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# Positioning qualitative market research: reflections from theory and practice

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## Abstract

Discusses a number of important issues pertaining to the domain of qualitative market research. Attempts to define what qualitative research is about and discuss some of the difficulties involved in coming up with a clear definition of the qualitative paradigm. Suggests a number of issues relating to theory and practice that warrant the existence of a new journal devoted specifically to qualitative market research. Concludes with a discussion of validity and reliability in the context of qualitative research.

## Introduction

Marketers are becoming convinced of the fact that qualitative research can contribute significantly to an optimisation of their marketing efforts (Satlow, 1989). However, qualitative research still suffers from an ambivalent image persisting among many practitioners (Coldwell, 1990). Frequently, product or marketing managers can be heard to ask: "How can you say that the results are representative for my customer base on the basis of 20 interviews?" or they sigh in despair: "I cannot face my boss without hard figures". In this way, managers try to interpret the results of qualitative research in a quantitative way and by doing so they lose sight of the essence of this type of research (Gordon and Langmaid, 1988). The ambivalence towards qualitative research is present in academia, too. Qualitative research is often referred to as disreputable research, a field with which successful people do not want to be associated. As a consequence, information on qualitative research and its practical applications is not widely available. Due to this gap in the market research literature, it is hard to gain an insight into the opportunities and advantages that this type of research has to offer. Therefore, at the launch of a new journal on qualitative market research, it seems that there is a need for a clear positioning of the field, in which definitional issues as well as issues related to research on qualitative marketing research are addressed (Calder and Tybout, 1987). In this paper we attempt to define qualitative research and discuss some of the difficulties involved in coming up with a clear definition of the qualitative paradigm. Subsequently, we will outline why there is clearly a need for a journal dealing with qualitative marketing research and suggest a number of topics that may be addressed in research on qualitative research to convince "non-believers" of the quality of qualitative research.

## What is qualitative research?

A number of years ago a manufacturer of razor blades conducted a small scale qualitative study into the possibilities of developing new products. During group discussions with male respondents, the following striking results were obtained. A number of respondents told that they frequently lend their razor blades to their wives to epilate their legs.

From the reactions that these respondents got from their wives it appeared that the shape of the razor blades was not well-suited for this purpose. Therefore, it was decided during the study to conduct a follow-up study involving respondents from this newly discovered target group. On the basis of both qualitative and quantitative market research, it was then decided to develop a new product, specifically designed for women.

This example is meant to show that important market insights may result from a small number of interviews with consumers. The usefulness of qualitative research is not determined by how many consumers say something but by what is being said and how it is being said. In the search for an in-depth insight into the subjects, it is not the power of the numbers that is important but the power of words and images. By offering respondents a creative setting they can express their ideas in a manner that appeals more directly to the imagination.

Qualitative research can first of all be characterised by the use of small samples. The number of respondents seldom reaches 60, and smaller samples of between 15 and 40 respondents are commonly found. What is the value of research on the basis of such small samples? What is the quality of the small “n”, as it is often referred to in market research, what does it have to offer?

Qualitative research offers an insight into questions that address the way people think about a certain subject and why they think that, it does not answer questions like how many people share a certain opinion. Representativeness on the basis of a small sample is not possible. It is not what qualitative research aims for. A careful target group selection and classified sample is needed to make sure all possible views and opinions of consumers may be expressed. Representativeness of the results in accordance with the subject of investigation, not the research population, is what counts. In quantitative research it is attempted to use a sample that reflects the population adequately. In qualitative research the issue is to cover the subject of study comprehensively.

Qualitative and quantitative research are often used in a complementary fashion. Frequently, they are applied in different phases of the same research project. Qualitative research is often of a diagnostic exploratory nature. In scientific research, for instance,

qualitative research is often used to study phenomena about which relatively little is known. In this context, the purpose of research is to formulate theories and/or hypotheses. Apart from this, qualitative methods and techniques can also be used as independent research instruments.

