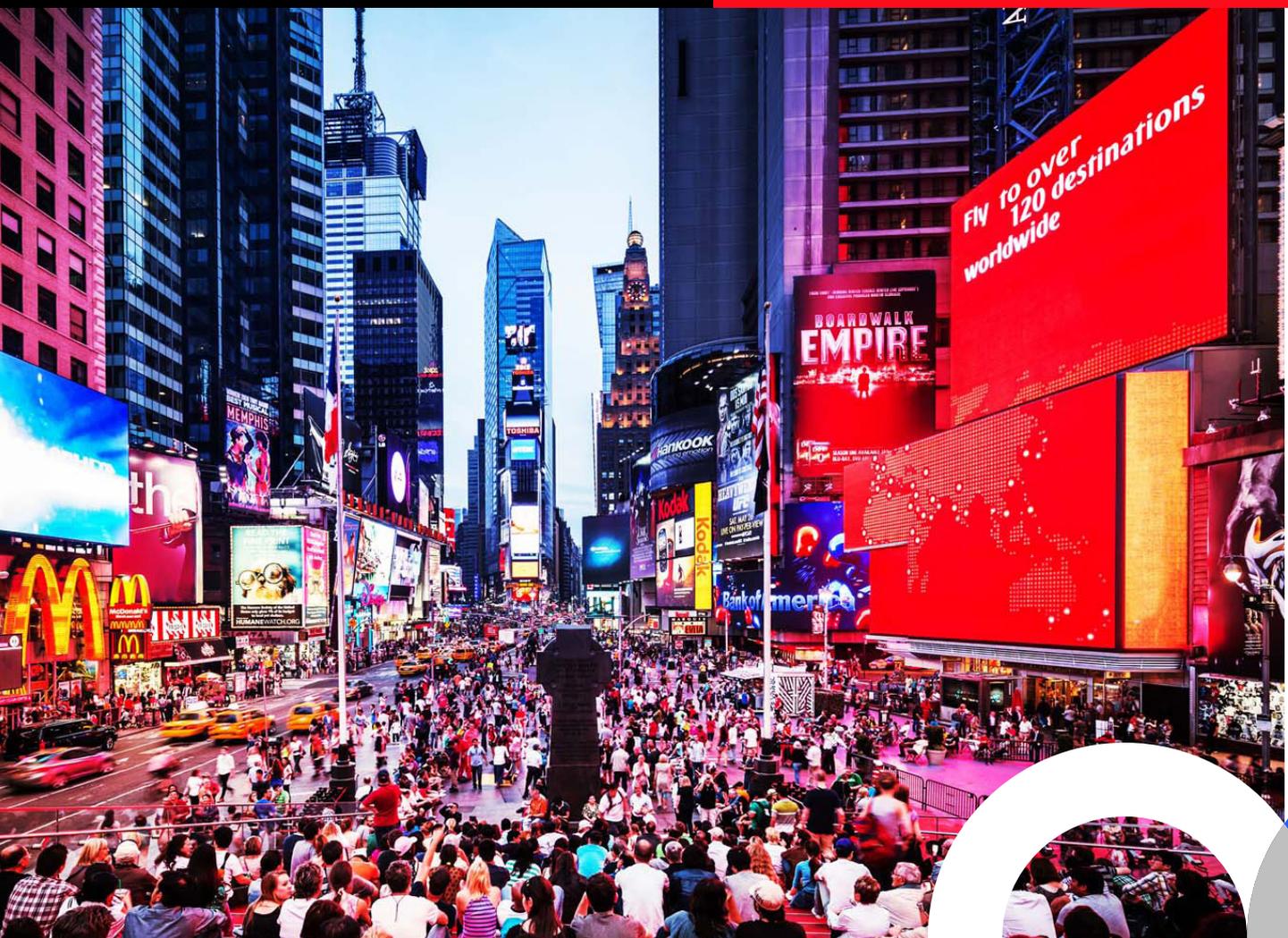


A REFLECTION ON HOW TO CONDUCT MARKET RESEARCH

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WHITEPAPER



BACKGROUND

Let us start with an anecdote that nicely introduces the topic of this white paper: *"A while ago, when I was walking on the streets, I was asked to participate in a study. Of course, I wanted to participate, since I knew it might be difficult to find participants and it is important to obtain different opinions. I was brought to a hotel room where I had to taste different drinks. However, I was not at all in the mood for drinking and the hotel room was a far from stimulating environment. The last time I was forced to drink was during the first year*

