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Evolution And Revolution In Qualitative Research

Gill Ereaut

We inhabit a world in which qualitative modes of thought are highly relevant, even essential. As businesses get to grips with postmodern marketing, and struggle to turn data into information, the days of 'soft' thinking are with us. The ability to make business sense from messy, ambiguous evidence about consumers, markets and trends has never been more highly valued.

Brand integration, too, means that unpicking how brands and people relate to each other will become more relevant to more parts of more organisations. We may well see qual researchers, who know about these things, working in new areas such as HR or customer services.

So the climate for qualitative thinking as a business service is excellent. But how does 'qualitative thinking' relate to what we know as 'qualitative research'? I would say these two ideas are at last becoming productively detached from each other.

The challenge for qualitative research has always been turning a hard-to-pin-down mode of knowledge generation into a set of research products. We have to take the qualitative 'idea' systematic but interpretative analysis of the world and turn it into things clients can understand, see the benefit of, and be willing to pay for. We have to turn intellectual skills into hard, tradable merchandise.

Is the focus group dead?

The standard group discussion has provided a fast, cost-effective, flexible answer. For over 20 years, focus groups and depth interviews have reigned supreme, and for good reason. Interviewing and analysis styles might differ widely between researchers and across cultures, but the basic format is easily understood, immediate and visible. It has been easy to sell groups, easy to cost them, and there is an infrastructure to support them. The development of this clear, efficient unit of service fuelled the massive expansion of qualitative research from the late 1970s onwards.

But it is no longer possible or sensible to represent a whole research philosophy with a single method. People are thinking radically about the kinds of qualitative services there could be. They are taking a wider view of what constitutes 'qualitative market research', bringing other data-collection and analysis processes under this heading. They are putting real expertise in place to deliver complementary approaches; and being brave and bold about these alternatives, their benefits, their organisation and pricing. It has meant suppliers and clients alike working outside their comfort zones and rethinking business models.

Does this mean that focus groups are dead? Certainly not. They remain invaluable, but they are beginning to share centre stage with other methods. And it looks like qualitative research is undergoing long-overdue differentiation and segmentation.

At one end, businesses need answers to certain questions again and again, and they need them quicker and cheaper. Fast-and-furious focus group projects will be used for immediate feedback on straightforward issues, or where some information is simply better than none. 'No frills' groups harness the time and cost savings offered by panel recruitment, mobile connectivity and online methods. But at the other end, clients have more need than ever to understand the texture, context and meaning of consumers' lives. And they are increasingly willing to use complex research methods with or without more sophisticated varieties of consumer groups to do this.

Closer, deeper, wider

There are two trends here. First, clients often want, literally, to get closer to consumers via research by direct dialogue or facilitated interactive sessions with customers. They also want proximity to the consumer disseminated throughout the business. So we will see researchers helping clients experience consumers' lives by proxy: immersion sessions, workshops and video-clip libraries increasingly replacing PowerPoint. Second, there is 'bricolage' the idea that complex business challenges need complex research solutions. This means behavioural data and psychological insight alongside socio-cultural analysis; research groups alongside, or replaced by, non-group methods.

The new complexity

Important 'new' methods of data collection and analysis semiotics and ethnography are looking increasingly mainstream and essential. They are no longer 'fancy stuff', but sit alongside face-to-face interviewing as core qualitative research methods.

As this happens, the heroic qual researcher with diverse skills is giving way to the specialist. Expert teams are being put together by agencies or clients ethnographers, semioticians, futurologists, data miners, discourse analysts and others to work together. They analyse

their own and each other's data. Qual and quant sources get integrated, meta-analyses created, key implications drawn. These endeavours can demand significant investment (though not always) and are far from easy-to-buy, easy-to-sell focus groups. But eclecticism is a route to original business solutions in increasingly saturated markets.

Re-volution?

Is this a revolution in qualitative research? An evolution? Qualitative market research began with invention and bricolage: in the early days, all qual research was bespoke and most was multi-method. Ethnography was alive and well (though rarely called this). Researchers had specialist expertise in psychology, sociology or anthropology. What is happening now, maybe, is literally revolution returning to where we came from. We are emerging from two decades of 'let's do some groups' and re-embracing what's really possible with qualitative thinking. It looks good to me.

NOTES & EXHIBITS

Gill Ereaut



Gill Ereaut spent 20 years in qualitative research. She now specialises in applying discourse analysis to business issues.

gill@linguisticlandscapes.co.uk

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World Advertising Research Center Ltd.
Farm Road, Henley-on-Thames, Oxon, United Kingdom, RG9 1EJ
Tel: +44 (0)1491 411000, Fax: +44 (0)1491 418600

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