RESEARCH ● *The word is adaptability*

Right ways to conduct qualitative research

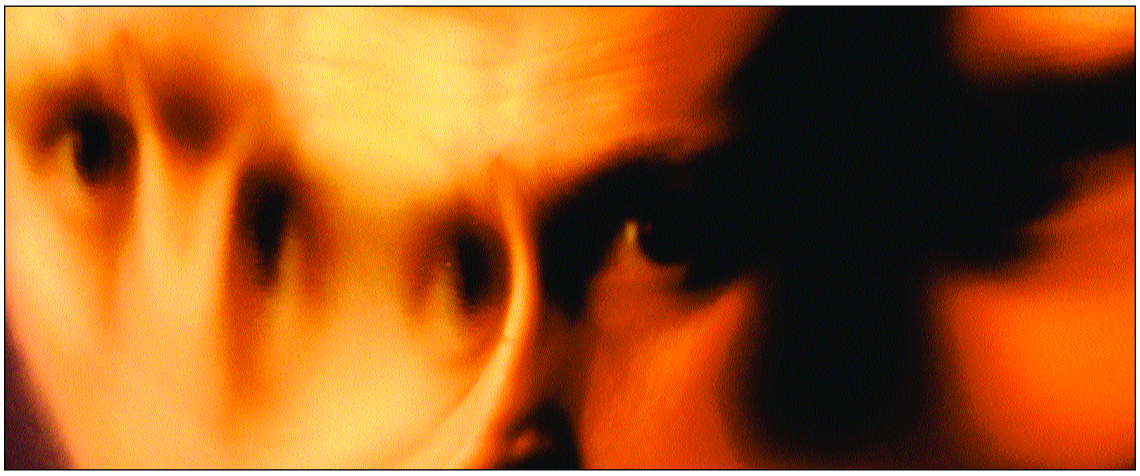
The industry's best practices point the way

By NAOMI R. HENDERSON

In a number of professions there's a "right" way to do the work of that industry. For instance, there's only one right way to sing on key if you're singing the aria to *Madam Butterfly*. If you're being checked for glaucoma, there's only one right way to do that test to guarantee accuracy.

In other arenas, however, there is no so-called right way. There's more than one way to win a race. Even the predictable act of birthing a baby—a process millions of years old—has hundreds of techniques used in countless cultures, each one touted as "the best way." And something as simple as making a perfect martini has at least two options (shaken or, perhaps, stirred).

Marketing research is no different. In qualitative research, for example, we're still figuring out names for some of our focus group techniques. There's room for many styles, wild ranges of personality, 50 different ways to ask questions and hundreds of techniques created on the spot to get to more top-of-mind responses. Our industry leans heavily on sociology, psychology and anthropology—all of the soft sciences that examine how humans operate in different environments. In fact, qualitative research is probably the best proof of the benefits of adapting to change. One right way to do any of the steps of a qualitative research project would never garner a critical mass of believers agreeing on any two of them.



Some classic rules in survey research fit the "right way" model. The first one is to ask every respondent all survey questions the same way. And if a subject has a problem with a survey question, just repeat it—don't explain it. Another traditional guideline is to ask all survey questions in a neutral tone of voice to avoid giving weight to any one question through inflection. However, these rules break down quickly in qualitative research where questions are amended to fit the mood of the room, the flow of the conversation or the area of the country where the research takes place. Unclear questions are reframed on the spot and additional probes asked to ensure that respondents are clear about the line of questions. Good moderators make sure to avoid leading respondents because the personality, tone, pitch and pacing of the moderator's questions can affect the way a question is asked and, to some degree, the way it is answered. In fact, one bonus of doing qualitative research is the flexibility it offers in reaching project objectives. The power of qualitative research lies in its dynamic process. The second and subsequent groups of interviews stand on the shoulders of the previous ones.

Yet our industry yearns to move toward some standards. To put some rigor into the soft, quivering science of perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes (POBAs), the Qualitative Research Consultants Association has worked diligently on a set of ethics and practices for our industry. Likewise, the American Marketing Association and the Market Research Association have published ethics and standards documents. But there's room for doing qualitative work in as many ways as there are researchers.

Best practices

One area in which best practices, rather than the so-called right way, can help strengthen qualitative research is in working with clients who buy qualitative research services. While no hard and fast rules exist for the best way to work with clients, some elements make the researcher-client interface work more smoothly. The most important ones include being the right researcher for client needs, providing the right research tool for a client, listening to client needs, and communicating effectively with clients.

Be sure you're the right researcher.

Being the right researcher for a client

means being a good match for that company's needs. Some researchers are generalists, and some focus on niches. The generalist is able to bring a wide range of experience to the table, standing on the expertise learned in hundreds of focus groups with thousands of consumers. To a generalist, it doesn't matter if the topic is a new formula for dog food or an extension line of a breakfast cereal. The focus is on testing issues with consumers and providing new insights to support client decision-making.

