

Qualitative Market Research

If you're a foreign aid health worker, it's handy to know that 63% of people in a certain region don't boil their water. But if you want to change this behavior, you also need to know *why* they don't boil their water. Do they understand that unboiled water leads to sickness? Do they have enough fuel to boil water? Does superstition or tradition go against boiling water? If you keep talking about cholera but the problem is a lack of firewood, you won't get too far.

Qualitative research helps you understand what underlies public opinion and behavior. Once you know how your target audience thinks, feels, and behaves—and why—you can better develop messages that are effective in creating the change you want. Before doing qualitative research, answer the following:

- What are your research goals?
- What do you want to learn?
- What questions will you ask?
- Who's your target audience? (Who will you talk to?)
- What research methodology will you use—focus groups, one-on-one interviews, a combination?

In-Depth Interviews

The two most common forms of qualitative research are focus groups and one-on-one interviews. One-on-one interviews provide the deepest insights about how people think. Imagine being asked to give your opinion on the war in Iraq. A poll asks you to choose between a few preset responses (support/do not support). A focus group gives you more freedom—you can state your opinion and offer brief rationale. However, you'll also hear the opinion of several others in the room, which might influence your responses, or at least, reduce your chance to expand on your thoughts. In a one-on-one interview, you can volunteer detailed (and unsolicited) information that gives deeper insight into how you think and feel. You might mention that your brother, a Vietnam vet, never received adequate medical care after being injured, a fact that greatly contributed to your negative view of military leadership.

Interviews allow a detailed, in-depth, and honest exploration of a topic, and there's no social pressure to conform to group dynamics. On the down-side, interviews can be time consuming and responses can be difficult to interpret. They also trade depth for breadth. Research done with so few respondents makes it hard to know whether the findings can be extended to the general population.

In-depth interviews typically last between 30 and 90 minutes. Most are one-on-one discussions, but interviews can also be performed in twos or threes. Ideally, a professional interviewer leads the discussion. The interviewer should be trained in building rapport with the interviewee, appearing unbiased, and uncovering hidden issues.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are loosely structured interactive group discussions led by a trained moderator who encourages the free flow of ideas. Many market research firms run large discussions with 10 or more participants, however, we recommend limiting groups to 6 or 8 participants when possible. Smaller groups give everyone a chance to participate without the discussion becoming unwieldy.



“Most pollsters know what voters think, but too few understand how voters feel. Traditional telephone polling is simply not enough.”

—Frank Luntz, Focus Group Research in American Politics

Focus groups help you understand how people interact around an issue. And while participants may not be as honest in a focus group as in one-on-one interviews, the group dynamics can really take the discussion in new directions, helping you cover the issue thoroughly. Focus groups usually last between 90 and 120 minutes. They should ideally be held at a focus group facility where you can sit behind a one-way mirror and watch and listen. Focus groups are usually recorded on video.

Five Deadly Focus Group Mistakes

Mixing apples and oranges (focus group composition). The composition of participants makes or breaks a focus group. Generally speaking, people in focus groups should feel comfortable discussing the issue at hand with the others in the group. Imagine having a frank conversation about sex with a group of at-risk teenagers. Now imagine that same conversation, but with the parents sitting in the back of the room. Group composition absolutely affects what people say.

As a general rule, put people with similar beliefs and/or demographics in the same focus group. Separate the moveable middle from opponents. Jerry Springer might boost ratings by inviting Klan members to share their viewpoints with civil rights activists, but you'll need new furniture if you follow suit. If you need to know what a certain sub-segment (such as African Americans) thinks, run an additional group made up of African Americans. Ensure the moderator also reflects the group demographics. On rare occasions, you may want to put dissimilar people together to test general public reactions and/or group interactions. In all cases, the moderator should fit seamlessly into the group.

Assuming bigger is better (focus group size). A group of more than eight people gets unwieldy. In order to control large groups, the moderator has to shorten response time and forego follow-up questions—which ends up defeating much of the purpose of having a focus group in the first place.

