toy will do so by simply playing or not playing with the toy. Retail marketers commonly gather marketing intelligence about competitors and about their own employees’ behaviors by hiring the services of “mystery shoppers” who pose as customers but who are actually trained observers. In some situations, data can be obtained with better accuracy and less cost by using observational methods as opposed to other means. For example, counts of in-store traffic can often be made by means of observational techniques more accurately and less expensively than by using survey techniques.

Such advantages of observational research methods should not be interpreted as meaning that this technique is always in competition with other approaches. A resourceful researcher will use observation techniques to supplement and comple­ment other techniques. When used in combination with other techniques, each approach can serve as a check on the results obtained by the other. Actually, obser­vation of humans in their natural context is the approach that has been used by anthropologists for over 100 years and has recently become accepted as a method of marketing research.

**Limitations of Observational Data**

The limitations of observation are the limitations inherent in qualitative research in general. With direct observation, typically only small numbers of subjects are studied and usually under special circumstances, so their representativeness is a concern. I? This factor, plus the subjective interpretation required to explain the observed behavior, usually forces the researcher to consider his or her conclusions to be tentative. Certainly, the greatest drawback of all observational methods is the researcher’s inability to pry beneath the behavior observed and to interrogate the person on motives, attitudes, and all of the other unseen aspects of why what was observed took place.

To recap, a limitation of observation is that motivations, attitudes, and other internal conditions cannot be observed. Only when these feelings are relatively unimportant or readily inferred from the behavior is it appropriate to use observa­tional research methods. For example, facial expression might be used as an indica­tor of a child's attitudes or preferences for various types of fruit drink flavors because children often react with conspicuous physical expressions. But adults and even children usually conceal their reasons and true reactions in public, and this fact necessitates a direct questioning approach because observation alone cannot give a complete picture of why and how people act the way they do.

**FOCUS GROUPS**

As we indicated, there are several types of qualitative research, but the technique most often associated with this category is the focus group. A focus group is a small group of people brought together and guided by a moderator through an unstructured, spontaneous discussion about some topic. The goal of a focus group is to draw out ideas, feelings, and experiences about a certain issue that would be obscured or stifled by more structured methods of data collection. The use of a small group allows the operation of group dynamics and aids in making the partici­pants feel comfortable in a strange environment. It is called a “focus” group because the moderator serves to focus the discussion on the topic and does not let the group move off onto tangents or irrelevant points. Focus groups have become so popular in marketing research that every large city has a number of companies that specialize in performing focus group research. You can be assured that you will encounter focus group research if you become a practicing marketing manager. “Almost nothing gets done without them,” says Bill Hillsman, a successful advertising executive whose campaigns have worked for the Minnesota Twins, the Dales shopping cen­ters, and Arctic Cat snowmobiles. Focus groups are an invaluable means of regain­ing contact with customers when marketers have lost touch, and they are very help­ful in learning about new customer groups.

**Some Objectives of Focus Groups**

There are four main objectives of focus groups: to generate ideas; to understand consumer vocabulary; to reveal consumer needs, motives, perceptions, and attitudes on products or services; and to understand findings from quantitative studies.

To generate ideas means to use the focus group as a starting point for new prod­uct or service ideas, uses, or improvements. Read Marketing Research Insight 8.2 as it depicts how this brainstorming can occur in a focus group. Notice the improvements that are suggested for Fujifilm’s digital cameras.

To understand consumer vocabulary means to use the focus group to stay abreast of the words and phrases consumers use when describing products so as to improve product or service communication with them. Such information may help in advertising copy design or in the preparation of an instruction pamphlet. This knowledge refines research problem definitions and also helps structure questions for use in later quantitative research.

To reveal consumer needs, motives, perceptions, and attitudes on products or services means to use the focus group to refresh the marketing team as to what customers really feel or think about a product or service. Alternatively, managers may need early customer reactions to changes being considered in products or services. Focus groups are commonly used during the exploratory phase of research. This application is useful in generating objectives to be addressed by subsequent research.

To understand findings from quantitative studies means to use focus groups to better comprehend data gathered from other surveys. Sometimes a focus group can reveal why the findings came out a particular way.

Warner-Lambert is a company that has successfully used focus groups to accomplish all four of these objectives. Its consumer health products group, which markets over-the-counter health and beauty products as well as nonprescription drugs, uses focus groups extensively. In fact, Warner-Lambert uses a combination of qualitative research techniques to gain background information, to reveal needs and attitudes related to health and beauty products, to interpret the results of qual­itative studies, and to stimulate brainstorming new ideas. Focus groups have been useful in understanding basic shifts in consumer lifestyles, values, and purchase patterns.

**Operational Questions About Focus Groups**

Before a focus group is conducted, certain operational questions should be addressed. It is important to decide how many people should take part in a focus group, who they should be, how they will be selected and recruited, and where they should meet. General guidelines exist for answering these questions. A discussion of each follows.

