

Six Ways to Do It Better with Qualitative Research

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Some of the research called for in new product development is elaborate and quantitative. However, there is no substitute for direct interaction between marketing, advertising, research people and the consumer. A familiar technique for obtaining this direct interaction is the focus group. A technique we at Oxtoby-Smith find even more valuable is the old-fashioned one-on-one in-depth interview.

Conducting good in-depth interviews and interpreting the results to best effect are sometimes considered an art. Maybe so. But experience gained over hundreds of one-on-one interviews suggests that following six simple rules can help in using qualitative research to evaluate new product ideas more effectively.

Here are the rules:

(1) Listen to the enthusiasm level, not the purchase intent score

-Get a gut feeling for whether or not respondents are enthusiastic about the product. A "definitely would buy" claim that's not backed up by some excitement can be misleading. Will the respondent try anything new in this category or is there really something that turns him on about your idea? Remember this is qualitative research; that means the quality of the interest in the product has to be assessed. There aren't enough respondents in this kind of research for reliable head counting on purchase intent, so don't attempt it.

On one interview, users of a skin remedy were shown a concept for a new product and 40 per cent said definitely they would buy -but without much enthusiasm. The reason for the lack of enthusiasm turned out to be that users of products in this category don't care much about what brand they buy.

We learned this by asking them the following:

What brand are you using now?

Virtually all named the leading brand.

Can you show us the product? After digging around in pockets and purses, most produced a product but only half produced the product they had named. The others actually had some other brand in their pockets but didn't even remember its name.

We, and our client, decided that interest in our product was low, at least in part because consumers just don't pay much attention to specific brands in this category. The client decided to focus efforts on other categories where there was a greater chance of generating some consumer excitement and brand awareness.

(2) Find out what respondents think your product is

Don't take communication for granted.

Ask respondents the following types of questions:

How would you describe this product to someone else?

What products is this like?

How, step by step, would you use this product?

This question once revealed that a concept for a gum stimulator was perceived as a denture cleanser by a substantial number of respondents.

Incidentally, don't be afraid to ask people if they need their glasses to read the concept. Some people will stare at a concept and not be able to see it. Find out whether you've got a concept that doesn't communicate or a respondent with astigmatism.

(3) Take little problems seriously

If only a few people think your product is inconvenient, gimmicky or likely to be of only passing interest, your ears should perk up. A corollary to Murphy's Law is probably appropriate here- problems tend to get bigger, not smaller. If, among the few people in your qualitative research, you are already picking up signs of problems with intended usage or other key perceptions of the product, think how many people will have these problems if it ever goes national.

(4) Probe inconsistencies

Be alert to inconsistencies between respondent's attitudes and their behavior. Ask respondents to help you understand the reason for these. Ask questions like, "You said you liked this product. Why aren't you still using it?" An underlying cause for brand selection or category use sometimes emerges that bears on your product's chances of success.

In a recent series of interviews for a personal grooming product, some respondents had tried one of the brands that was a unique form. They said they liked it but were no longer using it. The reason turned out to be that the product form made use too conspicuous, thereby making the grooming problem too obvious. These respondents wanted the product benefits but did not want anyone to know that they used a product. This consumer desire for inconspicuousness would not have emerged had we not probed the apparent contradiction of respondents liking a product but no longer using it.

(5) Beware the "probably's"

Many enthusiastic marketing people are tempted to say, "If you add the definitely and the probably would buys, you get a 70 per cent positive purchase intent." Horsefeathers. Any idea exposed to consumers will get a lot of "probably would buy" responses. Go back to rule one - check the enthusiasm level, not the purchase intent score.

(6) Challenge the respondent

Ask questions like "Would you really go to all the trouble of buying this new product when you said your current brand was pretty good?"

Why would you do this?" If the respondent can't give a simple and compelling reason to buy the product, then your concept or ad has failed to give him one.

These are six simple rules to help do better qualitative research on new product ideas.

Perhaps a seventh rule should also be made explicit: **Verify**.

Qualitative research can provide valuable clues, insights and suggestions regarding consumer sentiment but these clues are, after all, gathered from talking to just a few people. Talk to more people - focusing on what the qualitative research suggested - by conducting quantitative follow-up research.