



To paraphrase Mark Twain, reports of the demise of traditional qualitative research methodologies are greatly exaggerated. A paper I co-authored analyzed interviews a colleague and I conducted with research buyers on the usage trends. This included overall relevance of traditional focus groups. To simplify the findings, our work revealed that despite the “trendiness” of focus group bashing (by the likes of Malcolm Gladwell), the people whose budgets counted, were far from abandoning the defining methodologies in the qualitative tool kit.

Now fast forward to this year. We examined the impact ethnography and observational research were having on traditional qualitative research. While our findings supported a heightened interest in ethnography, traditional central location-based qualitative work was still very much in demand. In fact, with the stir created by “reality research,”\* many found the net result was that marketers were more willing to explore a broader range of qualitative research. Perhaps it’s analogous to the halo effect. For example, an author publishes a best selling new novel and his or her earlier works also see a spike in interest. For those who are interested in greater detail on the findings of these two studies, visit [www.sportsandleisureresearch.com/downloads.php](http://www.sportsandleisureresearch.com/downloads.php) for complimentary downloads.

There appears to be a buzz about the transformative potential of online qualitative research. Some research providers tout their capabilities for scraping the blogosphere, by creating and combing Web-based communities, social networking sites and other online conversations. Others peddle virtual focus groups that utilize I-chat and similar technologies. All infer that these approaches are rendering traditional in-person qualitative obsolete. But, forgive me if I don’t rush to my local monument retailer to pick out a fresh headstone for qualitative research

# Let’s Broaden the Qualitative Conversation... But Not Break its Foundation

as we’ve known it. I find too much value in well-conducted traditional qualitative work.

My conviction is fueled by the strengths that have made focus groups and in-person IDIs such a mainstay in our profession. We have all experienced clients who have utilized the term “focus groups” as a generic catch all for any type of marketing research. Let’s face it, focus groups are the “comfort food” of marketers. When done well, they deliver a fundamental opportunity to come face-to-face with consumers in a highly controlled environment. Focus groups elicit and probe for the “how and why’s” not always possible through a quantitative study, while simultaneously satisfying a voyeuristic need for clients’ direct involvement. Some may argue that the same can be said for some of these newer methodologies. To them I will rebut that argument with the same type of reasoning behind why trade shows and conferences will not die. We are a social species by nature, and I maintain that no matter how good a virtual environment we create, nothing will replace the original. There’s clearly something to be said for the process.

There is value from sitting across the room or glass from your customer, looking them in the eye and watching how they digest their way through a projective technique or timely probe from a moderator who is unwilling to accept a cliché or pat response. I’ve found another advantage of central location, face-to-face qualitative work is its ability to allow researcher and client to immerse themselves in an uninterrupted observation of their customers. Both as a client and moderator, throughout my career, I still get a rush out of those “a-ha” moments so unique to face-to-face qualitative and the post mortem client debrief. This often occurs during a late night bonding session in the back of a dimly lit focus room, with favorite beverage in hand. This can’t happen across a communications device. In

an age of attempted commoditization of research services, the ability of that moment to forge and strengthen client relationships is often alone worth the “price of admission.”

Surely technology makes us move quicker and more broadly. It enables us to multitask, and it offers presentation and communication enhancements unimaginable a generation ago. But qualitative research in its purest form draws great strength from the need for direct human interaction and the wonderment it derives. The telephone enabled us to “reach out and touch someone,” but that did not replace our need to literally visit with friends and family. Online dating and social networks have enabled us to expand our social horizons, but I can’t think of anyone who married someone they met online before they met in person.

Therefore (as the two aforementioned studies demonstrated), broadening the qualitative tool kit does not portend an imminent demise for traditional qualitative research. Rather, I think it will further expand our ability to gain insights. Of course you don’t have to take my word for it, and neither will I. In the spirit of our previous studies, plans are already underway to formally test these hypotheses in another research on research effort in the months ahead. I’ll look to many of you for your input.



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\* Last-ism: Jon defines “reality research” as meant to be a metaphor for how the influx of voyeuristic reality television shows have influenced the marketing culture to seek similar “natural” environments from which they can observe consumers.