**What Should Be the Size of a Focus Group?** According to industry wisdom, the optimal size of a focus group is 6 to 12 people. A small group (fewer than six participants) is not likely to generate the energy and group dynamics necessary for a truly beneficial focus group session. With fewer participants, it is common that one or two of the participants do most of the talking in spite of the moderator’s efforts. At the same time, a small group will often result in awkward silences and force the moderator to take too active a role in the discussion just to keep the discussion alive. Similarly, a group with over a dozen participants will ordinarily prove too large to be conducive to a natural discussion. As a focus group becomes larger in size it tends to become fragmented. Those participating may become frustrated by the inherent digressions and side comments. Conversations may break out among two or three participants while another is talking. This situation places the moderator in the role of disciplinarian in which he or she is constantly calling for quiet or order rather than focusing the discussion on the issues at hand.

Unfortunately, it is often difficult to predict the exact number of people who will attend the focus group interview. Ten may agree to participate and only 4 may show up. Fourteen may be invited in hopes that 8 will show up, and all 14 may arrive. Of course, if this occurs, the researcher faces a judgment call as to whether or not to send some home. In the worst case, a researcher may run into a situation in which no one attends, despite promises to the contrary. There is no guaranteed method that will ensure a successful participation ratio. Incentives (which will be discussed later) are helpful but definitely not a certain way of gaining acceptance. So although 6 to 12 is the ideal focus group size range, it is not uncommon to have some groups with fewer than 6 and some with more than 12.

**Who Should Be in the Focus Group?** It is generally believed that the best focus groups are ones in which the participants share homogenous characteristics. This requirement is sometimes automatically satisfied by the researcher's need to have particular types of people in the focus group. For instance, the focus group may be comprised of executives who use satellite phones, it may involve building contractors who specialize in building customer residences over $500,000 in value, or it might involve a group of salespeople who are experiencing some common customer service difficulty.

The need for similar demographic or other relevant characteristics in the focus group members is accentuated by the fact that the focus group participants are typically strangers. In most cases, they are not friends or even casual acquaintances, and many people feel intimidated or at least hesitant to voice their opinions and suggestions to a group of strangers. But participants typically feel more comfortable once they realize they have similarities such as their age (they may all be in their early thirties), job situations (they may all be junior executives), family composition (they may all have preschool children), purchase experiences (they may all have bought a new car in the past year), or even leisure pursuits (they may all play tennis). Furthermore, by conducting a group that is as homogenous as possible with respect to demographics and other characteristics, the researcher is assured that differences in these variables will be less likely to confuse the issue being discussed.

**How Should Focus Group Participants Be Recruited and Selected?** As you can guess, the selection of focus group participants is determined largely by the purpose of the focus group. For instance, if the purpose is to generate new ideas on digital camera improvements, the participants must be consumers who have used a digital camera. If the focus group is intended to elicit building contractors’ reactions to a new type of central air-conditioning unit, it will be necessary to recruit building contractors. It is not unusual for companies to provide customer lists or for focus group recruiters to work from secured lists of potential participants. For instance, with building contractors, the list might come from the local Yellow Pages or a building contractor trade association membership roster. In any case, it is necessary to ini­tially contact prospective participants by telephone to qualify them and then to solicit their cooperation in the focus group. Occasionally, a focus group company may recruit by requesting shoppers in a mall to participate, but this approach is rare.

As we noted earlier, “no shows” are a problem with focus groups, and researchers have at least two strategies to entice prospective participants. First, incentives of various types are used. These range from monetary compensation for the participant’s time to free products or gift certificates. Second, many focus group companies use call-backs during the day immediately prior to the focus group to remind prospective participants that they have agreed to take part. If one prospective participant indicates that some conflict has arisen and he or she cannot be there, it is then possible to recruit a replacement. Neither approach works perfectly, as we indicated earlier, and anticipating how many participants will show up is always a con­cern. Some focus group companies have a policy of over recruiting, and others have lists of people they can rely on to participate, given that they fit the qualifications.

The difficulties encountered by focus group companies in recruiting focus group participants have led to some questionable practices. Some people like to participate in focus groups, and a focus group company may keep a list of willing participants. Other participants may want to take part simply for the monetary compensation, and their names may be on the focus group company's list as well. In either case, inclusion of those people who have previously participated in numerous focus groups can lead to serious validity problems. Some researchers will explicitly disal­low a focus group company to use these participants because of this concern. As a matter of policy, some focus group companies will always report the last time, if ever, that each focus group member participated in a focus group. Other companies will do so only if the client firm makes an explicit request for this information.

