

Qualitative or Quantitative: Weighing Research Methods

There are basically two types of custom marketing research studies: Qualitative and quantitative, or “soft” and “hard” research, respectively. Qualitative studies most often mean focus groups or in-depth, one-on-one interviews. The three most common quantitative techniques are telephone, mail and in-person (mall intercept or in-store, self-administered) surveys. In a perfect world of no time constraints and bottomless budgets, it is advisable to field both quantitative research with statistical predictability and qualitative research to uncover the motivations unable to be read between the statistics. But realistically, a company often finds itself having to choose between quantitative and qualitative studies. Here are some of the advantages of each.

The first advantage of qualitative research over a statistical study is timing. Focus groups can be set up in one to two weeks, with the analysis being virtually instantaneous –which brings us to our second advantage: the ability of client viewing. It’s amazing how comfortable focus group or one-on-one respondents become during the course of the session, even after they have been informed, that someone is watching them behind the one-way mirror or on video. The body language which accompanies responses can be invaluable information.

Both focus groups and one-on-one interviews also have the advantage of allowing the researcher to probe respondents and uncover their true opinions. And both of these in-person techniques are considerably better than telephone calls if you have to show anything to the interviewees for their reaction (concept statements, advertising, packaging, etc.).

Two additional benefits of focus groups which one-on-ones cannot match are their dynamic and interactive nature. Once a quantitative survey is developed, it is pretty well cast in stone. But a focus group discussion guide can not only be changed right up until the start of the group, it can also be revised during the session. And perhaps the most important feature of focus groups is the free and open exchange of opinions and ideas, as participants react to and build on each other’s comments. Some of the best new product suggestions and creative advertising ideas have come out of qualitative studies. Companies which tend to rely more on the numbers than the verbatims are probably missing key information (remember, “new” Coke was a winner over Pepsi in taste tests, so they expanded it nationally).

Of course, the downside to qualitative research is the extremely small sample size. Focus groups are clearly non-projectable, and their findings must be viewed as “directional” and not definitive. Some companies rely heavily on focus groups, particularly for evaluation of advertising copy alternatives. When they hear what they want to hear, a focus group is great. When they don’t hear what they want to hear, it’s “just a focus group.”

For about the same price as two focus groups, you can usually conduct and tabulate at least 200 10-minute telephone interviews or at least twice that number of completed mail surveys. If your research objective is, for example, to take predictable data to the investment community so that you can fund start-up or other capital expenditures, then a quantitative study is the only way to go.

Again, budget and time parameters permitting, it is also extremely worthwhile to complement the statistical data with some qualitative meat—a “selectively-edited” video tape of focus groups or in-depth interviews works well here. But rarely will a venture capitalist accept the focus group findings without some additional confirmation from a representative sample. Sometimes you can get around this by conducting focus groups in two to four geographically disparate markets, but a better method is quantitative research with a national sample of at least 400 respondents, one-fourth each from the East, Central, South and West regions.

Whether your quantitative study should be by phone, mail or in a mall depends on your target respondents and desired research learnings. You can reap some of the “show-and-tell” benefits of qualitative research via a mall study or by enclosing descriptions or pictures with a mailed questionnaire. A phone survey is your best guarantee of securing responses from the “right person” – particularly critical for research in the business community. A sample of questionnaires can usually be completed faster by phone than by mail, and any survey conducted by a personal interviewer (phone or mall) offers the ability to probe and clarify responses.

A phone or mall study virtually guarantees achievement of your desired sample size. However, you could be pleasantly surprised by a mail survey’s higher-than-expected response rate, providing you with increased statistical reliability. Of course, there’s a risk of poor response yielding a lower-than-desired sample size, but generally mail studies are less expensive than other types.

So, which methodology makes the most sense for your next research study? If you are looking for detailed reactions to or suggestions for new products or marketing programs, or just trying to determine an “absence of negatives,” then qualitative research could suffice. But if you must have a comfort level based on numbers then a quantitative study is imperative. And if you can afford both of them, then you will have all the answers, know precisely what people think of your situation and why they feel that way.

<http://www.johnfoxmktg.com/qualitative-or-quantitative-weighing-research-methods/>

Qualitative research is designed to reveal a target audience's range of behavior and the perceptions that drive it with reference to specific topics or issues. It uses in-depth studies of small groups of people to guide and support the construction of hypotheses. The results of qualitative research are descriptive rather than predictive.

Qualitative research methods originated in the social and behavioral sciences: sociology, anthropology and psychology. Today, qualitative methods in the field of marketing research include in-depth interviews with individuals, group discussions (from two to ten participants is typical); diary and journal exercises; and in-context observations. Sessions may be conducted in person, by telephone, via videoconferencing and via the Internet.

Why Qualitative Research Works

Several unique aspects of qualitative research contribute to rich, insightful results:

- Synergy among respondents, as they build on each other's comments and ideas.
- The dynamic nature of the interview or group discussion process, which engages respondents more actively than is possible in more structured survey.
- The opportunity to probe ("Help me understand why you feel that way") enabling the researcher to reach beyond initial responses and rationales.
- The opportunity to observe, record and interpret non-verbal communication (i.e., body language, voice intonation) as part of a respondent's feedback, which is valuable during interviews or discussions, and during analysis.

The opportunity to engage respondents in "play" such as projective techniques and exercises, overcoming the self-consciousness that can inhibit spontaneous reactions and comments.

Types of Qualitative Research

- [What is Qualitative Research?](#)

Types of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research methods are continually evolving, as patterns and styles of human interaction and communication change. Current research may include:

- Face-to-face, telephone, or online exchanges
- Interviews conducted in a research facility, at a respondent's home or business, or at a public location
- Real-time communication and "time-lapse" techniques (e.g., diaries, electronic bulletin boards)

Regardless of venue or medium, qualitative research is always based on open-ended queries; it uses in-depth probing to uncover the thoughts and feelings behind initial responses; and it applies insights and learning to the research process in real time. Typical qualitative methods include:

Focus group – A moderator-led discussion among a group of individuals who share a need, habit, or life circumstance relevant to the research issue(s) at hand. Typically one to two hours in length, a focus group discussion often includes from two to ten respondents. While focus groups have historically been held in person (face-to-face), they can also be conducted remotely by teleconferencing, by videoconferencing, or through the Internet using text chat, online bulletin boards, online collaboration tools, desktop video conferencing, or various forms of tele/web conferencing.

In-depth interview (IDI, one-on-one) – Interview with a single individual, typically lasting from 30 to 90 minutes, depending on the subject matter and context. IDIs may be conducted in person at a research facility, the respondent's home or workplace or a public location, or by telephone.

Dyads, triads – In-depth interviews with two or three people who often represent members of the same family or business team, who use a product or service and/or make purchase decisions together.

Paired interviews – Consecutive or interlocking interviews with two people who use and/or decide to purchase a product or service together, e.g., husband and wife, parent and child. Given the objectives of a particular study, the qualitative consultant will advise the client in selecting the most appropriate setting.

http://www.qrca.org/?page=types_qual_research