



qualitative reflections

Twelve Steps to Better Research

How to bring rigor to the “soft” world of qualitative research.

By Naomi R. Henderson

Qualitative research, by its very nature, is soft and flexible. It centers on perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes (POBAs). You can’t ask a pet owner what percent of their love is reserved for their children and what percent is given to the pet. Love is not divisible in the qualitative world. However, with qualitative research techniques, you can ask them to tell you how they love their pet and what the pet does to merit that love.

But just because the world of qualitative research is “soft” doesn’t mean it’s lacking in rigor. Think of other soft items like parachutes, airbags, and life preservers, which not only hold up well under stress but can save lives as well. The rigor that goes into making these items is remarkable, and that same rigor can be brought to the “soft world” of qualitative research.

The 12-Step Program

For the last 30 years, I have managed to fit my research rigor into the following 12-step process:

1. Client makes a request for qualitative research
2. RIVA Market Research determines project purpose
3. RIVA writes a proposal that includes a methodology, timeline, and costs
4. Client reviews proposal and signs off on costs, timeline, and research plan
5. Project logistics are determined: where, when, who, how many
6. Field facilities are located and booked
7. Screener is developed and client signs off
8. Moderator’s guide is developed and approved
9. Groups/IDIs are conducted
10. Tapes are transcribed/analysis begins
11. Report is written
12. Presentation of findings is made to client, along with final billing

Over time, a number of these steps have changed in character and emphasis. Not every client wants an in-person presentation of findings and sometimes a client team handles the fieldwork, only hiring the moderator for the last five steps. This article will address four of the steps from the list that I feel have had the greatest changes in the last 20 years.

Client requests. In the ‘80s and ‘90s, clients would make a request over the phone and seldom sent anything in writing to a qualitative consultant. While that practice still goes on in some industries, these days many researchers often get a document entitled something like “Market Research Brief” that outlines the study purpose, a skeleton research plan, and the framework in which the project occurs along the product or service continuum. As a researcher who likes a little rigor, I love getting one of those documents. I ask better questions on the conference calls and help my client better define the research parameters to get them closer to their objectives. I’ve also found that, when clients are clearer at the research design stage, there are fewer misunderstandings with research suppliers and the projects tending to unfold along a logical path.

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Client rigor at the front end makes the project more successful and my job a lot more satisfying.

Research costs for qualitative projects. Like the cost of bread, milk, gasoline, and healthcare, prices for qualitative research have risen steadily over the years. The “per group” moderator’s fee, the cost of mirrored rooms, expenses for catering food, the cost of finding the “right” respondent, the cost of travel, and respondent stipends have all risen.

In some cases the costs are justified, like the need to pay more dollars for stipends for an evening session with individuals who give up their personal time to help provide opinions in 2005 vs. 1995. But sometimes it feels like other costs are created on whim and whatever individuals feel the market will bear.

One example comes to mind—the price tag of \$100-\$200 for a stationary video of a focus group where a staff member simply turns on a switch and tapes a two-hour session on a VHS tape that costs less than \$5.

Five minutes of staff time, plus the cost of the video, doesn’t factor out to a charge of \$100-\$200 per group in my mind. If

this cost was applied to 200 focus groups over the course of a year, it would equal \$20,000-\$40,000. More than enough to pay for the camera, the wiring, and the staff person who pushes the button 10 times over.

Some facilities, to their credit, make this a “value added” feature and say, “A video of your group, using our stationary camera, is free.” Those firms have worked stationary video costs into a fair “room rental charge” since the camera is built into the wall in the pair of rooms that serve as the research venue for a focus group. Those facilities don’t charge extra for the video or for the easels that are used. Everyone likes to hear about getting something “free,” and value added is the new name of the game in research these days.

Qualitative researchers seldom talk with each other about fees, and they surely aren’t talking about their billable rates to a possible competitor. I would like to see a focus group project where the respondents were all directors of market research for a variety of companies and organizations. The first client type would be those whose companies had products to sell. Another client type would be ones who market services. A third client type would be those who deal with social issues. The last groups would be composed of clients who use qualitative research to check on elements related to advertising. In fact, keeping to good research design, I would like two groups of each client “type” making a nice, neat eight-group project so I could compare across similar groups and between different types of clients.

If I were in the back room for each of these distinct groups of clients, I would want the moderator to ask questions like these:

- What is the range of prices clients are quoted in proposals for the same study when they ask for multiple bids?
- Are the quotes fairly similar with only a couple of hundred dollars making them different or is the gap between cost estimates 30%, 40%, or 50% different?
- What line items drive the variations in prices?
- If price is taken out of the decision, what is the next most important factor clients consider when choosing among several equally qualified research suppliers?
- Do you prefer a flat rate charge per group or line item breakdowns?

Now that would be an interesting focus group study! My primary purpose in wanting data like that from clients would be to get their perspective on a range of consultant pricing options that they receive because the “client” is the only one that sees that range. Individual qualitative consultants don’t have that particular view and, in truth, they shouldn’t—I’m sure the Federal Trade Commission would look askance at a group of independent consultants working on “fixing prices.”

I do think that as an industry, however, we might borrow a page from healthcare and set some prices for services that are a bit more uniform than the ones we have now. For example, the costs that labs charge for a standard blood test for cholesterol are fairly uniform. What if there was a “rate sheet” for room rentals at facilities with sliding scales based on what’s in the room (e.g., display rails, computer jacks, etc.). Such a “rate card” would go a long way to weeding out firms that have costs that are out of line with good business practices, and consultants wouldn’t be paying the same prices for a “Spartan” setting in one location and a “luxury” setting in another.

Locating and booking field facilities. Twenty years ago, a “nice” facility was one with a good mirror, decent soundproofing, good audiotaping, decent recruiting with no “repeaters,” and an interesting deli tray for respondents along with a fair stipend for participants. Now those features are the baseline platform for the facility world and many field houses have stepped up to a level of excellence, including items like remote viewing for clients in another city; state-of-the-art computer hookups for participants to interact on the Internet and for clients to access data via laptops; chefs and stellar catering services; ancillary services like the making of DVDs rather than videos and time-stamping VHS tapes; unusual room configurations for a variety of qualitative methodologies; trained staff; appropriate recruiting techniques and re-screening procedures; and serving as “team partners” with qualitative researchers to bring clients a higher level of excellence.

So when a qualitative researcher hires a facility that drops the ball on baseline factors like recruiting, re-screening, and forgetting to turn the tapes on for a focus group, the egregious errors blare like fire truck sirens going to a four-alarm fire. The focus group facility bar has been raised and woe to the ones that can’t jump that high.

Reports for clients. Twenty years ago, clients wanted full reports with quotes and deep analysis to help understand respondents’ thinking. Now the trend seems to be fewer full reports and more “executive Summary” or “topline” reports. These types of reports distill the essence of the qualitative experience and target the key insights that relate to the study objectives. Along that dimension, the PowerPoint report is gaining in popularity, and this “crisp” bullet style format hits all the high notes needed for decision making.

While my 12-step chart still works like it did 20 years ago, what is different is where the emphasis is placed. I still go through all 12 stages and I’ve got the wealth of experience of many successful projects behind me to be able to hold the flag for “research rigor” so that my clients have every chance for the best possible research for decision making. ●

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