

FAQ on Design Research

To answer some questions that regularly come up around design research, we have created this FAQ. It explains the background and benefits of the approach, and addresses some of the common confusions around this relatively new approach to service innovation.

1. **What is design research?**
2. **How is design research different from qualitative market research?**
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1. **What is design research?**

Research into people's behaviours and motives that is integrated in the design and development of new products, services and systems. The integration of 'understanding' through research with 'creation' through design accelerates innovation and is particularly valuable when a company wants to explore the potential of new areas with many unknowns.

2. **How is design research different from qualitative marketing research?**

Traditional qualitative marketing research is often not very well integrated in design and development processes. It is mostly used to test people's response to already designed products or services than to explore an entire new area. It often focuses more on opinions (like in focus groups) than observing actual behaviour as design research does. Both may use ethnography as a method, but with different results.

3. **How will the result of this project be different from other qualitative consumer research?**

Design research aims to create opportunities that make a meaningful, valuable difference in the lives of the participants and many other people. To achieve this we need to step into the shoes the participants for a while and analyse how, from their perspective your company could add value. Results from qualitative consumer research normally do not bring the customer and company perspective together in opportunities. Qualitative consumer research often only gives the perspective of the consumer, or just their opinion on new products.

4. Why do we take this design research approach?

Because we want to innovate together with customers rather than just for them. We want to integrate the people who will use future products and services in the creation of these products and services. Doing so raises the chance that innovations that are introduced are successful considerably. After all, through the design research we already will have a good idea about how these products and services will fit in people's lives and why.

5. Why is the scope we are taking so broad?

At the start of a design research, we do not know yet where the participants will take us. If we would, the opportunities that must eventually arise from the fieldwork would hardly be new or innovative. To allow participants to tell us unexpected stories from their everyday lives, we should work with a broad topic that considers all kinds of practices of participants relevant, as long as the participant can fit it within the scope.

6. How are the participants recruited?

First a participant profile is agreed, listing the requirements for each participant (eg. between 25 and 40 years old, avid user of technology and lives in London) and also the variables we want to have a spread on (eg. male/female, profession, interests). We then either assign a specialised recruitment agency, or we initiate a 'snowball'. Snowball recruitment involves asking around for people that fit the profile. We do not interview people we already know well, but we do include friends of friends for instance. Often it helps to have a mutual acquaintance as this instills trust with the participant and makes them more open to deeply engage in the interview. For some project we include a mix of snowballing through personal contacts and online forums, as well as asking a specialised recruitment agency for additional candidates.

7. Why do we work with specific profiles of participants, shouldn't participants be representative?

For most research projects we need participants with a special interest in a topic area. In this type of research we want to learn about the potential of a certain practice in their daily lives because we are designing a new service, system or product for the future. Talking to people who already partly live in that future, because of their existing routines and behaviour is then beneficial. Eg. someone who orders almost everything online could tell us about the future of shopping. While talking to the average user of online shopping would not bring forward specific examples of possible consequences of the growth of online shopping.

8. Why are the questions during the interview so open-ended?

As design researchers we must remain open to unexpected answers, and avoid asking for answers we already know. It helps if participants can take questions in unexpected directions and tell us stories we had not anticipated. These are the moments we might enter unknown terrain that we were unaware of. This is often fertile ground for innovation opportunities that competitors have not yet spotted either. The focus during the fieldwork is on storytelling rather than answering a longlist of specific questions. We always try to get a number of detailed stories that we can communicate in an engaging, empathic way to the teams that are involved in creating innovative products, services or systems. The questions in the interview guide are prompts to elicit stories from our participants. We only need them when the participants need to be nudged to tell their stories.

9. What are the probes you use during the fieldwork?

They are tangible artefacts, like a map or labels, that we often use at the start of an interview to gain an overview of some relevant aspect of the participant's life. They help to map certain activities, objects or devices in the home, for instance. This allows the design researcher to gain a quick overview of all the possible stories that a participant could tell, without going into them yet. That is helpful to decide which stories will be told and explored in-depth later in the interview. For some research projects we prepare online diaries where the participants reported about their experiences with specific topics, and they also get a set of printed cards with questions and assignments, to keep them motivated and curious during the test period.

10. Why are stories so important, shouldn't we focus on facts?

We want to capture the behaviours of participants and the motives they have for their behaviours. We want to do this as systematic and concise as possible. Stories have proved to be a very good format for this: for each behaviour and underlying motive we tell one story, in the words and from the first person perspective of the participant. Facts may support this but they can not replace the richness of stories. If we truly want to understand and empathise with people and their lives, we cannot end up with a list of facts, can we?

11. Why is using video to communicate the participants' stories so important?

Short video clips are a great way to communicate personal stories of participants, as the client team can hear the stories in the most direct way. The video clips not only communicate the message, but also the personality of the participant and the context in which they are using the site. The video clips are taken at specific parts in the interview, at moments where the participants had collected their thoughts on certain aspects, and were ready to summarize them in a concise way. By asking participants to take us through their routines, we often ask them to 're-enact' their use of it. People are generally very well capable to re-enact their own behaviours and routines in a natural way. They do not have to pretend to be someone else, they are just themselves. Re-enactment is a show and tell that allows the design researcher to see the untold. That often adds a lot of information because participants are seldom aware of everything they do. If we can observe their behaviour we can question it, and reflect on the behaviour with the participant him or herself.

12. How can we ever draw valid conclusions from a small number of participants?

Design research aims to create an overview of existing behaviour around a certain topic. Its goal is not to quantify behaviour in percentages or even majority or minority behaviour. Once you start to interview people on their behaviour in relation to a certain topic, pretty soon stories will start to repeat. When you find almost no new kind of stories anymore you know that you have pretty well covered the existing behaviour. That is enough to draw conclusions on patterns and routines in people's behaviours. To find out how often a specific behaviour occurs, a follow-up quantitative research is needed. This is often done once a businessplan needs to be made.

13. Who does what during the interviews? Who can be part of them?

Mostly, one or two design researchers attend each interview of at least 2.5 hours each. These take place at participants' homes, where they work or other places where they would do the activities we are interested in, eg. we may be with them during their daily commute. Often a client representative may also take part, as an observer or with a more active role too if they like, such as asking questions, taking photos and making notes.

14. Where do the insights and recommendations in design research come from?

Insights summarise the understanding of a specific pattern in people's behaviour and explain why this behaviour occurs by relating it to people's motives. To achieve strong insights and recommendations, a rigorous and structured analysis of participants' behaviour, motivations and preferences needs to be applied, matching the participant's perspectives to the professional perspectives of the client company.

15. Who is STBY?

STBY is one of the leading pioneers in the field of design research. Our creative research projects connect organisations with the lives and experiences of their customers. This helps our clients to innovate their service offering, making it more valuable for both their customers and their business. We have offices in London and Amsterdam, but often work around the globe through the REACH Network for Global Design Research we initiated in 2008. For more details see www.stby.eu and www.globaldesignresearch.com