of my studies. I realized that my opinion about each drink I tasted was influenced by the odd surroundings, the strange eyes watching me closely, and the time of the day, and I knew that this opinion would be totally irrelevant to the drinks company. Also, from a professional point of view, I knew that by tasting this drink and giving my opinion would never lead to valid insights." This is a question that might be recognized by the reader in the same or a different qualitative setting for research: Why do we rely on the outcomes of these studies?

One of the main aims of market research is to understand the motives underlying consumer evaluation and behaviour. The difficult part here is that you must obtain the deeper thoughts of consumers; what do they really believe or think? What would they do? You want to measure opinions and natural behaviour as precisely as possible.

Thus, first, asking the right questions in the right way is extremely important. Most market research does not acknowledge academic research that strongly indicates that consumers primarily respond in a spontaneous, automatic manner.^{1,2} That is, the brain flows freely, and does not think in the nicely structured grids that appear in questionnaires. Hence, market research should capture this type of behaviour. Secondly, consumer responses to statements and questions intended to measure brand perceptions have been shown to be highly similar across brands: many brands are perceived as 'relevant,' many are seen as 'trustworthy.' Importantly, this even happens for brands within the same category!²

It is important that you ask these right questions in the right way in the most natural environment. As the anecdote describes, putting people in an environment that they do not know and where they feel uncomfortable, will influence

the results of the study. Therefore, it is important that you try to measure opinions and behavior in an environment where the respondent feels comfortable. The environment where consumers normally feel comfortable is their own home. Luckily, nowadays it is extremely easy to do research online. Whereas in the past the fear was that respondents would not be honest, nowadays, we experience from our own studies that people are honest and share a lot of sensitive information. Online, respondents are not spied upon or influenced by other people. As an example, we once conducted a study about incontinence among men, an even more taboo subject than incontinence among women, and the stories these men shared with us, within the comfort of their homes, was incredible. We would have never obtained so much information and insights when we would have conducted face-to-face interviews, for example.

Moreover, market research needs to validate the direction a company chooses to go in terms of marketing, but validating does not mean asking what you think. Validating is also understanding each of the reasons better and ensuring every detail that you expect is explored. However, most market research is unable to make use of the available data in an optimal manner; it solves only part of

the puzzle. It may uncover the 'how' but not the 'why.' This is unfortunate, because if market research is conducted, it should generate maximum insights. The reports it produces typically end with several suggestions for more research. This is surprising, considering that the goal of the report was to find answers.

So, the answers to many questions is in qualitative research, by asking a lot of 'why'-questions. However, a pitfall of conducting qualitative research is that it is often done with a small number of people. However, it is possible to conduct qualitative research with many people. Which, by definition, provides you with more information.

QUALITATIVE VERSUS QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

Traditional market research tends to take either a quantitative or a qualitative approach. And yet, market researchers seem unhappy about this distinction, as 56% of market researchers indicate that the inability to translate qualitative insights into quantitative insights is one of the biggest challenges facing market research.²

In traditional quantitative market research, consumer reactions are measured by forcing respondents to react to pre-defined lists of statements. This method is not only boring for respondents, it also leads to biased or even incorrect insights, because the human brain does not work using a fixed, pre-defined list. Generally, in quantitative market research, no qualitative questions are integrated because the argument is that it is too time-consuming to code. Another argument is that respondents do not like to fill in open answers. This may be true for some of your respondents, but they are then simply bad respondents. Open answers are often crucial for checking the quality of your data.