Qualitative research does not measure, it provides insight. This insight can be gained through a process consisting of analysis and meaningful integration of views expressed by respondents (Spiggle, 1994). Attitudes and behaviour are experienced as a whole (Gestalt), partly consciously, partly subconsciously. In qualitative research they are separated into bits and pieces, assigned to abstract dimensions, meanings, motivations, associations and emotions and finally integrated into one overall picture that can be used to guide the marketing policy of organisations. Qualitative research is a questioning search and a search for questions at the same time. Data collection and data analysis take place simultaneously. As became clear from the example introduced at the beginning of this section, qualitative research offers the flexibility to respond to the direction in which conversations with consumers are going. Research that is meant to generate ideas leaves researchers a lot of room. They are even encouraged to take side tracks that may possibly lead to new insights. Protocols that are made on the basis of audio or video tapes are merely tools that can be used in the analysis process. This process takes place predominantly on the basis of an integration of impressions that have been obtained during the entire research path, such as for instance briefing meetings, or interviews with consumers in which verbal and non-verbal information play an equally important role.

Hence, qualitative research provides an in-depth insight; it is flexible, small-scale and exploratory and the results obtained are concrete, real-life like and full of ideas. Qualitative research has not only proven to be useful for market research purposes in practice, it is also widely used by management consultants and public policy makers. It provides an answer to questions in areas like:

- *strategic marketing*: how can I describe the various target groups in terms of needs, wants and behaviour?
- *consumer decision making*: why do consumers buy this product and not the other?

- *customer satisfaction*: how satisfied are my customers, what makes them satisfied and how can I increase their satisfaction?
- *communication*: how is my concept ad understood and appreciated and how far does it encourage consumers to actually take action?
- *idea generation*: which latent needs and motives are there in this product area and what are the possibilities of addressing these?
- *product and concept development*: how can I meet my customers' needs and wants in the most optimal way (in terms of the physical product, packaging, promotion and distribution)?
- *development of questionnaires*: which themes are important in a given market or in relation to a certain product and what are the words consumers use to describe aspects of those?

Several techniques are currently used in qualitative research. These are primarily tools that can help the researcher to uncover meanings and intentions. We can distinguish two types of these tools:

- (1) *Elicitation techniques*. These are techniques that are meant to elicit certain responses from respondents such as primary reactions, unconscious feelings, associations in images, positive or negative aspects, etc. Examples of these techniques are the photosort in which respondents are invited to group images or pictures in relation to a certain product or service and constructing a collage in cooperation with others that represent a product or theme in their lives (Ball and Smith, 1992).
- (2) *Analysis techniques or models*. These are models of interpretation regarding consumer behaviour that can be used to place consumer reactions in a broader context. The results are interpreted in accordance with a scientifically developed framework. In this way, results from qualitative research that are classified in this way may be a useful addition to insights based on common sense. An example of such an analysis technique would be the means-end chain, which is often used in combination with the laddering technique (Gutman, 1991).

Elicitation and analysis techniques can be used independently. However, frequently they

are used in combinations in such a way that a standardised way of obtaining data from consumers yields answers that are translated in a standardised way into insights into consumer behaviour. A typical example would be the technique which is called "mindmapping" whereby respondents are asked which associations they have in relation to a brand or product (e.g. Volkswagen) (Gordon and Cowley, 1991). Subsequently, he/she is asked which associations go with one specific response (e.g. "solid"). After that, a subsequent association concerning this response (e.g. Miele) is asked from the respondent. In this way a map of associations can be drawn around the initial stimulus word and its various associations. This map offers an insight into association patterns. It is implied that association patterns serve an important function in the way in which decision processes take place in a consumer's mind. Elicitation technique and model of analysis form a unified entity.

### Can we capture the essence of qualitative research in a journal?

The literature on marketing can nowadays be used to fill bookshelf after bookshelf. Likewise, books on marketing research have gained their own space on the shop shelf. Within the marketing research literature the focus is predominantly on quantitative methods; the body of literature on qualitative research is relatively small. This is no doubt a direct consequence of the fact that qualitative research makes up only a small part of the total turnover of market research. However, if one takes the total number of research projects that employ qualitative research methods and techniques into account then it must be concluded that qualitative research has a substantial share of the market research market. Why, then, is there only a limited body of literature available on qualitative research methods and techniques?

There are a number of possible explanations.

### Qualitative techniques are less founded in scientific traditions

Quantitative methods and techniques offer better conditions for "strict" scientific testing. The number of scientific studies that use quantitative methods is considerably larger than the number of studies using a qualitative approach. This is undoubtedly due to the fact

that quantitative research techniques can more aptly be used for hypothesis testing. The success of these methods can be ascertained using a wide variety of statistical procedures.