The generalist pulls insights and techniques from a wide range of categories, much like CNN news pulls from a wide number of news reporting bureaus. For the niche researcher, having experience in specific areas (such as pharmaceuticals, employee studies or politics) means they can bring deep understanding to the project in terms of language, respondent concerns and history with the mind of the consumer on those topics.

However, it doesn't matter if you're a generalist or a niche specialist if you aren't the right researcher for the job. Imagine you're on one side of the abortion issue and a client for the side you don't support makes a request for you to lead six focus groups. Because objectivity on this inflammatory subject will be hard to maintain, you probably aren't the right researcher for this type of project.

If the client wants someone who can lead a series of groups and then host a brainstorm session with the client team the next day, and you don't have brainstorming experience, then you aren't the right researcher. And, for example, if your job is to talk to morbidly obese Hispanic women in a small Texas town, and you are an anorexic woman from New England, you probably aren't the right researcher.

It doesn't matter if you're a generalist or a niche specialist if you aren't the right researcher for the job.

In determining who is the right researcher for any given assignment, best practices lean toward someone who can do all of the following:

- ◆ Stay truly objective
- ◆ Create instant rapport with respondents
- ◆ Create a safe space for respondents to share more in-depth comments
- ◆ Reach the client objectives without leading respondents
- ◆ Keep the emphasis of the research on the topic, not the opinions, personality, culture, race or creed of the moderator
- ◆ Have the skill set needed to talk to the respondents recruited
- ◆ Be seen as the newest friend to the respondents, not an authority figure or someone wildly different

There have been a number of spirited conversations in this industry about the efficacy of matching the moderator with the respondent set. This may mean having men lead only male groups and women lead only female groups—or a white moderator lead only white groups and a minority moderator lead only minority groups. However, that framework doesn't seem to be supported by the evidence from other facets of American life. Consider all the men and women who deliver the evening news in English on the major networks: To most viewers, it doesn't matter if the newscaster is a man or a woman, or what their ethnic background is. What does matter to most viewers is whether they like one person's personality or delivery style more than another. Ultimately, though, the news is the news, no matter who delivers it.

The same, I believe, can be said for the moderator. If the moderator can meet the criteria outlined here, their race or gender shouldn't matter so long as the topic itself or the race and gender of the participants doesn't set up a barrier to free conversation. For example, while a man could talk to women about menopause, it might be better to have a woman do this in order to move through obvious baseline data more quickly. Conversely, a woman could talk to men about use of Viagra, but it might move more quickly if a male moderator led the discussion.

On the issue of race, matching respondent and moderator is a wise move if any part of the conversation hinges on issues related to gender or race. For example, if African-Americans are to be interviewed about home mortgages, race may not be a factor until you consider the lawsuits from the '70s stemming from situations in which African-American couples were told the price of a house was a high figure, while white couples were quoted a lower figure. Even today, when the focus group is about the best place to get mortgages, race will come up in the conversation. In these cases it would be best to match the moderator's race to the participants and defuse that line of discussion when it arises.

That proved that the last researcher he hired didn't know how to manage the group dynamics process effectively enough.

Match the research tool to the client. Providing the right research tool for the client is the next step. I remember a client who wanted 20 dyads of friendship pairs to test ideas related to hand care and manicures. When I asked the reasons for wanting dyads rather than traditional focus groups, the client said, "I went to this conference and one of the speakers said dyads were the best tool for qualitative research to eliminate the problem of thought leaders." To me, that proved that the last researcher he hired didn't know how to manage the group dynamics process effectively enough to control thought leaders. It took a lot of convincing to get him to agree to four traditional focus groups in two evenings taking eight hours of time, rather than three days of one-hour dyads taking nearly 21 hours of time.

From time to time, the right research tool isn't even qualitative research. After talking

See QUALITATIVE / Page 28

QUALITATIVE / From page 27

to clients, it may become clear that a quantitative survey is what's needed to achieve the research objectives. Even though it may mean losing the client to another firm that provides that tool, it's best for the client.

(One tricky area arises when a qualitative researcher has a proprietary tool they like to use to serve clients. However, one proprietary approach can't meet the needs of all clients. When a researcher tries to force his program to fit the building blocks of a client request, rather than provide the best tool to reach the client's objective, the project starts off flawed.)

Listen to the client. Listening to the client's needs is sometimes like being in a submarine and steering carefully around mines. A client request doesn't come in a vacuum, with you sitting by the phone, poised to take the request and fill it. Requests come somewhere between the tasks you're already completing for other clients. I dream of the day when requests for the new project come on the exact day I mailed out the final report to the previous client. At any one time, a series of three to eight projects might be underway at once, each one moving through the 12-step continuum from initial request to delivery of the final report. That means listening to client needs is more than just hearing the request; it means listening to where it fits into your life.

Best practices recommend that the initial conversation with a client look like an in-depth interview or mini-group, where the researcher asks clear and cogent questions to determine exactly what the client company wants done, what expectations the executives have and if they have any concerns. If the call is a conference call with all the key parties involved, you should also ask questions about study logistics (for example, sites, respondent profiles, budgets and timing). In some cases, the client's executives become clearer about their needs in this conversation.