**Where Should a Focus Group Meet?** Obviously, if a group discussion is to take place for a period of 90 minutes or more, it is important that the physical arrangement of the group be comfortable and conducive to group discussion. So focus groups ideally are conducted in large rooms set up in a round table format. An advertising company conference room, a moderator’s home, a respondent’s home, the client’s office, hotels, and meeting rooms at churches are all locations in which focus groups can be held. Aside from a seating arrangement where par­ticipants can all see one another, the second critical requirement in selecting a meeting place is to find one quiet enough to permit an intelligible audiotaping of the sessions.

The ideal setting for a focus group is a focus group facility, which is a set of rooms especially designed for focus groups at a marketing research company specializing in conducting focus groups. The focus group room itself contains a large table and comfortable chairs, a relaxing atmosphere, and a one-way mirror so that clients can view the interviewing process. Ample space for video and audio equip­ment should also be provided. An example of a typical floor plan for a focus group facility is provided in Figure 8.1. Because focus group research is qualitative, it gen­erates many diverse pieces of information. Rather than relying on memory, which can be faulty, or relying on the moderator’s taking notes, which can slow down and distract the process, most focus groups are audiotaped and many are videotaped. You can see from the floor plan in Figure 8.1 that a focus group company's facilities have recording capabilities designed into them. Microphones are built into the walls or ceiling or otherwise set in the center of the table, and videotape equipment often operates from an inconspicuous location. One-way mirrors also allow clients to observe the focus group as it takes place.

In the past, companies have tried to hide or disguise the equipment they used to record respondents’ reactions. This was done in an attempt to remove any feelings of self-consciousness or awkwardness that might result in the respondents’ inter­views by being taped. However, such a practice is unethical, and few participants are tricked anyway. Now it is common practice to let participants know about the recording aspect when they are recruited. If they have any objections, they can decline at that time.

**The Focus Group Moderator’s Role and Responsibilities** By now, you realize that the most crucial factor influencing the effectiveness and usefulness of a focus group is the moderator. A focus group moderator is a person who conducts the entire session and guides the flow of group discussion across specific topics desired by the client. The moderator must strive for a very delicate balance between stimulating, natural discussions among all of the group members while ensuring that the focus of the discussion does not stray too far from the topic. A good moderator must have excellent observation, interpersonal, and communication skills to recognize and overcome threats to a productive group discussion. He or she must be prepared, experienced, and armed with a detailed list of topics to be discussed. It is also helpful if the focus group moderator can eliminate any preconceptions on the topic from his or her mind. The best moderators are experienced, enthusiastic, prepared, involved, energetic, and open-minded.

The focus group’s success depends on the participants' involvement in the discussion and in their understanding of what is being asked of them. Productive involvement is largely a result of the moderator's effectiveness, which in turn is dependent on his or her understanding of the purpose and objectives of the inter­view. Unless the moderator understands what information the researcher is after and why, he or she will not be able to phrase questions effectively. It is good policy to have the moderator contribute to the development of the project’s goals so as to guide the discussion topics. By aiding in the formation of the topics (questions), he or she will be familiar with them and will be better prepared to conduct the group. It is important when formulating questions that they be organized into a logical sequence and that the moderator follow this sequence to the furthest extent possible. With an incompetent moderator, the focus group can become a disaster. Unfortunately, there are no industry standards or certification systems for focus group moderators, but we have found some trade secrets of successful moderators. You will find them in Table 8.1.

The moderator’s introductory remarks are influential; they set the tone of the entire session. All subsequent questions should be prefaced with a clear explana­tion of how the participants should respond, for example, how they really feel personally, not how they think they should feel. This allows the moderator to estab­lish a rapport with participants and to lay the groundwork for the interview’s structure.

**Table 8.1 Focus Group Moderators’ “Tricks of the Trade”**

The following trade secrets were divulged by experienced focus group moderators at a recent panel at the annual conference of the Qualitative Research Consultants Association.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Question** | **Tricks of the Trade** |
| **How do you make your groups great every time?**  **How do you build rapport quickly?**  **How do you bring a drifting group back into focus?**  **How do you get them to talk about deeper things than top-of-the-mind answers?**  **What about management of the “back room” where your clients are observing?** | * Be prepared * Be energized * Be nice but firm. * Make sure *everything* about the experience is comfortable. * Make meaningful eye contact during each person’s introduction. * Learn and remember names. * Let them create their own name cards. * Welcome folks as they come into the room and use small talk. * Tell them the topic is “for another group” and that they need to focus on the topic for this group. * Make a note and tell them that they will come back to this topic if there is time. * Tell them the topic is “interesting” but not the subject at hand and refer to the next question. * Suggest that they can talk about it on their own after the focus group is over. * Play naïve or dumb and ask them to help you understand by explaining. * Use probes such as “Tell us more about that,” or “Can you go deeper on that?” * Ask for specifics such as “Tell me about the last time that you...” * Pair them up and give them 10 minutes for each pair to come up with a solution or suggestion. * Orient clients with a 10-minute overview of focus groups, research objectives, and what to expect. * Check with the client(s) during breaks, written exercises, and so on to make sure things are going well. * Have an associate or colleague there to work with the client(s). * If you don’t have an associate for the back room, ask the client to select one person to be the point person to communicate with you. |

