**A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH CHALLENGE**

# 7 DAYS, 7 COUNTRIES, 7 WAYS

Qualitative technology is busy issuing promises to make research better, faster and cheaper. But can it live up to the hype?

BY JIM BRYSON

**T**raditional, in-person, international qualitative research is slow and difficult. Researchers must nation-hop, hiring moderators and translators along the way. Multinational, multicultural, multilingual research complicates logistics, travel, execution, reporting and budgets, and always seems to take more time than it saves.

But new trends in technology are helping researchers reduce the time, budget and complications in multinational qualitative research, so we challenged ourselves to apply new research technology around the world in a week. Here, I detail what my colleagues and I call the "three sevens challenge" and the myriad insights we discovered.

Qualitative technology is on a roll. It seems that every day a new technology is announced that promises to make research better, faster and cheaper.

But is that really the case? Is technology truly increasing the researcher's ability to get deeper insights to better inform marketing decisions? Is qualitative technology really facilitating dependable research at the speed of business today? And is it truly driving down the overall cost of research?

For each of these questions, the answer is a resounding but qualified "Yes." But for new research methods to be better, faster and cheaper, you have to know what "qualified" means and how it changes for each method.

We recently issued ourselves a challenge—which we called the "three sevens challenge"—to test the efficacy of different research technologies in striving to quickly implement superior research on a decreasing budget. The challenge was to create a global research design to test a new snack food concept that can be completed in seven days, in seven countries, in seven different ways and show that it is better, faster and cheaper than the alternatives. For the challenge, we assumed the target population is mothers of children age 6 to 10 who purchase snack food weekly. The countries, which included both developed and developing nations, were Australia, Brazil, Germany, India, Russia, the U.K. and the U.S. Additionally, the research designs had to be available and practical today.

### TIME CRUNCH

Obviously, time constraints are a massive barrier in this project. Seven countries in seven days is virtually impossible to do in person. So the very structure of this challenge necessitated a variety of methods utilizing technology and a team of researchers (with only one to two on the ground) to complete the project within the seven-day time frame.

### INTERNET CONSIDERATIONS

Because the design must rely on Internet and mobile technology, we must consider up front how these variables impact our research effectiveness.

Online qualitative research did not begin to grow significantly in the United States until 2006 when Internet penetration reached about 60% of U.S. households. Europe experienced a similar adoption pattern.

### MOBILE CONSIDERATIONS

Most research designs utilizing technology must incorporate mobile. In developed countries, some respondents use mobile devices to access the Internet more than they use computers. In developing countries, many consumers have skipped the computer technology adoption phase altogether and moved directly to 100% mobile Internet accessibility.

## RESEARCH DESIGN STRATEGY FRAMEWORK

Because the countries selected have widely varying penetration rates for the Internet and for mobile smartphone devices, specific methodologies had to conform to the market realities of technology adoption and use. Additionally, we created a research design that moves from exploratory research to validation within the seven-day execution window.

Our research design had three distinct phases:
1. An exploratory phase to understand specific questions surrounding the snack food category in different regions of the world;
2. A concept testing phase; and
3. A validation phase so the researcher can get "up close and personal" with respondents and the winning concept(s) to validate the findings from previous phases.

## PHASE I: SNACK FOOD EXPLORATORY

### DAY 1
### AUSTRALIA: MOBILE GEO-LOCATION INTERCEPTS

The first day's research objective was to better understand the perception of in-store snack food shoppers. The mobile geo-location design utilized panelists who agreed to be contacted for research purposes when their phone was near a location of interest. Australia is an excellent market for this research because of its high market penetration rate for smartphones.

The technology identified panelists who were in or near a store that sold snack foods. Those panelists received a notification and invitation to participate in an immediate research opportunity, and then sent a very short screening questionnaire to ensure they fit the target market profile. Those who qualified participated in an on-the-spot interview.

The interviewer may ask the respondent a variety of questions to explore purchase intent, shopping habits and impressions, snack food choice patterns, etc. Once the interview is completed, the respondent

continues her shopping day and the interviewers move on to the next waiting respondent. Because interviews are typically short, by the end of the day an interviewer can conduct many "on-site" interviews.

The mobile geo-location interviews proved faster, as they were held in real time, and cheaper, since recruiting costs and incentives were low and there was no travel. However, whether the technique was truly better received a mixed reaction. In-person interviews yield more data but are limited to specific interviewer locations.

### DAY 2
### UNITED KINGDOM: LIVE MOBILE ETHNOGRAPHY

On day two, the research moved to the other side of the globe and used another in-depth mobile technology to explore the use of snack food in homes.

