



THE MOTIVATION CONNECTION IN CONSUMER RESEARCH

by Suzanne DuFore

Orienting your marketing program means seeking out the right kind of information to understand key consumers

Why would women remain loyal to a brand-name shampoo, even when they know that an identical generic version is available for one-third less? When two new credit cards with identical rates and marketing budgets have very different levels of acceptance, what factors are at work? And why do NASCAR fans gravitate to certain kinds of tie-in products while shunning others?

These are the kinds of questions that vex marketers in their upstream planning—for new products or existing, ailing ones. Regardless of the category or price point, there are always intangible factors that make consumer acceptance *seemingly* impossible to understand or predict; this is why what appear to be logical extensions of highly successful product lines can disappoint, and why other offerings catch fire despite

features and packaging that fly in the face of marketing wisdom.

But when corporate growth is at stake, marketers must exhaust all resources to ensure that, within reason, they have given a new or established product every chance of success. This is where consumer information enters the picture; and instinct might dictate that a survey sent to the greatest number of consumers will yield the most reliable insights—and the surest odds of acceptance.

The questions we need to answer, however, go beyond *quantification* and drive toward *motivation*—often a highly personal and subjective topic. Though a survey sent via e-mail or administered by phone may help establish the scope of the issues in question, understanding *why* often benefits from the personal touch—a one-on-one or focus-group connection.

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

This is where qualitative research can add depth and insight to consumer-centricity in our marketing efforts—as a *complement* to other research, effectively informing quantitative efforts to make the whole weave of information stronger. At least one prominent commentator has gotten quite a bit of press in recent months for questioning the value of focus groups; but with all due respect, we will show how qualitative research—conducted by a qualified moderator—can add an indispensable dimension to consumer insights.

As stated previously, one important application of the qualitative approach is as a source of guidance for a future quantitative

UNDERSTANDING *WHY* CONSUMERS FEEL OR ACT A CERTAIN WAY OFTEN BENEFITS FROM A PERSONAL TOUCH

study. This can range from designing a study to constructing questions to picking the best words to describe a specific subject. For example, Knowledge Networks has found in its research that it is difficult to reliably describe many of the new media technologies—from broadband Web access to digital video recorders—in a way that will consistently evoke the correct meaning. What words most quickly convey the notion of high-speed Internet access? How can we differentiate the fastest hookups (via a cable modem) from DSL lines, when both are touted as “high-speed”? These kinds of questions can be explored in person, via focus groups, with greater clarity,

resulting in a questionnaire that is more likely to produce the right emphases and therefore a reliable quantification of marketing variable outcome.

Qualitative research is also highly valuable for its ability to provide detail and color to our understanding of product use—which in turn can inform better quantitative questionnaires and even segmentations. Focusing on specific product use occasions—who was there, the mood, reasons for choosing that particular product—gives us a better idea of how to ask questions about that product. And it can guide us to a more nuanced sense of the differences between segments of product users—should there be a separate segment for those who drink soda only in social settings, or are they merely just part of the “occasional users” group?

Qualitative work can also shed light on findings from quantitative studies that are already complete. Recently a packaged goods manufacturer conducted a study that included questions identifying its most loyal customers—those who owned collectible items featuring the product’s “mascot” or “icon.” While demographics told the company a good deal about these important consumers, that kind of information could not get to the root of their passion for the product; so they arranged a series of focus groups among this very narrow group and walked away with a variety of insights that helped them enact the findings of their quantitative work.

GETTING TO THE HEART OF COUNTERINTUITIVE FINDINGS

Qualitative can also be used as a check on counterintuitive quantitative results. Sometimes a researcher will be presented with data for specific questions that simply do not make sense. Did respondents misunderstand the question wording? Do they have motivations that the client company had never even guessed at? Rather than dismiss the findings as anomalies, or act on them with a certain amount of trepidation, marketers and researchers can confirm their insights by following up with focus groups on this particular topic.

To make best use of focus groups and one-on-one sessions, there are some important guidelines one should follow; these can make the difference between a successful, authoritative study and a potentially confusing one.

Choose an interviewer/moderator with care: This is the key to obtaining the kinds of insights that qualitative is best at delivering; a good moderator or interviewer knows when to probe further, how to mitigate the impact of dominant group members, and how to get at a client's core questions. Too often moderators are chosen because they are "friends of friends" or have been grandfathered into the role from previous projects. Don't take the moderator role for granted.

Strive for a natural setting: Evoking a natural setting, and keeping focus groups small, can go a long way toward creating the intimacy and trust that are essential to qualitative insights. Getting rid of the proverbial conference room table and

replacing it with comfortable couches evolves comfort; so does limiting group size to four or six rather than the traditional eight to ten. The goal is to imitate life with skill and transparency.

Consider the strength in the qual/quant continuum: It is easy to be moved by qualitative research; we see the respondents ourselves and become certain that we know who among them is *the* customer we need to reach. The desire to go with a "gut" reaction based on interviews with eight or twelve people can be hard to resist; but even multiple focus groups cannot adequately measure the quantitative incidence of any belief or preference. They can provide flavor and reveal motivators; but using them as a sole source of marketing insights must be correlated with the information need.

As with all marketing insights, it is essential to match the business goals and risks to the research method. Qualitative studies, whether in focus groups or one-on-one, bring us closer to understanding the intangibles and unexpected forces that can upend the best-laid plans of companies large and small. Strategic thinking—perhaps more than tactical—demands that we identify the contexts of product purchase and use; this can mean anything from state of mind to the physical location of use. In most cases, these insights work best as a complement to quantitative approaches; but the fact that they can enhance and activate those approaches is undeniable. ▀

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