**Reporting and Use of Focus Group Results** As we noted earlier, focus groups report some of the subtle and obscure features of the relationships among con­sumers and products, advertising, and sales efforts. They furnish qualitative data on such things as consumer language; emotional and behavioral reactions to advertis­ing; lifestyle; relationships; the product category and specific brand; and uncon­scious consumer motivations relative to product design, packaging, promotion, or any other facet of the marketing program under study. But focus group results are qualitative and not perfectly representative of the general population.

Two important factors must be remembered when analyzing the data. First, some sense must be made by translating the qualitative statements of participants into categories and then reporting the degree of consensus apparent in the focus groups. Second, the demographic and buyer behavior characteristics of focus group participants should be judged against the target market profile to assess to what degree the groups represent the target market.

Focus group information is evaluated by an analyst who carefully observes the recorded tapes several times, transcribing any relevant statements that seem evident. These statements are then subjected to closer evaluation. This evaluation is based on the analyst’s knowledge of the history and statement of the problem plus his or her own interpretation of the responses. A detailed report is prepared for the client’s review.

The focus group report reflects the qualitative aspect of this research method. It lists all themes that have become apparent, and it notes any diversity of opinions or thoughts expressed by the participants. It will also have numerous verbatim excerpts provided as evidence. In fact, some reports include complete transcripts of the focus group discussion. This information is then used as the basis for further research studies or even for more focus groups. If the information is used for subse­quent focus groups, the client uses the first group as a learning experience, making any adjustments to the discussion topics as needed to improve the research objec­tives. Although focus groups may be the only type of research to tackle a marketing problem or question, they are also used as a beginning point for quantitative research efforts. That is, a focus group phase may be used to gain a feel for a specific survey that will ultimately generate standardized information from a representative sample.

**Advantages of Focus Groups**

Now that you understand the basics of focus groups, we can turn to a brief descrip­tion of their advantages, disadvantages, and other issues researchers are confronted with when they rely on focus groups. There are four major advantages to using focus groups as a form of qualitative research: They generate fresh ideas, they allow clients to observe the group in action, they are generally versatile, and they work well with special respondents. We describe each in turn.

**Generate Fresh Ideas** Creative and honest insights are often the result of focus groups. Because the respondents are not alone with the interviewer, they feel more at ease and free to express honest opinions rather than the ones they think will please the interviewer. The effect of “snowballing,” or of one comment triggering another, is also common in a focus group situation. A “group creativity” factor is often observed in brainstorming sessions in which one person’s idea stimulates others to generate their own ideas. Focus groups are excellent arenas for this sort of effect.

**Allow Clients to Observe the Group** A frequent complaint of marketing research clients is that they have difficulty understanding the complex quantitative tech­niques used and the statistical results produced. This lack of understanding invari­ably leads to an underutilization of the information provided. However, because managers can be involved throughout the focus group process by helping with the design of objectives and by observing the focus group, the results make more of an impression on them and are more likely to result in action. In fact, managers some­times formulate and begin executing action plans based on their focus group obser­vations even before the focus group data are analyzed and submitted as a formal report.

**Generally Versatile** A virtually unlimited number of topics and issues can be discussed in a focus group interview situation. It is even possible to incorporate the use of other qualitative techniques such as role playing into the session, thus increasing the productivity of the discussion. Prototypes of products can be demonstrated, concepts can be described, and product performance test results can be dis­closed. Even advertising copy can be evaluated with a focus group. The moderator is also allowed to probe more deeply into the opinions of the participants, something not allowed in highly structured quantitative methods. A different aspect of this advantage is the flexibility of focus groups afforded by technology. Some companies regularly conduct focus groups with participants at diverse geo­graphical locations through the use of videoconferences. Even business supply companies such as Kinko’s Copies have videoconference centers available for rent, and focus groups can be conducted with executives, for instance, with the use of these facilities or the videoconference facilities now in place in many focus group company office areas. Some services are now providing focus groups on the Internet where net users will enter chat rooms where certain topics are identified and all chat room members can submit their comments and reactions in a public forum. Some Internet focus groups take place over extended time periods using newsgroup postings.

