



A wasted opportunity

Suppose they held a research event and nobody came? Actually, that might not be too surprising, given some people's enthusiasm for research. But, suppose they held a research event, and paid a lot of money for it, and nobody came? That seems a bit surprising to me.

Recently, a series of in-depth interviews (IDIs) was held with professionals to help develop a new product concept. This was not unusual, as IDIs are frequently the method of choice for qualitative interviews among professionals who will be exposed to brand stimuli individually. What was surprising was that, for a number of the interviews, no client attended. It was only the qualitative interviewer and the respondent - no one else.

This phenomenon has occurred a number of times, and it continues to startle. It's a missed opportunity, a failure to take advantage of something with real value.

There are at least three types of information which can be gathered

in a typical qualitative research study. The first is the information gathered concerning the topic at hand - addressing the marketing research objectives. The second is information around the topic gathered because one has the ability to interact with the respondents. The third is the information exchanged in the back room - whether it be an electronic chat room or the little dark rooms with which most marketers are familiar.

While qualitative research is often (mis)used to "pick a winner," it can also serve to "pick a loser" and eliminate options when there are too many to be taken into quantitative research. Another use is to learn which options are universally loved or hated, giving additional insight into how to proceed.

While those types of information are helpful, it is in uncovering the "whys" that the true power of qualitative research comes forth. Why can this be eliminated? Why is this option universally loved/hated? What if it were

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changed this way or that, would it still be loved/hated? Why?

A large part of this "why-ness" comes not only from having a skilled moderator asking the questions, but from having brains in the back room feeding in to the discussion. Even if the moderator gets no input during a given interview, every good moderator I have worked with checks in with those observing, and hones the questioning to make the information gathered more useful to the client.

Finally, the back room experience provides a wonderful and increasingly rare opportunity for research users to interact. Agencies (consulting agencies and advertising agencies) get to help with questioning and get valuable time to interact with their clients. Assistant brand people get to learn from

and interact with more senior brand people. Given the kinds of schedules most marketing professionals have, this time is truly time well spent.

Unless you don't spend it.

Obviously, it is possible to conduct qualitative that no one attends (except the moderator and respondents, of course). One still obtains all of the value of the first type of

information (Was the concept well-received? Poorly received?), and half or more of the value of the second (you get the answers to some of the whys, at least the ones thought of prior or that the moderator thinks of), but none of the value of the third (the backroom interaction). The worry is that such qualitative research will become the norm, as busy people become

accustomed to setting it up and going ahead with other business while waiting for "results" to come back.

At times, given busy schedules and heavy workloads, it is probably inevitable that qualitative will occur with nobody observing in the back room. But if that situation can be avoided, it should be. It's a wasted opportunity for everyone. | Q