RESEARCH ● *Don't shoot!*

Focus groups are valid when done right

By PETER NOEL MURRAY

In the digital age, marketers have an inherent preference for quantitative research, striving for mathematical certainty in business analysis. To maintain credibility in a culture that favors "hard" data, qualitative researchers must ensure that their methods meet the highest standards of reliability and validity.

Last year, *BusinessWeek* published an article, "Shoot the focus group," which argued that group discussions produce information that is of little value in today's Internet-savvy economy. Indeed, one trend brought about by the Internet is the emphasis on using metrics as inputs to strategic planning. In marketing, this has resulted in the demand for increasingly sophisticated quantitative data analysis. For market research, this has meant that qualitative methods, which investigate non-numeric factors, have fallen out of favor at some companies.

As we reap the benefits of the digital age, however, we must remember that human understanding is necessary to motivate consumer behavior and successfully manage interpersonal business relationships. Qualitative studies provide insight into the human psyche by asking "why." Qualitative methods are needed now more than ever because they are the only means for discovering the underlying attitudes and emotions that influence behavior.

Looking at how qualitative research often is conducted today, we see that (the original) methodological values have been lost.

One factor that contributes to the devaluation of qualitative research by today's marketers is that its current implementation no longer reflects the strict conventions of its roots in social science. The commercial use of focus groups and other qualitative methods was created by psychologists and sociologists during and after World War II. These professionals developed their methodologies using principles of social science research, endowing them with values of reliability and validity.

Looking at how qualitative research often is conducted today, we see that these methodological values have been lost. For the focus group, the most widely used qualitative method, these lapses include: misusing the methodology by substituting it for more expensive quantitative studies needed to generate data for decision-making, using moderators untrained in techniques for asking questions and interpreting responses, and using "professional" respondents that are recruited from databases.

To meet the higher standards needed in today's business environment, qualitative researchers must offer the same measures of reliability and validity that clients demand in quantitative studies. Here is how these principles are applied to the focus group:

◆ Construct validity exists when the research instruments accurately reflect the concepts being studied so that the study actually tests what it purports to test. Both the discussion guide (as well as other stimuli) *and* the moderator are research instruments in focus groups. Therefore, unless the moderator has training in interviewing and interpreting verbal, emotional and physical responses, a threat to construct validity exists through interviewer bias.

◆ External validity means that the study's findings and conclusions are applicable to the target population. The threat to external validity comes from the increasing use of professional respondents—the practice of recruiting from databases. The Victoria, Australia-based *Association for Qualitative Research Newsletter* from April 2006 cited "fraudulent" and "fake" respondents as a leading industry issue, and said that the use of these professional respondents can be the result of cost pressures and insufficient time

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Qualitative research must be rigorous

scheduled for recruiting. Short of demanding that research suppliers use random recruiting methods, marketing managers should insist on independent recruitment validation in their studies.

◆ Reliability refers to the veracity of the study and is demonstrated by the fact that results are reproducible. For qualitative studies, data stability is the factor corresponding to reliability in quantitative research. The goal is to identify findings that are stable from focus group to focus group upon which conclusions can be developed. First, to achieve stability, study participants must accurately represent the target population. Second, professional respondents threaten stability through their spurious attitudes, research-savvy comments and possible deviation from screener specifications. Finally, dimensions of stable group response often lie beneath the surface of respondent discussions. For this reason, moderator skill as an interviewer and training as an interpreter of responses are key factors in identifying stability.

While quantitative analysis of metrics produces deep levels of understanding of the dynamics of a business, it is qualitative research that investigates the soul of the enterprise. As the great psychologist and motivational researcher Ernest Dichter wrote, "We never buy anything or take action unless there is some kind of deep psychological need for it." Properly designed and professionally executed, it is qualitative research that identifies the consumer needs that drive consumer purchases and other desired behavior.

To fulfill its important role in today's business environment, qualitative research must provide marketers with the values of reliability and validity that only can be obtained through adherence to the methodological rigors of social science research. ■

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small groups of consumers. From that process, Perceptive Sciences experts were able to find out how its client could better understand product perceptions, imagery associations and Web site expectations.

The results showed the company lacked a consistent image, because different messages were being delivered to the markets through advertising and packaging as well as through its Web site. Product design and promotional messaging created a negative impression in several countries because the ways in which consumers understood the imagery and the messaging varied.

Research results were compiled into a single overall program so that the company could see what changes needed to be made.

Though she could not reveal specific details, Leyla Namiranian, senior vice president of international research for Decision Analyst, says, "The packaging was projecting a certain imagery of the person who uses the product. Modification of the packaging was necessary to meet the needs of the market to improve the image."

Fortunately, the company was able to see what it was doing wrong and make some significant changes to color, in particular, in its packaging, messaging and to its Web site. With the new changes the marketing conveys a common image, but also has information of local interest for each country.

Today, the company continues to track its global brand image on a monthly basis, and overall, "they are seeing an improvement in market share and brand image. They're getting more positive feedback," Namiranian says, although the feedback still is being collected and analyzed. ■

Deborah L. Vence is a contributing editor based outside Chicago.

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