**Work Well with Special Respondents** Another major advantage of focus groups is that they permit the researcher to study respondents who might not respond well under more structured situations. In some situations, such as those involving hard-to-interview groups such as lawyers or doctors, the format gives them an opportu­nity to associate with their peers and to compare notes. Otherwise, they might refuse to take part in a survey. Creative variations of focus groups are successful in studies on children. Both Kid2Kid and Doyle Research Associates have innovative approaches in which children interact with other children in structured team activi­ties, storytelling, and other interactions that the children treat as games. Of course, accommodations must be planned for special respondents. For instance, focus groups can be successful with disabled respondents, but provisions must be in place for each type of disability.

**Disadvantages of Focus Groups**

No research technique is flawless, and focus groups are no exception. Some weaknesses are readily apparent, whereas others are less obvious. There are three major weaknesses: They may not represent the general population, their interpretation is subjective, and their cost-per-participant is high. A discussion of these weaknesses follows.

**May Not Represent the Population** Focus group results should not be viewed as conclusive research because the participants are not likely to be representative of the general population the researcher is studying. Generally, those who agree to participate in focus groups are more outgoing than the average person. They are more accessible and probably more compliant. Coupled with the small sample size and homogenous group design, these unique characteristics render many focus groups unrepresentative of the marketer’s target population. Furthermore, because it is not possible to ensure that all of the participants who agree to take part will show up, semiprofessional respondents are sometimes “on call” for last-minute emergencies. Consequently, tight controls and a sober evaluation of the representativeness of focus groups' participants are mandatory.

**Interpretation Is Subjective** Selective use of the data collected by focus groups is a typical problem. Individuals with preconceived notions can almost always find something to support their views, ignoring anything that does not support their opinions. So focus group analysts are constantly on guard against bias entering into qualitative research. The subjectivity problem is compounded by involvement of management personnel during the design and conduct of the focus groups. It is not uncommon for a manager to enter the process with a preconceived notion of what the research will find (or what it should support). Because focus group research typ­ically allows the manager and his or her team to suggest topics and to add specific questions as well as to observe the groups in progress, a danger exists that certain preconceptions will enter into their impressions of the research findings. In fact, as we mentioned earlier, they may even take these impressions and convert them to action before the focus groups are analyzed and the summary report delivered to the client. If a researcher senses that premature actions are a danger, he or she will advise the client to wait until a trained focus group analyst has interpreted the com­plete set of focus group transcripts, and experienced researchers know that this process takes time.

**Cost-per-Participant Is High** A variety of expensive items contribute to the high cost-per-participant. One is participant recruitment. Numerous telephone calls are usually needed to recruit the desired number of required participants. The average charge for this service is around $25 and more for hard-to-reach or rare respon­dents. Next is the incentive cost. Some sort of compensation is offered to those who show up (usually around $30). This should be given to all respondents who arrive, even if they are not required to participate. These costs are minor compared to the moderator and facilities rental fees. A qualified moderator's salary can range from $1,500 to $2,000 per session. This amount includes his or her participation in devel­oping the objectives, conducting the focus groups, transcribing the videotapes, and writing and presenting a full report to management. Last, rental of the focus group facility plus its videotaping equipment are additional costs to be considered. The rental cost varies greatly, depending on where the focus group takes place, but a fully equipped focus group facility usually charges hundreds of dollars per hour of use. A final cost factor involves hidden costs. Such costs include time spent by the marketing manager and his or her team working and travelling that are absorbed by the manager’s budget but not necessarily assigned as a cost of the focus groups by the company's accounting system. Sometimes managers may even review all of the videotapes pertaining to a set of focus groups, resulting in many hours of time, which also draws them away from their other responsibilities. Not counting hidden costs that are difficult to estimate, a typical focus group may cost from $150 to $200 per participant, whereas a “ballpark” telephone survey cost is between $10 and $15 per respondent.

**Final Comments on Focus Groups**

The focus group approach is firmly entrenched in the marketing research world as a mainstay technique. Because they are easy to interpret, of reasonable total cost when compared to large-scale quantitative surveys involving a thousand or more respondents, adaptable to managers' concerns, and capable of yielding immediate results, focus groups are an appealing qualitative research method. Moreover, face-to-face focus groups are becoming common worldwide, and online focus groups are boost­ing the popularity of focus groups with new capabilities. They are a unique research method because they permit marketing managers to see and hear the market. Managers become so engrossed in their everyday problems and crises that they find it very refreshing to see their customers in the flesh. It is common for marketing managers to come away from a focus group session observation stimulated and energized to respond to the market’s desires.

**OTHER QUALITATIVE RESEARCH TECHNIQUES**

Although focus group interviews and many of the observation methods we have described thus far are clearly the most frequently used qualitative research tech­niques, they are not the only type of nonstructured research available to marketing researchers. Other popular methods include depth interviews, protocol analysis, various projective techniques, and physiological measurement.