Qualitative research on the other hand is more aimed at generating new hypotheses. Science finds it difficult to get a grip on creative processes that form an important part of qualitative research. Hardly any scientific instruments are available to test techniques that generate ideas on their scientific worth and rigour. Increasingly, however, fundamental research is conducted into the quality requirements (i.e. validity and reliability) of qualitative research (Sykes, 1991).

### **Qualitative techniques as the marketing tools of market research companies**

In the practice of market research a great deal of knowledge and expertise in the field of qualitative research has been acquired. This knowledge and expertise, however, has remained largely in the heads of researchers that use the methods and techniques on a daily basis. Qualitative market researchers are closely involved in all phases of a research project: the preparation, data collection, data analysis and reporting phases. In addition, they are responsible and accountable for promotion, acquisition and the training of junior staff. The attention devoted to their own personal training is divided between following trends in the research market and the development of new products, i.e. new research methods and techniques. As a result there is hardly any time to trust their own experience and expertise to paper.

Moreover, as qualitative techniques are often regarded as proprietary products of research companies the development of new approaches is hardly visible to those with a (professional) interest in the field. Finally, the results of research on concept or product development are often considered as confidential and the occasional practical cases presented at seminars and conferences are often no more than promotional material aimed at profiling the research company. They almost exclusively focus on the success of a certain approach and the audience is thereby denied the lesson that can be drawn from any disadvantages or less successful applications. Hence, market researchers have little opportunity to exchange experience and information regarding the usefulness and

effectiveness of qualitative methods and techniques.

### **Qualitative research is difficult to describe**

Quantitative techniques are relatively objective measurement instruments that can be described in great detail. Of course, it requires considerable expertise to select the appropriate research design in relation to a specific research question and the analysis and interpretation of the results requires research and market experience (Berlamino, 1992; Marshall and Rossman, 1989). However, equipped with this experience, sufficient insight into a marketing problem can be obtained as long as the steps of the method are followed accurately. In qualitative research the choice of the research technique plays a less important role. The end result is determined to a much larger extent by the researcher's personality (style, social skills) and his/her vision on the consumer/customer (theoretical models and information on consumer behaviour). The central role of the researcher's personality, however, does not imply that it is useless to describe the methods and techniques in research articles. It does make us aware of the fact that writings on qualitative research are a necessary but by no means sufficient condition to guarantee the quality of qualitative research.

In the sections below we will describe a number of developments on the sides of demand and supply in the market research market. These developments largely determine the nature of qualitative research.

### **Growing interest on the demand side**

Although an increase in the number of qualitative research projects has remained largely unnoticed, it is commonly agreed by market researchers that the interest in qualitative research will steadily increase in the decade ahead. This belief is based on a number of factors which we will discuss briefly below.

### **Information explosion as a result of an advancing information technology**

As a result of advances in information technology, there is an increasing amount of quantitative market information available to organisations.

For instance, retailers can forward real-time information on product turnover directly

via EDI-based applications. Moreover, the use of electronic payments (via credit cards) and loyalty marketing programmes such as “frequent flyer miles” has increased the quantity of quantitative information available to marketers considerably. However, in many cases it still holds that “the more you know, the more you want to know why”. Increasingly, therefore, marketers turn to qualitative research to see what is behind all the numbers.

### **More emphasis on share of customer instead of share of market**

Many companies are trying to be market- and consumer-oriented and do their utmost to know their customers well. They want to gain insight in the attitude and behaviour of their customers that form the market share which is usually expressed in percentages. However, the present day customer can no longer be easily pigeon-holed according to traditional segmentation criteria. Marketing is suffering from its own success: an ever growing number of companies applies marketing tools and as a result products and services have improved and hence are very similar. The consequence of this is that it is increasingly difficult for manufacturers or service providers to come up with a unique market positioning. From this perspective, the value of brands and images is becoming increasingly important in the consumer decision process. Insight in the perception of the individual customer forms crucial information for “brand manufacturers”. Qualitative research is especially suited to provide this type of information.

### **Marketing cycles are becoming shorter, this requires flexible research**

In times that are characterised by an ever-increasing number of trends following each other, companies have to react swiftly to the wants and needs of what is sometimes called the “moment-consumer”. Qualitative methods and techniques enable marketers to reach the flexibility that is needed in present-day marketing.