Live mobile ethnography utilized mobile streaming technology to conduct live video interviews through mobile devices and a wireless Internet connection. The technology works well in homes because consumers typically have strong and consistent wireless Internet throughout the home.

Respondents were pre-recruited to fit the target market and to have in-home wireless Internet. At the specified time, the interviewer called the respondent and began the streaming video interview. The respondent spoke with the interviewer while walking around the home using her smartphone to show the pantry, refrigerator, kitchen or other places where snack food might be stored or consumed.

| DAY | METHOD | LOCATION |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Mobile Geo-Location Intercepts | Australia |
| 2 | Live Mobile Ethnography | United Kingdom |
| 3 | Mobile Journaling | Brazil |
| 4 | Online Blogging | India |
| 4 | Online Bulletin Board | Russia, United States, Brazil, India |
| 5 | Online Bulletin Board Continued | |
| 6 | Social Media Webcam Interview | Germany |
| 7 | In-Depth Interviews | United States |

If we assume a 45-minute interview, our study could complete 10 in-home mobile ethnographies in an eight-hour day spread throughout the U.K. Geography is irrelevant. Our interviewer remains in her home or office while technology transports her to respondents' homes in just a few seconds. Because of this, live mobile ethnography is both faster and cheaper due to the elimination of travel. Although the method is not better if compared to long-form ethnology, it is significantly better than asynchronous "digital ethnography" or in-depth phone interviews.

### DAY 3
### BRAZIL: MOBILE JOURNALING
Day three presents our first major challenge. Because of the size of the market, the widely differing culture and the speed of Brazil's development, it is imperative that we conducted exploratory research in Brazil for this project. Brazil's smartphone penetration is relatively low compared to more developed countries in our study. Even so, we could conduct research using smartphones in Brazil.

The mobile journaling method utilizes a smartphone application that can be downloaded for iOS and Android operating systems. The app allowed the researcher to send assignments to the respondent. The respondent could upload pictures, video and text directly from the smartphone to the researcher's online platform so that it was viewable, searchable and ready for analysis.

We asked 20 respondents from across Brazil to journal several activities, which included:
- A short (less than 3 minute) video each time they or their children have a snack. On the video, they told why they chose that snack, showed the snack, and showed the person eating the snack.
- A shopping trip to purchase snacks, which included sending a picture of the snack shelf where the snack is purchased and accompanying text about why they purchased a particular snack food.

The activities and questions can be as widely varying or as narrowly constructed as the interviewer desires. Though we designed this study as a single day, it would commonly occur over several days to include more opportunities to capture a family's snacking habits and preferences.

This method was faster, since it yielded 20 respondents in a single day, and cheaper, since travel was eliminated and little time was spent interviewing and moderating. (However, significant time was spent analyzing video and other input.) But compared to a live ethnography, mobile journaling was not viewed as better since quality is respondent-controlled and varies widely. It is, however, excellent for peeking into the lives of a diverse target market to gain understanding and perspective.

### DAY 3
### INDIA: ONLINE BLOGGING
Because India is very low in overall technology adoption, it is a challenging country for technology-based research. Smartphone penetration is only 6%. The Internet and Mobile Association of India estimates online penetration at 11.4% in 2012. Therefore, for India, we selected a technology solution that required low bandwidth and provided the greatest coverage: the blog.

Here, an individual documented their experiences in text—and for respondents with greater bandwidth—included photos and video. The researcher provided assignments and asked questions while the respondent blogged their responses in free-form prose.

Because the online blog is primarily text-based, it has at least two advantages. More Internet users can access it easily since it requires low bandwidth. Thus, the study can be conducted in various regions, not just the urban areas with higher socio-economic groups. Also, text-based methods are easier to translate and easier to analyze, facilitating faster analysis and insight.

Therefore, blogging is as a better option compared to other high-bandwidth options available today, but it's not a better option compared to more in-depth, in-person research. Data collection via the Internet means blogging is a significantly fast option for text-based analysis. It's also cheaper since travel isn't necessary and there is little interviewing/moderating time. Additionally, analysis time in text-based solutions measured less than video.

## PHASE II: SNACK FOOD CONCEPT TESTING

### DAYS 4-5
### RUSSIA, UNITED STATES, BRAZIL, INDIA: ONLINE BULLETIN BOARDS
After the previous exploratory phases to understand the snack food category in key global markets, we tested concepts in the four markets where the products have the

greatest sales opportunity: Russia, the United States, Brazil and India.

For speed and clarity, we conducted four online bulletin boards, one in each native language: Russian, English, Portuguese and Hindi.