Traditional qualitative research solves some of these shortcomings of quantitative research, but generally has other shortcomings. Types of qualitative research are for example, focus groups, central location tests (as in the anecdote described) or in-depth interviews. So, generally, for most of these types of research respondents will be brought to a place where the research will be conducted, hence they are not in a natural environment. Also, there is a very high chance that respondents will not be honest since they are likely to answer in a socially desirable manner. And, finally, the study is generally conducted among a small number of respondents.

We would like to provide you with an example that conducting qualitative research with a small number of people simply leads, in the best case, to biased, and in the worst case, even to wrong results. Professor Tammo Bijmolt from the University of Groningen compared the results of a study we conducted with a large number of respondents next to a study a qualitative agency conducted with a

small number of respondents, on exactly the same topic. Most surprising to professor Bijmolt was that the outcomes of both studies were more dissimilar than similar. Also, with the qualitative study, some research questions could simply not be answered, since there were only a handful of respondents. Our qualitative study used a nationally representative sample, so results you will find, hold for the whole country. The main conclusion of this validation paper was that also quantitative research could be explorative providing the right questions are asked. Another important recommendation from the Professor was that only in a very few cases exploration can be done with a few people, but in general you need a large representative sample.

So, how to ask the right questions? We believe this can be done by including some new qualitative techniques.



EXAMPLES OF NEW QUALITATIVE TECHNIQUES

Research should focus on digging deeper and understanding better. There are a series of qualitative techniques that are integrated in a quantitative approach that can explore the respondents ideas and opinions better than the traditional qualitative settings. It is exactly this understanding of how many people behave in the way they do, combined with the depth of why they behave this way, which gives us the rich and detailed insight to know what steps to take. The most important techniques are summarized below.

FREE ASSOCIATIONS

Free associations help provide answers to questions such as; How do consumers see my brand and/or the category? What is the mental position of my brand in consumers' minds? What are consumers' first reaction to my brand, the category or new concept? Free associations can be used in combination with a smart system of classifying these associations by consumers themselves. This eliminates the need to have others interpret the associations, rendering the research extremely high both in validity and insight. Free associations as a direct response to a stimulus immediately show the strength of an ad (quantitative) and explain the why (qualitative). A meta-analysis on the DVJ copy test database for TV ads has shown that the quantitative data the free association technique generates is an important predictor for in-market success and more reliable than many statements most companies use. Free associations can be used in variety of ways. Examples include understanding the most important themes in a category, the position of a brand within a domain, and the direct response to a stimulus.

STORYTELLING

Instead of asking an opinion, you can also ask to share a

story. A story is a response mechanism to many stimuli like insights, brand positionings, ideas, etc. Besides that, storytelling can also be used to share the latest experience or behaviour: Telling a story is a much better way to capture consumer reactions to any type of stimulus than prompting consumers with lists of pre-defined statements. Storytelling helps to focus on the 'why'. Similar to free associations, storytelling could be used in combination with consumers classifying their own story on different aspects. These classifications ensure that all relevant aspects of behaviour are unravelled. By asking respondents to classify their own story, the internal validation is by definition extremely high: no one can give meaning to the stories better than respondents themselves. In addition to classifying their own stories, in our online market research, we borrow from personal interviewing techniques by asking respondents to highlight the part(s) of their stories that are particularly important or relate to a specific topic. We use online laddering to get deep insight into the why behind respondents' reactions.³ This means that you dig one layer deeper than the normal open-ended questions that are used in research.

In order to make it special and quantitative it is crucial that you give respondents the possibility to act freely and give their unbiased thoughts and that you use the answers of the respondents to dig one layer deeper (and not your own lists). In addition, it is important that you can categorize the answers in a certain way. Although this can be done by the interviewer or market researcher, we believe it is much better if the respondents categorize and classify their own answers. Academic research⁴ shows that there are three ways of coding, namely: machine coding, manual coding and own interpretation. The last one is by far the most reliable and valid way of doing this.



THE "IDEAL" APPROACH

To sum it up, the ideal way of conducting research is through listening to clients and consumers with the integration of qualitative and quantitative research in online market research. Because of its qualitative nature, respondents are free in offering their responses, without being constrained by pre-defined lists of statements. Because of its quantitative nature, you will be able to conduct market research on a large set of respondents in an online environment, which enables generalization of insights to the target audience.

