



Demise of qualitative?

David Fanning on the current health of gathering in-depth understanding of human behaviour

Qualitative research seems to be under pressure of late. It started in earnest around the time the first cracks in popularity were appearing in the New Labour government's 'spin' culture in the UK; with focus groups seen as the handlers' key tool. It has continued apace to the extent that it is rare to find a marketing conference today without some consultant, planner or 'juicer' seeking to flog new or 'radical' thinking, while at the same time pouring scorn on 'traditional' qualitative research. But is this criticism fair?

Criticism of qualitative research seems to occur from a wide variety of angles, but essentially there are two broad strands which are worth considering:

1. It is a crude and one dimensional tool: the use of focus groups in viewing facilities with respondents cast as 'lab rats' sitting in 'judgment' of embryonic creative ideas has heightened a perception of the discipline as highly restrictive.
2. It has become a staid technique and in a communications sphere which has embraced many new ideas and innovations, it has begun to appear passé.

To be honest, there is more than a grain of truth in the first point, with ample evidence to suggest that many focus group projects resemble 'labs' where creativity is stifled as consumers crudely sit in judgment over ideas. The trend towards using viewing theatres accentuated this perception. There is nothing inherently wrong with viewing facilities and most researchers would readily admit that they are a great way to involve clients and advertising agencies in the research process. The difficulty is that there can often be a tendency to hold the 'debrief' immediately after the groups, typically at 10.30pm, when there has been no room for analysis or consideration of the findings.

Focus group (or any research) projects can broadly be divided into two phases: data collection, where the opinions and motivations of consumers are listened to and observed, and the analysis phase, where the data is carefully sifted through and interpreted.

Any experienced qualitative researcher will know that the analysis phase is absolutely critical in the overall process. This is where the contradictions and inconsistencies that respondents routinely utter in focus groups can be fully teased out and explored. The consistent refrain of the last decade is for research to uncover insights, yet it is very rare to hear a respondent in a focus group utter an insight;



'The use of accompanied shopping trips has greatly added to understanding consumers' – David Fanning

they simply don't always think things through in a logical and linear manner. It is only through reflection and careful analysis of what people say and how they say it, that insights are revealed.

The second criticism is that qualitative research has become staid: that it is essentially eight people talking with a moderator in a viewing facility. But rather than being stagnant, qualitative research is a vibrant methodology that has developed and evolved hugely over the last decade. Ethnography is now used extensively in qualitative studies and has helped to bring us closer to people's everyday lives and experiences. Ideas such as going for a night out with a group of 22-year-olds to see where they go, see how they interact, to understand the cultural nuances and codes of youths can be invaluable.

The use of accompanied shopping trips or shopper safaris to understand how people go about their shopping, what factors come into play when choosing brands and the role that the in-store environment (offers, positioning, layout, etc) in influencing decisions is now widespread, and has added greatly to our understanding of consumers. The burgeoning use of Eye Tracking is also likely to enhance our knowledge here.

Pre-group exercises that enhance and deepen the investigation have become far more prominent in the design of qualitative projects. Tasks can vary from the completion of a questionnaire about shopping behaviour, to the compilation of a video diary about their social habits, to developing a blog charting their experience of buying a car.

Co-creation, which brings researchers, consumers and client stakeholders together in direct contact, has also emerged as a further strand within the broad field of qualitative research. While there has been some understandable wariness cast in UK research circles at the almost evangelical tone of some co-creation advocates, it has contributed significantly in the area of new product development in particular.

Online discussion groups are increasingly being used and though Ireland has been slower to fully utilise the potential of this methodology due to the comparatively poor broadband access, it is certain to account for a growing proportion of qualitative projects in the coming years. So rather than being stagnant, qualitative research is very much enjoying a period of growth and re-birth adapting as it does so to new social dynamics.

But to remain dynamic, any discipline must be critically analysed on an ongoing basis and qualitative research should be no different. In a world becoming ever more complex, the ability of qualitative research that is carefully and rigorously analysed, to make sense of the contradictions and irrationality of human behaviour, remains unique.

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