**Depth Interviews**

A **depth interview** is defined as a set of probing questions posed one-on-one to a subject by a trained interviewer so as to gain an idea of what the subject thinks about something or why he or she behaves in a certain way. It is conducted in the respondent’s home or possibly at a central interviewing location such as a mall-intercept facility where several respondents can be interviewed in depth in a rela­tively short time period. The objective is to obtain unrestricted comments or opin­ions and to ask questions that will help the marketing researcher better understand the various dimensions of these opinions as well as the reasons for them. Of primary importance is the compilation of the data into a summary report so as to identify common themes. New concepts, designs, advertising, and promotional messages can arise from this method. If used properly, depth interviews can offer great insight into consumer behavior.

Depth interviews are especially useful when the researcher wants to understand decision making on the individual level, how products are used, or the emotional and sometimes private aspects of consumers’ lives.

The depth interview is typically conducted by a trained field-worker who is equipped with a list of topics or, perhaps, open-ended questions. In other words, the respondent is not provided a list of set responses and then instructed to select one from the list. Rather, the respondent is encouraged to respond in his or her own words, and the interviewer is trained in asking probing questions such as “Why is that so?” “Can you elaborate on your point?” or “Would you give me some specific reasons?” These questions are not intended to tap subconscious motivations; rather, they simply ask about conscious reasons to help the researcher form a better picture of what is going on in the respondent’s head. The interviewer may tape-­record responses or may take detailed notes. Although it is typical to do face-to­-face depth interviews, they can be done over the telephone when interviewees are widely dispersed.

Depth interviews are versatile, but they require careful planning, training, and preparation.

The summary report will look very similar to one written for a focus group study. That is, the analyst looks for common themes across several depth interview transcripts, and these are noted in the report. Verbatim responses are included in the report to support the analyst’s conclusions, and any significant differences of opin­ion that are found in the respondents’ comments are noted as well. Again, it is vital to use an analyst who is trained and experienced in interpreting the qualitative data gathered with depth interviews.

**Protocol Analysis**

Protocol analysis involves placing a person in a decision-making situation and asking him or her to verbalize everything he or she considers when making a decision. It is a special-purpose qualitative research technique that has been developed to peek into the consumer’s decision-making processes. Often a tape recorder is used to maintain a permanent record of the person's thinking. After several people have pro­vided protocols, the researcher reviews them and looks for commonalities such as evaluative criteria used, number of brands considered, types and sources of infor­mation utilized, and so forth.

Protocol studies are useful in two different purchase situations. First, they are helpful for purchases involving a long time frame in which several decision factors must be considered, such as when buying a house. By having people verbalize the steps they went through, a researcher can piece together the whole process. Second, when the decision process is very short, recall may be faulty and protocol analysis can be used to slow down the process. For example, most people do not give much thought to buying chewing gum, but if Dentine wanted to find out why people buy spearmint gum, protocol analysis might provide some important insights regarding this purchasing behavior. A variation of the protocol technique is "customer case research," and we have provided a description and examples of its revelations in Marketing Research Insight 8.6.

**Projective Techniques**

**Projective techniques** involve situations in which participants are placed in (projected into) simulated activities in the hopes that they will divulge things about themselves that they might not reveal under direct questioning. Projective techniques are appropriate in situations in which the researcher is convinced that respondents will be hesitant to relate their true opinions. Such situations may include behaviors such as tipping waitresses, socially undesirable behaviors such as smoking or alcohol consumption, questionable actions such as littering, or even illegal practices such as betting on football games.

There are five common projective techniques used by marketers: the word asso­ciation test, the sentence completion test, the picture test, the cartoon or balloon test, and role-playing activity. A discussion of each follows.

**Word Association Test** A word association test involves reading words to a respondent who then answers with the first word that comes to his or her mind. These tests may contain over 100 words and usually combine neutral words with words being tested in ads or words involving product names or services. The researcher then looks for hidden meanings or associations between responses and the words being tested on the original list. This approach is used to uncover people’s real feelings about these products or services, brand names, or ad copy. The time taken to respond, called “response latency,” and/or the respondents’ physical reactions may be measured and used to make inferences. For example, if the response latency to the word “duo” is long, it may mean that people do not have an immediate associa­tion with the word.

When a company is experiencing a customer problem that it finds very difficult to research via conventional methods, an option to try is customer case research, referred to as CCR, CCR IS defined as an “exploratory, qualitative market research method that conducts in-depth, chronological case studies of actual purchases,” and this Marketing Research Insight is based on a recent exposition of the CCR method.

