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••• qualitative research

Remember what's important

Despite all the new tools, stick to the
fundamentals of good qualitative

| By Kirsty Afshar Bennett



snapshot

Kirsty Afshar Bennett
argues for the value
of effective listening
and careful attention
to language to deliver
qual insights.

Excitement about the burgeoning array of new, technologically enabled methodologies for qualitative research is reaching fever pitch. A quick look at industry articles, conferences and qualitative awards spotlights the promise of a renewed direction, a “brave new world,” for those of us engaged in getting into consumers’ hearts and minds on behalf of the brands we serve.

These are thrilling times for sure. We now have the ability to get up-close and personal into the lives and thoughts of targets. We can use video and interactive components, social media engagement and analyses, etc., to paint vivid pictures of what their lives are like – providing insight into opportunities and challenges for brands to mine. That said, I believe a word of caution is required here. Why? Because the fundamentals of exploring the human psyche and the keys to influence it – regardless of whether that takes place in a traditional focus group or digitized ethnography/interactive smartphone app – remain the same.

That “same” is that the real success of any project depends upon the skills and expertise of the researcher/moderator to keenly understand the core fundamentals of qualitative research as well as how to navigate them to uncover what’s really going on (not just what the consumer presents/tells us is going on). Ultimately, our job is to frame the true problem and identify inspiring solutions and exciting opportunities.

I fear that too little attention is paid to really understanding these fundamentals and identifying methodologies to address them. And I also fear that as an industry we do a very poor job of educating our clients on them.

So, let’s not be so blinded by the shiny new things that we forget to value what’s most important. Because if we are blinded by “shiny and new” we won’t see the real insights we set out to seek.

It’s time for the qualitative industry to get back to basics and focus on honing the fundamentals of qualitative inquiry. So in this piece I’ll focus on the fundamentals.



www.quirks.com/articles/2018/20180809.aspx

Inconsistent and fickle

"There's nowt so queer as folk!" is a Yorkshire expression (from where I grew up in the U.K.). In translation: People are strange! When you study them, they say things they don't really mean; they act in ways that contradict stated beliefs; they can be inconsistent and fickle in some ways and stubborn in others. We are all these people. And "people" are not particularly good as research subjects.

As people, we'll tell others what we think they want to hear or what we believe the appropriate response should be and we struggle to articulate issues we have never been asked to contemplate before. We become emboldened when we feel supported and entrench when we feel challenged or attacked. We have been schooled by marketing conventions and can fall subject to cognitive dissonance – all of which can automate our responses. Talking to us can be frustrating and complex, a true challenge for those searching for simplistic answers.

A skilled qualitative expert/moderator must have the honed instinct and skills to identify such issues and the expertise and tools to break them down and get beyond them; to map out true core insights that inform a real understanding of the current mental architecture.

Different meanings

Almost every category you can imagine has everyday language that is used by consumers and marketers alike but which communicates broad/different or undefined meanings. Let's take cold remedies for example. "Relief" is commonly used as the desired benefit or product claim. But does the individual mean "relief – elimination/absence of cold symptoms" or are they really expecting "relief – lessening of intensity/bother"? "24-hour remedy" might imply "dosage – take one every 24 hours" or "its effect lasts a full 24 hours" – obviously two different ideas. Non-category-specific examples include: When someone says "tired" are they meaning "tired – sleepy" or "tired – fatigued"? When a Web site is "easy" is it "easy – not difficult/hard" or "easy – quick/no hassle"? Likewise, if something is "simple" is it "not hard" or "quick"? Could be both but might just be one versus the other.

Interpreting the specific meaning

in any particular situation is not an academic semantic exercise. It is crucially important, because it informs our understanding of the situation and helps us consult ourselves – and importantly our clients – in their optimal use of language.

Uncover what's at the core

The mind doesn't know what the brain doesn't want it to know. Psychological defense mechanisms often inhibit individuals from acknowledging and articulating innermost thoughts and feelings. But this doesn't mean they aren't there. They are. They're deep, entrenched and protected. Skilled techniques are required to help uncover what's at the core of people and break through denial. For example, individuals may find it easier to associate and define such feelings if they can associate them to some other individual (think jealousy, resentment, embarrassment, etc.).

Likewise consumers are ill-equipped to imagine what could be versus what is. They can only assess a new idea within the context of their current mental architecture. But, oftentimes, the real brand opportunities might lie in challenging the status quo or reframing the landscape and thus exploring future-oriented solutions. Skilled researchers need to help individuals conceive of and imagine new scenarios.

We want an absolute

Why do qualitative practitioners use "scoring" of ideas or concepts but then tell clients not to pay attention to them? Firstly, let's address why even when those behind the glass are told not to pay attention to them, they do. Because as human beings we want an absolute. (This is why, in some cases, quantitative research is wrongly dominating but that's for another article.) Our job in qual is to help clients understand the role of scores and scoring, their limitations and how to optimally score. So here it is:

The role of scores/scoring. Scoring helps ensure that individual participants actively engage in personal contemplation. It also acts as a barometer for a moderator to feel the climate in the room and direct probes appropriately – providing an efficient way to identify issues. And finally, scoring can provide a quick confirmation of go/no-go areas if they correlate (or not) with the team's

strategic thinking, allowing an efficient focus on key topics and stimuli.


Limitations of scoring. It has to be understood that a single word or image or secondary idea can cause an individual to score something low or high. Perhaps even more significantly, an individual's state of mind and their scoring parameters typically change throughout a session as they become more comfortable or familiar with an idea or topic. This is because their understanding changes and they "play" at the research process; their context changes. In addition, participants in a study typically have different scoring parameters based upon their individual personalities and a skilled moderator gets to know these personalities quickly.

Finally, number scores such as 1-10 or 1-5 can be extremely vague and don't get to the heart of whether something is exciting, credible, motivating, interesting, compelling. Even when these are explicitly defined, participants will struggle to score according to the definition (particularly important in claims evaluation) and to disconnect a score from the idea vs. the product (key for any creative exploration).

As such, it is crucially important that all associated with a research study firmly understand the role of scores and teach clients what they mean in the context of the overall exploratory.

Optimally using scoring. What I do is to develop qualitative scoring (not numbers) such as bad, good, wow. This helps me, and the client, dimensionalize scoring with added layers to discern if an idea is "expected" or "totally new" so as to really understand what's going on inside the target's head.

Not be blinded by the new

In this new Wild West of technologically enabled qualitative, please let's not be so blinded by the new and shiny methodologies that we forget the fundamentals. All of us, clients and research companies alike, must keep the focus on the consumers who are at the heart of our process and remember that the best methods are the ones that get us closest to the insights we're after. 

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