The research design incorporated two days of online discussion designed to produce an iterative concept development process yielding further refined concepts. The bulletin boards had the following five discussion sections:

### FIRST DAY
- Introduction and warm-up
- Usage and attitudes questions
- Test initial concepts

### SECOND DAY
- Test refined concepts
- Discussion of attitudes and use of refined concepts

To facilitate analysis, the bulletin boards employed instantaneous translation technology so the researcher and the clients could analyze the research in their native language as it progressed. Such technology is crucial to this iterative concept evaluation since concepts need to be refined between day one and day two.

The concept testing sections used a qualitative concept evaluation plug-in to generate heat maps with feedback on the initial concepts presented. Once the concepts were refined, the same technology was employed to provide feedback and scoring on the revised concepts on day two.

The concept testing capabilities available today provide more data than typical interviewing methodologies, which makes the online bulletin board a better method. However, loss of spontaneity and non-verbal cues can be a significantly negative effect. Due to no travel time and simultaneous research across time zones, instantaneous translations and reporting capabilities and easy iterative testing, the online bulletin board is faster. In addition, zero travel and the ability to combine two or more projects into one means the method is cheaper.

## PHASE III: SNACK FOOD CONCEPT VALIDATION

This validation phase ensured the resulting concept is the right one for the most important rollout markets. For this step, we have chosen in-person, individual, in-depth interviews (IDIs) to deeply understand individuals utilizing both cognitive verbal and subconscious, non-verbal feedback.

### DAY 6
#### GERMANY: SOCIAL MEDIA WEBCAM INTERVIEW

After the online bulletin board concept tests, the field of product concepts is narrowed to one or two winning executions. We want to be sure our final concept is appealing in the largest consumer market in the European Union: Germany.

Since Germany has more than 25 million Facebook subscribers, we have chosen the social media webcam interview as the fastest method to recruit and interview respondents in our target market.

## IN PRACTICE, SOME METHODS ARE BEST UTILIZED WITH SLIGHTLY MORE TIME IN EXECUTION, BUT KNOWLEDGEABLE RESEARCHERS WILL KNOW HOW TO BEST MIX THE METHODS TO IMPROVE INSIGHTS, REDUCE TIME AND REDUCE COSTS BETTER THAN EVER BEFORE.

This method used social media to recruit respondents, so recruiting and interviewing could be completed in a single day. We simply included a link on the client's Facebook site or on another site frequented by snack food buyers. Potential respondents opted in by following the link to a short screener that determined whether they qualified for the study. Qualified respondents with a webcam are invited to a virtual lobby for their interview to begin.

When the interviewer was ready, the respondent was linked to the interviewer and the interview began. The interviewer introduced the concepts, asked follow-up questions and probed as necessary. Thanks to the webcam, the interviewer (and viewing clients) could note facial expressions, body language and other non-verbal cues for additional learning and/or follow-up.

Once the interview concluded, the next respondent was linked from the virtual lobby to the interview and the next session began. The process continued until the interviewer had all the necessary information. Then, the link was deleted and the flow of respondents stopped.

The method of social media webcam interviewing was better because non-verbal clues were available, spontaneity was possible, and it was less "real" compared to in-person. It was also faster because it eliminated travel time and recruiting lead-up and was held in real-time. Additionally, the method was cheaper because it eliminated travel and had less expensive recruiting and incentives.

### DAY 7

#### UNITED STATES: IN-PERSON, IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

The final method—the in-person, in-depth interview (IDI)—wrapped up our week of research. We conducted a day of IDIs of approximately 45 minutes each at a central location where a couple of staffers were needed on the ground. Respondents were pre-recruited to fit our screening criteria. In eight hours of interviewing, we conducted 10 IDIs.

Each IDI probed use of snack foods—as well as shopping/buying habits—with the respondent, her children and other members of her family. The interviewer presented the final concept(s) to gain verbal and non-verbal interest and purchase intent as well as understand how the concept might fit into the respondent's lifestyle.

This method served as a culmination of the exploratory, concept testing and validation phases to verify, in-person, that the resulting product has a good chance of being a success.

In-person IDIs have the ability to probe and understand context, motivations, non-verbal clues and the possibility of spontaneity, so the in-person IDIs methodology is deemed better. However, it isn't faster thanks to typical lead up in recruiting and execution, and there are execution and travel costs associated.

### CONCLUSION

This challenge demonstrates some amazing recent advances in qualitative research technology. In practice, some methods are best utilized with slightly more time in execution, but knowledgeable researchers will know how to best mix the methods to improve insights, reduce time and reduce costs better than ever before.

Overall, these guidelines can mitigate contradictions that compromise institutional intuition. As a result, executives and analysts will begin to develop mutual appreciation for learning, making choices and driving confident decisions in our complex world. Just as we evolved from green screens to empowerment, the next generation of decision-making promises alignment between the numbers and the stories they tell. **MI**

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