



Fast Guide

Fast guide to qualitative research



Ask most people about market research and one of the first things that they will think of is focus groups. Not necessarily with great associations – focus groups are linked in many people's minds with New Labour spin-doctoring and failed product launches. This perception has been so damaging that some recoil at the very mention of them, which is a bit unfair.

We're going to take a brief look at focus groups and the rest of the contents of the qualitative research toolbox, focusing on the benefits they can bring you when they're used properly.

What is it?

Qualitative research doesn't necessarily entail any particular technique, although it does tend to suit some more than others. Most often you would meet it in the form of focus groups (discussion groups) or face to face depth interviews. More rarified forms of qualitative research, such as ethnography, are rarely seen outside of the academic world.

What makes a piece of research qualitative rather than quantitative is the fact that it is focused on *understanding* rather than measurement. It's useful when we need to understand something in greater detail, or probe into motivations or attitudes.

What is it good for?

Qualitative research is hopeless if you want to know how many people do something or think something, or if you want to measure something like customer satisfaction. It's useful if you need to understand how people see something or if you want them to explain how they feel.

Exploration

Before any satisfaction measurement survey (customer or employee), or indeed most surveys, it's good practice to use a phase of qualitative research in order to find out how the people whose views you're interested in see the topic that you're researching. This helps to ensure that the survey provides you with an accurate measure. Otherwise there is a danger that the questions may miss a key aspect of the topic as seen by respondents.



Explanation

Quantitative surveys are great at telling you what people think in terms of mean scores and percentages, but they're not so good at telling you *why*. Probing certain answers can add an element of qualitative insight into a large-scale survey, but sometimes the best way forward is to conduct some research specifically to uncover the reasons for a low score. This can be invaluable in helping an organisation to understand its stakeholders and gain ideas for improvement.

Sampling

One of the features of qualitative research is that sample sizes can be very small. It's important to make sure that a range of views are represented, but often no more than 4 groups of around 8 people each will be perfectly sufficient. With depth interviews as few as 12 participants are often used.

The reason is twofold. We don't need larger sample sizes because we're not trying to achieve a statistically representative sample as with a survey. It's also because larger sample sizes would be unmanageable – qualitative research produces much more data from each individual participant, and is notoriously time-consuming to analyse properly.

Analysis

So how do you analyse it? There are as many answers to that as there are qualitative researchers. By analogy to quantitative research, you're often looking to find a typical view backed up by an understanding of the range of views. It's also common to look for common themes and patterns of response. This analysis can be backed up by various models such as "grounded theory" which make explicit use of qualitative data to generate a theory about how the world works.

Validation

Qualitative research can often seem rather airy-fairy by comparison with the visible statistical reliability of a quantitative survey, but it does have its own systems for ensuring trustworthy findings. One approach is to involve several individuals, working independently, in the analysis. If they all reach the same conclusions then it's likely that the findings are coming from the data rather than the researcher's head. *Triangulation* is another key concept, meaning that multiple streams of evidence are all pointing in the same direction. But the most fundamental rule with qualitative data is that you make the data available as well as your analysis, so that the audience can check your conclusions for themselves. **S**