

# Doing More with More

Multi-phase and hybrid studies yield greater depth

While single-phase consumer engagement still has its place, a new trend in global marketing research is the rise of multi-part or hybrid research projects.



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**A**s greater and greater numbers of developed and semi-developed countries refine their internet infrastructures and services, digital research technologies are allowing more global researchers to engage consumers quickly, easily and affordably—at a variety of times, in a range of settings and long after they’ve left the focus group.

One of the most effective strategies emerging today in global qualitative research is the rise of multi-part or hybrid research projects. Some researchers have found this to be their “secret weapon” for achieving the client goal of providing more insights, faster, while at the same time helping to keep project costs low.

The basic concept of multi-modal research is fairly straightforward: instead of relying on a single phase of consumer engagement, such as a one- or two-hour focus group session, a researcher instead engages with the customer two or more times in a variety of formats. In the past, the concept of continuing the conversation after the focus group, or perhaps interviewing participants three or four times during different periods in their path to purchase, might have seemed like an impossibility. The cost and logistics of reconnecting with consumers in a strictly face-to-face world limited our ability to engage past a single focus group experience.

However, we don’t live in a strictly face-to-face world anymore. Online qualitative research platforms afford any researcher a multitude of simple-to-use and flexible solutions to craft a custom hybrid project with relative ease.

#### **REACHING FURTHER FOR INSIGHTS**

One key area where hybrid projects succeed is their ability to easily carry a conversation with consumers over an extended period of time. Historically, longitudinal qualitative projects were some of the most costly and difficult research methods. However, today’s digital techniques provide a tremendous advantage for longer term participant engagements.

One of the most powerful applications of hybrid approaches couples a face-to-face session with a follow-up online discussion days or weeks after the focus group. This “debrief” session can often yield amazing new insights that weren’t captured in the first event. It allows researchers to refine concepts based on

prior feedback and revisit the ideas with the same participants who participated in the first sessions.

As researchers, we can often forget how unusual the focus group environment can be for a respondent. A consumer is asked to visit an office in a building they’ve likely never entered, sit around a table surrounded by a handful of strangers and answer questions about products they use at home—all while glancing uncomfortably at reflections in a giant mirrored wall. While an effective moderator can alleviate much of this uneasiness, it can still be a tremendous challenge to develop rapport, present brand new concepts or ideas, moderate a lively discussion and cover all the primary topics in a 60- or 90-minute session.

Most researchers will quickly admit that many, if not most, of their groups could benefit from more time in discussion. However, by the time the 90 minutes is up, some participants are nearing the end of their natural attention span, while others must return to their lives, jobs and families outside of market research.

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This is where the debrief online session comes in. Instead of bidding farewell to these respondents forever, you can instead enrol them in a three-day online bulletin-board discussion or invite them to a webcam group a few days or weeks after the focus group. You are provided an opportunity to hear from the consumers after the ideas presented in the groups have gestated. Researchers tell countless stories of product concepts that just didn't get traction in the groups—yet after a few days' thought, many participants begin to see benefits (or concerns) they hadn't formulated during the short time in the focus group.

The debrief sessions are a perfect opportunity to revisit key discussion topics that might have been short-changed in the live sessions. In effect, you are given a second chance to engage with these respondents and cover content that was skipped—or perhaps content that didn't even exist—at the time of the first phase. How many times have you left a project wishing you could go back and ask each respondent a few more questions? How many times has your client come to you wanting to keep the respondents in the group just a few minutes longer? If you're like most researchers, this is a frequent occurrence.

The ease of joining one of these digital conversations means that most, if not all,

participants will be willing and able to be contacted—for very little additional effort or incentive (typically, participants are paid less than 50% additional honoraria for the digital debrief). Additionally, the cost of an online webcam group or bulletin board discussion is generally a small fraction of the overall project cost.

### CONTEXTUALISING THE PATH TO PURCHASE

Hybrid qualitative methodologies are gaining traction as a way to develop an immersive understanding of the consumer path to purchase and a more direct mechanism to study real-world habits and practices.

In the past, qualitative researchers struggled to adequately capture a broad consumer experience. Traditional single-phase research often consisted of a single interview or focus group in which the participants recounted a decision-making or buying process based largely on individual recall. Realising the shortcomings of relying on accurate depictions from consumer memory, qualitative researchers often relied on the paper diary or journal method to more adequately capture these events.

But what happens when a researcher replaces that paper diary with a digital tool? Take, for example, a recent project in Southeast Asia, in which the paper diary was replaced with a mobile-enabled qualitative discussion. For two weeks, 30 consumers documented each alcoholic beverage they purchased or consumed via a smartphone app, submitting hundreds of photos and videos that captured their purchase and consumption patterns. During that two-week data-gathering phase, participants could also log on to an online conversation in which the moderator created a rich dialogue about alcohol trends.

After the two-week mobile data gathering phase, the consumers were invited to a mix of face-to-face sessions and online individual webcam interviews (depending on their proximity to a central facility). The moderator used the consumers' individually generated content and their actual usage photos, videos and diaries to develop a custom-tailored conversation based on each individual's

unique habits. Rather than walking "cold" into a one-on-one interview with a stranger, the moderator and participant were able to continue their existing relationship during their first face-to-face chat. The level of rapport between them was high, as they'd spent the past two weeks engaging and getting to know one another in an online discussion. This allowed the researcher to engage in a frank and honest conversation with the participant on a topic that is, for some, a sensitive subject. In this case, the researcher felt the level of accuracy in the digital diary greatly exceeded a typical paper journal, and the hybrid approach meant a more comfortable discussion with the consumers in the face-to-face setting.

### A NEW DAY FOR RESEARCH

There's a lot of talk in our industry around the challenges facing today's researchers, much of it seeming to imply or assume that, as a group, we're somehow unfit for the future. It seems some pundits want to argue that researchers aren't up to the task and that our industry is forever stuck in the past.

That's not how I see it. From where I sit, I see a new day dawning for research.

Every day, I see more and more researchers rising to action. Practitioners across the globe are realising that today's digital tools, coupled with an existing mastery of research methods, allow them to gaze deeper into the consumer experience and uncover fresh new insights. With each bespoke project design, I'm seeing creativity flourish and renewed excitement in our industry. The one-size-fits-all mold is breaking, and a new age of mixed method, hybrid and truly custom-tailored design is upon us. **RW**



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