A good researcher has a toolbox of questions to get insights into the project so the client's end expectations are met. Try this question in the initial conversation about research needs: "If the focus group was only one minute long, what one question must be answered?" This type of question helps the client focus on the most significant aspect of the project and helps the researcher construct the research plan that will help answer it.

Sometimes the qualitative research tool is meant to be a hammer for clients. They want to use the findings to break down areas of mystery about issues or consumers. They may want to smash another department or decision-maker with data in order to encourage different decisions about the firm's products or services. It may be a sledgehammer of political force in which the research is meant to serve more as demonstration than a tool.

A good researcher has a toolbox of questions to get insights into the project so the client's end expectations are met.

Communicate with clients. Communicating effectively with clients is perhaps the most important aspect of client-researcher relationships. I have one client who deals with me almost exclusively via voice mail and e-mail. I sometimes think she has a little camera in my office to make sure that I'm not in when she calls. What I do like about working with her is the clarity of her communication. She asks direct questions or makes specific requests, which makes it easy for me to clearly understand what she wants me to know. She almost always follows up with a phone message or an e-mail. This allows me to reply and keep a copy of our dialogue to easily meet her requests or answer her questions.

I have other clients who, after the initial inquiry for availability, are nearly impossible to reach. To meet the needs of both, I've developed some rules of my own for having the best communication I can with clients, which seems to cut down on misunderstandings and keeps project elements clear.

Once the initial request is made for research, I prepare a three- to six-page proposal that outlines the study purpose, research methodology, and specific pricing options requested (for instance, four groups in two cities vs. all the groups in one city). Clients don't always want the proposal, but it's a way to outline what factors in the research methodology are driving the cost estimates provided, making it easier to add or delete line items when the project begins to shift with changes in specs.

Secondarily, with more than one project in stream at any one time, the proposal keeps us straight on what we're doing specifically on each project. In addition, the written proposal lets them know, in writing, that I'm clear about exactly what is wanted and needed.

After the project is awarded, I send a change-order memo to cover situations when clients make changes to study elements, such as shifting cities, changing recruiting specs, dropping or adding groups or interventions, and making requests for more clients to attend or special equipment to be provided. This memo outlines what I understand to be the change requested and any notes about how the change might affect the original cost estimate. This simple one-page document has done more to stop confusion about costs in the final invoice when compared to the original estimates. It also shows that changes have ramifications on more than one area of the study. For example, a change in a planned city site from New York to Philadelphia might mean a rush charge by the facility for shorter timelines to recruit. But the price may be reduced because recruiting in the Philadelphia suburbs might be cheaper than in midtown Manhattan. Travel and per diem costs related to the new site also may be affected.

Once the recruiting is underway, the client must know how the recruiting is going. Some clients want the daily grids that report who has been recruited for each group. Others just want the numbers telling them how many are in each group and how many are left to recruit. E-mail is a good tool for this daily information report.

Make the client right

You should expect several revisions to screeners and guides, and each iteration means you're meeting client expectations. "Make the client right" is a valuable lesson I learned years ago. My mentors warned me to never compromise the research or do anything unethical. However, butting heads with a client over small, ego-related issues isn't a good way to build a relationship.

Clear communication with clients becomes particularly important when problems arise. For example, a client wanted a study to recruit men ages 24 to 34, and another group ages 35 to 45, who used a particular bank service. A list was provided, and more than 80% of the men on the list in the younger age category "terminated" because they no longer used that bank. Clearly, a focus group of current users in that age range wasn't going to be possible. We could have thrown the problem back to the client by saying, "It can't be done. What do you want to do now?" Instead, it seemed to work best to provide a menu of solutions for the client and support them in choosing a good runner-up to the original research plan.

In that case, the client was presented with three options. First, recruiters could phone back the same respondents who were terminated and recruit a group of former users. Second, they could do the study only with those in the 35- to 49-year-old range who qualified. Or they could pull an additional list of names and continue to look for younger consumers.

Providing options, in writing, gave the client time to think about what to do next. By offering part of the solution rather than more of the problem, we gave the client a variety of ways to solve the problem. They decided to pull together a group of former users, hoping to find out more about what made them leave the bank. The resulting insights were instrumental in clearing up some issues about the bank they weren't aware of.

This example and ones like it have taught us that written communications, in conjunction with conversations, keep lines open between client and researcher. Relying too much on what was said in a phone call or voice mail puts both parties at a disadvantage when it comes time to remember what each party said. Clear communications are a key part of successful qualitative research. Truly listening to clients and tailoring research tools and approaches to meet their varying needs can help researchers gain valuable insights and better serve their clients. ■

Naomi R. Henderson is chief executive officer of Bethesda, Md.-based RIVA Market Research, a qualitative research firm.

This article originally appeared in the summer 2002 issue of Marketing Research *magazine and was edited for style and length before being reprinted. For information on subscribing to* Marketing Research*, please call AMA Customer Service at (800)262-1150.*