**How Customer Case Research Leads to Eureka!**

CCR poses seven questions to draw out consumers’ sto­ries about their experiences. More often than not, interpreta­tion of the stories of a handful of consumers triggers a *Eureka!-type* revelation for the marketing managers involved. Here are the seven questions with the interpretations of a representative case and the *Eureka!*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **CCR Question** | **Representative Interpretation** | **Eureka!** |
| 1. ***What started you on the road to making this purchase?*** 2. ***Why did you make this purchase now?*** 3. ***What was the hardest part of this process? Was there any point where you got stuck?*** 4. ***When and how did you decide the price was acceptable?*** 5. ***Is there someone else with whom I should talk to get more of the story behind this purchase?*** 6. ***If you’ve purchased this product before, how does the story of your last purchase differ from this one?*** 7. ***At what point did you decide you trusted this organization and this person to work in your best interests?*** | When asked about taking scuba lessons, many customers said they did so to prepare for a honeymoon in the Caribbean.  Downtown Chicago workers said that they walk by the Chicago River tour boat docks daily but only thought about the trip when visitors were coming to stay with them.  It was revealed that for men, giving Jewelry to a significant other was much more difficult than selecting it.  It was found that for a summer music festival those in the pavilion seats compared the price to winter indoor concerts.  With B2B research, often the presumedly informed manager will say, “I am not the best one to ask. You should talk to \_\_\_.”  It was determined that seeing a local television channel's news vans and news personnel around town entices curious news viewers to watch that channel's news that evening.  Prospective honeymooners are clueless about scuba equipment, but they indicated that when the salesperson asked about their specific needs, they began to trust him or her. | The scuba shop realized that brides’ magazines can be an effective advertising vehicle.  The tour boat owners realized that they could target passersby with a “best thing to do when your relatives visit” theme.  Jewelry store clerks were supplied with clever, romantic, and novel ways to use to “pop” the jewelry gift on that special person.  The festival organizers were able to raise the pavilion seat prices with no objections.  The research should lead to the actual decision maker in the company for the product or service.  The local station repainted its vans with vivid colors and logo and required its visible news folks to wear easily identifiable clothing.  Sales clerks were trained to ask about and to be sensitive to the expected uses of the scuba equipment so as to build rapport with first-time customers who are potentially going to buy an expensive set of scuba equipment. |

The NameStormers™ of Largo Vista, Texas, has been very successful with its variation of word association brand-name brainstorming, and its clients include GTE, Blue Cross, Hewlett-Packard, and Frito-Lay. It brainstorms unique combinations of words and coined words that are associated with the benefits and features of the product or service being named, plus the brand names can be very distinct and memorable. This company has an online service called NameWaveTM that generates such brand ­name candidate words. Table 8.3 shows the results of the candidate brand names that were generated for a new, good-tasting, and powerful sports drink. Which one of these do you think works best in immediately communicating this drink’s benefits?

**Sentence Completion Test** With a sentence completion test, respondents are given incomplete sentences and asked to complete them in their own words. The researcher then inspects these sentences to identify themes or concepts that exist. The notion here is that respondents will reveal something about themselves in their responses. For example, suppose that Lipton Tea was interested in expanding its market to teenagers. A researcher might recruit high school students and instruct them to complete the following sentences:

Someone who drinks hot tea is .

Tea is good to drink when .

Making hot tea is .

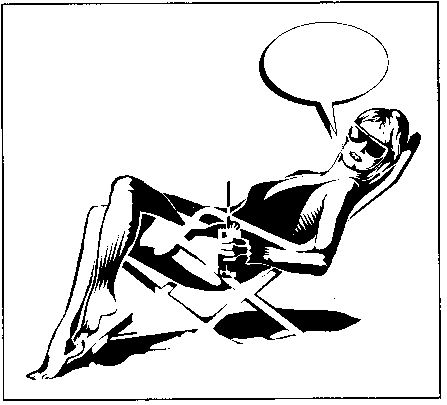
My friends think tea is .

The researcher would look at the written responses and attempt to identify central themes. For instance, the theme identified for the first sentence might be “healthy,” which would signify that tea is perceived as a drink for those who are health conscious. The theme for the second sentence might be “hot,” indicating that tea is perceived as a cold weather drink, whereas the theme for the third sentence may turn out to be “messy,” denoting the students’ reaction to using a tea bag. Finally, the last sentence theme might be found as “okay,” suggesting there are no peer pressures working to cause high school students to avoid drinking tea. Given this information, Lipton might deduce that there is room to capitalize on the hot tea market with teens.

**Picture Test**  With a **picture test**, a picture is provided to participants who are instructed to describe their reactions by writing a short story about the picture. The researcher analyzes the content of these stories to ascertain feelings, reactions, or concerns generated by the picture. Such tests are useful when testing pictures being considered for use in brochures, advertisements, and on product packaging. For example, a test advertisement might depict a man holding a baby, and the ad head­line might say, “Ford includes driver and passenger airbags as standard equipment because you love your family.” A picture test may well divulge something about the picture that is especially negative or distasteful. Perhaps unmarried male respon­dents cannot relate to the ad because they do not have children and have not experi­enced strong feelings for children. On the other hand, it may turn out that the pic­ture has a much more neutral tone than Ford’s advertising agency intended. It may be that the picture does not generate feelings of concern and safety for the family in married respondents with young children. In any case, without the use of a picture test, it would be very difficult to determine the audience’s reactions.