Leading the witness (getting honest responses). Let's go back to your opinions on the war in Iraq. Imagine you're a focus group participant and the moderator is wearing a tie-dye T-shirt with a peace symbol. Or conversely, imagine the moderator is a decorated five-star general. You might be worried about offending the moderator, or you might vow that you're not going to let the moderator intimidate you, but either way, you've just changed the dynamics of the conversation.

The composition of participants makes or breaks a focus group.



A single dominant voice can take over the discussion and quickly spoil your focus group.

People will speak more freely and honestly when the facilitator appears unbiased. A good moderator will seem entirely neutral and won't try to influence the discussion in any way. Ideally, focus group participants shouldn't be able to guess where the moderator stands on an issue. The minute the moderator appears to take sides, he or she compromises the integrity of the group.

Not inadvertently leading the focus group participants also means not making any assumptions. If the moderator doesn't understand what a participant is saying, he or she will ask them to restate their response. A good moderator sticks to neutral, clarifying questions. "You're shaking your head. What're you thinking?" is a fine question. "You're shaking your head. Are you thinking this is the dumbest thing you've every heard?" is not.

Rotten apples (dealing with dominant participants). A single dominant voice can take over the discussion and quickly spoil your focus group. A good moderator closely controls the group dynamic, keeping everyone involved using special techniques, such as asking for responses from all participants in rotating order. To avoid "group think" or the influence of a dominant voice, a moderator may also ask people to first write down and then discuss their responses.

No, a robot couldn't do this (using professionals). The outcome of a focus group reflects the quality of the moderator. Good focus groups require professionals. The moderator must cover the questions and topic at hand while making the group feel comfortable. He or she is creative and analytical, and employs exceptional listening skills. Moreover, a good moderator can handle and diffuse difficult personalities.

It also takes expertise to compile and analyze focus group results. Focus group comments can be tough to decipher. Experienced researchers examine more than what's said. They also interpret facial expressions, body language, and group dynamics. Ideally, they should be behavioral scientists or experts in sociology.

Elicitation Techniques

Most focus groups and interviews rely on the good old, proven method of asking participants to respond to, and discuss, various questions. However, there are various techniques for taking the discussion deeper:

- **Laddering** starts with broad, "safe and easy" questions before narrowing in on internal attitudes and feelings.
- **Hidden issue questioning** concentrates on deeply felt personal concerns and pet peeves.
- **Metaphor elicitation** asks participants to use pictures, images, and symbols as metaphors to describe how they feel about an issue or subject.
- **Projective techniques** use unstructured prompts, encouraging participants to project their underlying beliefs, attitudes, or feelings onto an ambiguous situation. Examples include word associations, sentence completion, and even story completion (where respondents provide the ending to a half-told story).
- **Third-person technique** uses visual or verbal clues to describe a hypothetical person's situation, then asks participants to guess the attitudes and/or feelings of that person. Researchers believe that when participants can talk in the third person, they're less likely to feel pressured into giving standard, or politically correct, responses.
- **Role-playing** asks participants to play out a hypothetical situation or character with the moderator.

A Note about Online Research

Many research firms are experimenting with virtual focus groups. This is when a research firm conducts an online discussion with participants responding to images, stories, or data from their computer off-site.

Virtual focus groups let you talk to large, geographically diverse groups without the cost and logistical headaches of in-person groups. They come with limitations, of course. Virtual focus groups that require that you recruit only computer-savvy participants. They should be shorter than in-person groups since it can be harder to keep the focus of virtual participants. There is generally less group interaction and written responses may be shorter and less nuanced than verbal responses. And, online moderators often find virtual groups more difficult to control since they can't take cues from participants' body language or tone of voice. This fact also inhibits the person analyzing the data.

On the other hand, virtual focus groups allow participants to speak more freely, so they tend to give richer, more honest responses than they would in an ordinary, in-person focus group.

Limitations of Qualitative Research

Two things highly impact qualitative research: The team doing the research and the participants in the focus groups or interviews. Two moderators can elicit very different reactions from the same set of focus group participants. Alternatively, a few strong participants can sway the outcome of a focus group one way or another. Qualitative research provides great insights into how people think, but they're not always an accurate reflection of the views of the larger population.



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