### **The researcher increasingly becomes consultant**

On the demand side, a seemingly contrasting development with regard to market research may be observed. With respect to large-scale quantitative research, only the data collection phase is now carried out by market research

companies. Important reasons for this development are the increased level of competence and data analysis expertise on the part of the in-company market researcher and the fact that quantitative data have become well integrated within the internal marketing information system (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Therefore, in addition to the large “data collection factories” there appears to be a market for small-scale, specialist agencies that focus more on advising companies in the areas of marketing and organisation. This advice is predominantly based on qualitative research.

### **Trends on the supply side**

Besides the aforementioned developments on the demand side, a number of trends on the supply side of qualitative research can be observed also.

### **Practical knowledge about qualitative research increases**

The cold water fear concerning qualitative research is slowly decreasing among marketers and researchers. This is largely due to the fact that more attention is paid to qualitative methods and techniques in education and managerial training. As a consequence, marketers obtain more knowledge on the possibilities and impossibilities of qualitative techniques.

### **Qualitative research is professionalising**

In the practice of market research, qualitative research is increasingly approached in a professional manner. Market research branch organisations are formulating quality requirements that serve as guidelines in qualitative market research projects; and these guidelines can be used by companies that have ordered the research to be conducted.

### **Information technology in qualitative research**

The qualitative research process has been influenced by developments in the areas of telecommunications and information technology, too (Fielding and Lee, 1991). Teleconferencing facilities can be used to collect data. Product or communication concepts can immediately be adjusted on the basis of respondent reactions so that pre-test-research is becoming more effective, and in the data analysis phase too, the computer can play an

important role. For instance, there are a number of software packages available for content analysing respondent reactions and composing a data matrix on the basis of verbal information. This reduces the time spent on analysing verbal information considerably. The application of advanced information technology results in a more efficient and standardised research process.

There is a large number of qualitative techniques. In most cases recent developments pertain to adaptations or improvements of existing research techniques; only in a few cases is an entirely new technique being developed. In universities there has been a renewed interest in qualitative research methods and techniques. This, in turn, has led to the application of these techniques by market research organisations. Some instances are:

- *Laddering*, a direct research technique which involves bringing to the forefront the underlying meanings, values or dimensions in a structured manner.
- *Neuro-linguistic programming*, a technique that aims to analyse non-verbal information that respondents unconsciously supply during interviews.
- *Motivation research*, a method which is essentially based on the techniques of psychoanalysis. This technique is sometimes used as complementary to other, more cognitively oriented, research techniques.

When looking at the development of new qualitative research techniques, it can be observed that there is an increased interest in hybrid techniques, i.e. techniques that consist of both quantitative and qualitative elements. In this way, the weak points of one technique can be obviated by the strong aspect of another, for example, when a relatively large number of interviews is conducted on the basis of a quantitative sample size whereby respondents are invited to answer open-ended qualitative research questions. Afterwards, the results are statistically processed. Such an approach is used with the critical incident technique. The case study method is another example of a hybrid method that can be used to focus on a specific research topic (Yin, 1989).

Another example forms the SMART technique (developed by Research International), in which a qualitative phase is used to construct scales for service quality. These qualita-

tively composed scales are subsequently presented to a large number of respondents.

Finally, it can be observed that an increasing emphasis is placed on non-verbal, visual aspects in qualitative research. The recently developed Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) (Zaltman and Higie, 1993) invites respondents to provide images for a concept with the help of a camera. Furthermore, collage techniques can be used to gain an insight into the image of brands. Respondents cut pictures from a large bunch of magazines and paste these on large boards. Every board represents one brand. The selection of pictures takes place impulsively; respondents hardly stop to think about the reason for their choice. In this way a nice picture of emotional perception of brands is created.

### The quality of qualitative research

Critics of qualitative research often refer to the fact that this type of research does not meet the demands of validity and reliability, criteria which are generally regarded as the cornerstone of any research. Indeed, as a result of the relative freedom and lack of structure and rigour characteristic of most qualitative research methods it is easy to question validity and reliability in their traditional sense (Kirk and Miller, 1986; Warren, 1991; Warren and Cragg, 1991). However, there is an increasing number of authors who argue that research on qualitative research should focus on developing criteria. We believe that additional research is needed into how the quality of qualitative research can be warranted. Below we discuss some of the issues that may be addressed.