The uniqueness of this approach lies in the following aspects:

- The difference between an open-ended question and a qualitative technique is crucial. A normal open-end question is typically asked before a predefined question with closed answers. We advise to turn this around. Start with the open question and then follow up with a closed-end categorisation or extension. A second difference between an open-end and a qualitative technique is the possibility to use the open-end for the next question. Digging one layer deeper is possible with new qualitative techniques.
- Respondents should classify and quantify their own responses to qualitative techniques. Because of this built-in validation, you will be able to both explore and quantify insights at the same time. In addition, this form of internal validation creates the highest predictive validity. Quantifying your own response also means that you enrich the answer of your story or thought. It basically means that what you normally do with asking different questions based upon the answer is now done in a structured way.
- In market research you should always make use of a combination of research techniques in projects. This

holistic approach enables one to generate validated answers instead of more questions. The resulting insights tell marketers exactly which buttons to push in order to reach their goals. There is never one question that answers everything. However, we see that a lot of agencies make the same mistake by asking the same question in a different way, which would not lead to additional insights. You should integrate the techniques in such a way that they become synergetic ($1 + 1 = 3$).

- The qualitative insights are reported as part of the quantitative findings, which enriches and supports quantitative insights with statements from consumers. Additionally, it is also important to keep each answer of a respondent in its original form, since that provides you with most insights. That is why coding of open-ends should be avoided. Read the stories and thoughts of consumers and you will get a better picture. Reporting these stories in reports with simple techniques like structured word clouds from different classifications already tell great stories. But you should avoid seeing these word clouds as tables; they paint the picture and generate understanding.

Therefore, we believe that research always need to be qualitative with large numbers of consumers and customers. It enables researchers to validate what they wanted to know and explore what they might have missed otherwise. To come back to the anecdote of the introduction: *"Imagine if I and hundreds of other consumers would have drunk the same drink at home in the garden and we all shared our stories and thoughts afterwards. That would have been really interesting for that company."*

CONCLUSION

Most companies have a strong ambition to grow. The best market research validates, explores, and provides insight, all at the same time. Research should be around listening better to clients and respondents. This results in market research that explores and validates at the same time. It produces richer and deeper insights, which provide answers instead of additional questions. By integrating qualitative and quantitative research in online market research, it allows respondents to indicate their responses in the freest manner possible, without the constrains of the typical lists of statements. Its quantitative parts ensure built-in

validation and makes it suitable for large sample sizes in order to relate to relevant audiences. To summarize the most important take-aways:

- New qualitative techniques enable qualitative research with many respondents. There is no need anymore to conduct qualitative research with a small number of respondents. A validation study also shows that research should be conducted on large numbers of respondents to gain valid insights.
- A common mistake in quantitative research is that qualitative questions are avoided. Reasons for this are

that coding is too time-consuming and expensive or that respondents do not like giving open answers. Both are not valid arguments since if you want to know what people really think, you should read all open answers and keep all information. Besides, coding can be done by respondents themselves, which is quicker, cheaper and more correct. Additionally, respondent who do not like filling in open answers are bad respondents. Open answers are also perfect ways to clean your data.

- Online is the best setting for sharing complex emotions. Respondents are in their own environment and they are

not observed and/or influenced by others. Experience with different online techniques show that respondents share and answer the most honest and extensive when answering online. Doing qualitative research in other settings or at other places has most likely a low correlation with real opinions or behaviour as socially desirable answers are very likely.

- Therefore, our approach to conducting research results in an actionable set of validated and generalizable insights that dig substantially deeper than the majority of market research approaches.

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We believe that research is all about listening. Listening to our clients to make sure the research is embedded in the organisation and answers the right questions, and listening to consumers by giving them the opportunity to express their feelings and share their stories.

We add value by leveraging the experience and expertise of our seasoned research and consultancy team, and staying true to our innovative mass qualitative philosophy.

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