**Cartoon or Balloon Test** With a **balloon test**, a line drawing with an empty “balloon” above the head of one of the actors is provided to subjects who are instructed to write in the balloon what the actor is saying or thinking. The researcher then inspects these thoughts to find out how subjects feel about the situation described in the cartoon. For example, when shown a line drawing of a situation in which one of the characters is making the statement, “Here is a pair of patent leather dress shoes on sale for $39.99,” the participant is asked how the other character in the drawing would respond. Feelings and reactions of the subject are judged based on their answers. An example of a cartoon test is provided in Figure 8.2. Feel free to fill in the balloon. It may interest you to know that some undergraduate students have written quotes indicating that this sunbather is not worried about skin damage from the sun, whereas others have written quotes about how this woman would not dare recline like this in the sun unless she had a very powerful sunblock on.

**Role-Playing Activity** With **role playing**, participants are asked to pretend they are a “third person,” such as a friend or neighbor, and to describe how they would act in a certain situation or to a specific statement. By reviewing their comments, the researcher can spot latent reactions, positive or negative, conjured up by the situation. It is believed that some of the respondents’ true feelings and beliefs will be revealed by this method because they can pretend to be another individual. For example, if Ray-Ban is thinking about introducing a new “Astronaut” sunglasses model with superior ultraviolet light filtration, space-age styling, and a cost of about $200, role playing might be used to fathom consumers’ initial reactions. In this use of role playing, subjects could be asked to assume the role of a friend or close work­mate and to indicate what they would say to a third person when they learned that their friend had purchased a pair of Astronaut sunglasses. If consumers felt the Astronaut model was overpriced, this feeling would quickly surface. On the other hand, if the space-age construction and styling were consistent with these con­sumers’ lifestyles and product desires, this fact would be divulged in the role-playing comments.



**Figure 8.2 A balloon test: What is she saying about her protection from the sun's ultraviolet rays?**

As with depth interviews, all of these projective techniques require highly quali­fied professionals to interpret the results. This increases the cost per respondent compared to other survey methods. Because of this aspect, projective techniques are not used extensively in commercial marketing research, but each one has value in its special realm of application.

**Other and Emerging Qualitative Research Techniques**

The various techniques described thus far are in no way a complete list, for a num­ber of other techniques are used by enthnographers, anthrophologists, psycholo­gists, and sociologists to study human behavior. Plus, there are promising analytical techniques for interpreting the marketing strategy implications of qualitative data. However, each new-to-marketing-research qualitative research technique brings with it a need to understand the theoretical and practical aspects of that technique in order to apply it properly, so it is best to hire a specialist with expertise in the par­ticular qualitative research technique. Indeed, companies that specialize in these new techniques report that clients are cautious about them at first. At the same time, qualitative techniques are fast and relatively inexpensive, and companies such as Bissell, which changed the name of its cleaner unit from the Steam Gun to Steam N’ Clean after qualitative research found that children would want to use a Steam Gun to threaten their siblings, have found qualitative research to be very satisfactory when funds are low and time is short.

**Physiological Measurement**

**Physiological measurement** involves monitoring a respondent’s involuntary responses to marketing stimuli via the use of electrodes and other equipment. Most people who are monitored find the situation strange and may experience uneasiness during the monitoring. Because of this factor and the necessary hardware, this tech­nique is rarely used in marketing research.

We briefly describe two physiological measures to round out this chapter on qualitative research: the pupilometer and the galvanometer. The pupilometer is a device that attaches to a person’s head and determines interest and attention by measuring the amount of dilation in the pupil of the eye. It actually photographs the movement of a person’s iris when he or she views different pictures. Theoretically, a person’s iris enlarges more with an interesting image than when an uninteresting one is viewed. Eye-tracking has a new application in the Internet marketing arena. For example, AT&T has begun to use eye-tracking coupled with depth interviewing to understand how AT&T customers interact with its customer service Web site.

The galvanometer is a device that determines excitement levels by measuring the electrical activity in the respondent's skin. It requires electrodes or sensing pads to be taped to a person’s body in order to monitor this activity. When a person encounters an interesting stimulus, the electrical impulses in the body become excited. Physiological measures are useful under special circumstances, such as testing sexually oriented stimuli where many people are embarrassed or may not tell the truth, and they require special skills to be administered correctly. There are two disadvan­tages to using physiological measurement techniques. First, the techniques are unnatural and subjects may become nervous and emit false readings. Second, even though we know that the respondent reacted to the stimulus, we do not know if the response was positive or negative.