### Validity and the real-life context

Validity in its quantitative sense refers to the correctness of the operationalisation of constructs that are used in the research project. In contrast, in qualitative research the issue is often how to gather information so that an optimal operationalisation can be achieved at a later stage in the research. By using open research questions, ideas and constructs are being developed through communication with a specific target group. Moreover, there is also the possibility of checking certain facts during the research, to elaborate on issues that come up and to ask for reasons and arguments that lie behind the facts. Issues that do

not appear to be relevant can be left out or be replaced during the research. Also, in qualitative research respondents are often invited to respond in their own words to the stimuli offered by the researcher. An in-depth insight into respondent perceptions offers the possibility to acquire an accurate operationalisation of the constructs that are used in the research. Therefore, the validity of qualitative research is primarily related to the fact that constructs are closely aligned to their real-life context. Results become meaningful in relation to the respondent's everyday reality. In this sense, one could argue that qualitative research offers the possibility of ecological validity. Future research is needed to study how this type of validity can be optimised. One direction for additional research could be to investigate whether data collection (interviews, focus groups) in the respondent's own environment could improve the validity of qualitative research.

#### **Reliability by systematic operation**

The reliability of qualitative research, in the sense of comparability of reproducibility, is often questioned. For instance, the results of two focus sessions may vary to a large extent pointing in the direction of questionable reliability (Burton *et al.*, 1977; Cartwright and Zander, 1968; Claxton *et al.*, 1980). However, an in-depth insight into the motivations and perceptions of respondents does not primarily require reproducibility. Instead, it requires a feeling for the logic and psychology of as well as certain "drivers" of consumer behaviour. Therefore, it frequently occurs that the emphasis in a research project is shifted and new questions are raised in the quest to look behind the facts. This flexibility is a clear advantage of qualitative research and is rated as more important than reliability in the sense of reproducibility. This does not mean, however, that qualitative research is merely asking a number of open-ended questions. On the contrary, by operating in a systematic way in the interview or focus groups, the reliability of qualitative research can be warranted. In fact, it could be argued that systematic operation is needed at the level of the research design (methods and techniques, interview protocols, etc.) but that freedom is needed to zoom in on points of interest that come up during the research. A systematic operation can also be achieved by linking responses to theoretical models and

concepts that lie at the heart of a research technique (e.g. the means-end chain in the case of the laddering technique (Valette-Florence and Rapacchi, 1991)). In addition the reliability of qualitative research can be grounded in an accurate description of the steps that have been taken in the collection and analysis of data, so that other researchers wishing to follow in their colleagues' footsteps can trace back the original research design. More research is needed into the development of theoretical models as well as criteria that enable more systematic operation in qualitative research.

#### **In conclusion**

In this article we have attempted to outline some of the issues that qualitative research both in academia and practice are struggling with and probably will be struggling with in the years to come. One issue is the definitional issue. Further conceptualisation from various perspectives, such as the positivist, postpositivist, humanist, structural and postmodernist perspectives needs to clarify and delineate our field of interest. Moreover, reflection on the application of various research methods needs to take the field of qualitative market research into new directions. It is hoped that contributions to *Qualitative Marketing Research* will be a help in dealing with the struggle. In addition to the issues raised in this paper, we feel that matters such as the selection of respondents, aspects of sampling, the multiple roles of the qualitative researcher and the issue of preliminary versus definitive findings. The selection of respondents is often very selective as one needs respondents that adhere to very specific selection criteria in order to be able to focus on the variables that are relevant for the research. Additional research is needed into the consequences of the qualitative selection process and the role of, for instance, selection agencies. In addition, not much is known about efficient and effective sampling. In qualitative research practice a set number of respondents is often based on personal experience and/or costs. Systematic research into the effects of, for instance, sample size is needed. Furthermore, the qualitative researcher often assumes multiple roles in the research process. Frequently, the researcher personally collects the data as interviewer or group moderator, writes the research report and at the same time hosts the research customer who is often present

during the data collection process. A possible biasing effect on the research results could be the result. Finally, clients often demand immediate conclusions from the research after they have witnessed data collection. Such conclusions may be based only on aspects that are striking at first sight and an in-depth analysis may easily yield different results. These are problem areas that play an essential role in the practice of qualitative market research and solutions to these problems may be offered by research into qualitative market research.

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