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# THE GREAT QUAL/QUANT DIVIDE

How integrated research will become the new normal

“We build too many walls and not enough bridges.”

–Isaac Newton

**O**verheard at a new-project proposal meeting: corporate researcher: *This research project will require quantitative data backed by qualitative insights. We need the data in days, not weeks.*

[Large global research firm]: *No problem. We can get the quantitative done, but it will take a little longer for me to find a contact in our qualitative team and loop them in.*

[Small qualitative supplier]: *That's a tight timeline, but I can do the qualitative. The quantitative will take a little longer, but I do have a friend in Berlin who is an excellent numbers guy.*

It's fictional, but scenarios like this do occur all across the research world. Right now, there is an iron curtain of sorts that divides quantitative and qualitative research. In large firms, quant people often do not know the qual people, and vice versa. They often work in different buildings and even in different cities. Many times, it's more difficult for a large quant supplier to work with its own qualitative team than to outsource the qualitative research to a totally unrelated entity.

Small research shops represent the other end of the spectrum. These are the quantitative-and-qualitative specialists. They know their business, and they do it very well, but the very specialisation that makes them unique also isolates them.

This wall of specialisation is a relic of days gone by. It came to pass in the 1960s, with the ascent of qualitative research as a research discipline. Quantitative people either did not believe in or did not feel comfortable dabbling in the “touchy-feely” art form of qualitative research. So qualitative specialists arrived to practice the art of qualitative distinctly apart from the science of quantitative. Thus, specialisation and segregation were born.

## NOW IT'S TIME FOR THEM TO GO

Today's consumer insights managers do not have time for phased or staged qual-quant research that requires weeks, or even months, to complete. Decisions must be made quickly. Too often,

key research components are scratched out of projects simply because they require too much time. A research project with two or three phases, each leading to deeper insights, is reduced to a single phase and methodology that can be delivered within the specified time frame—but at the expense of key insights.

Research has to learn to move at the speed of business. Qualitative and quantitative research specialties that are separated by literal and figurative walls slow the research process and degrade the quality of research. These walls must come down.

Fortunately, technology is beginning to help break down such barriers. Digital survey technology has been mainstream for many years. Digital qualitative technology recently reached a tipping point by making qualitative methods accessible to anyone with an internet connection, thus removing the mystery from the qualitative secret sauce. As digital qualitative methods continue to gain traction; and as text analytics and other analysis tools drive qualitative mainstream, I predict the divide between quantitative and qualitative will blur until it virtually disappears.

## INTEGRATED RESEARCH

Uniting quantitative and qualitative is rapidly becoming simple. Today's online qualitative technology plugs easily into the survey to provide a new depth of understanding never before available to researchers: a single *integrated research* project.

Systems that assimilate qualitative methods into survey methods to create integrated research studies are becoming the norm. These systems do not require a team of either qualitative or quantitative specialists to conduct a study, nor do they demand a sequential research design with distinct phases for qualitative and quantitative research.

Put simply, integrated research is a quantitative survey with in-depth qualitative components that are seamlessly interwoven so that respondents have no idea they are moving from quant to



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## Integrated research will provide a means for researchers to better meet client needs.

qual. Respondents simply experience different types of questions, some that are quick and easy, others that require in-depth responses. The entire respondent experience becomes a single pass. It is seamless.

A simple example of integrated research might occur with a typical customer satisfaction study. Imagine the insights if the quantitative satisfaction survey were followed by a two-day online bulletin board discussion of only those who were dissatisfied. Day one focuses on the source of dissatisfaction; day two focuses on the means of solving it. Along the way, video testimony is captured to underscore the reality of the dissatisfaction for the client report.

### WIN-WIN-WIN

Integrated research creates a win-win-win research process.

Respondents win because they experience more variety in their surveys. Variety and interest dramatically increase engagement, respondent satisfaction and data quality. Because integrated research is truly qualitative, respondents are far more engaged and articulate than in 'open ends' in the typical survey.

Research agencies win because they can deliver results backed by deep insights and respondent testimonies that bring the data to life for the clients. Plus, the digital methods are well established and well structured. They are easy to implement, and there is virtually no timeline lag or budget drag caused by phased or multi-stage research. Integrated research requires no more time than single-phase research.

Clients win because the research creates deeper insights, faster and less expensively than a phased research project. Clients get the numbers they need plus the depth of understanding that results from a single, integrated research initiative.

### LOOKING AHEAD

We have arrived at a point where qualitative and quantitative integration is easy and effective. Soon, it will be commonplace. Researchers should break away from the paradigm that insists that qualitative and quantitative research must be phased. They need to add 'integrated research' to their lexicon and their toolset.

Of course, phased, hybrid or multi-stage research still has a place. There are projects in which the researcher must pause between stages to evaluate the insights before moving on. However, when research moves at the speed of business, opportunities to pause and contemplate are few. Integrated research fills the gap created when a traditional, phased research plan cannot meet the business-decision timeline or budget.

Perfect-world thinking stifles the industry. Integrated research will provide a means for researchers to better meet client needs.

In many cases, quantitative researchers proudly (and correctly) assert their belief that the best quantitative results, the most projectable data or the best-crafted surveys are done by trained quantitative researchers. They argue that qualitative practitioners lack the expertise to develop a near-perfect survey instrument. They're right.

Unfortunately, the industry is often answering a question the clients didn't ask. Clients don't always need the absolute best-and-brightest quantitative minds crafting their surveys. And they don't always need a world-class qualitative researcher weaving together a narrative tapestry of the customer experience. Clients need all levels of research: sometimes, a brief, uncomplicated survey can fill in the gaps left from qualitative; other times, a quick, unstructured conversation with participants can tell the story behind the quantitative data.

### ACROSS THE BRIDGE

Qualitative research has always been difficult, expensive and time consuming, each project like a unique piece of art, designed and executed by craftsmen to stand as a beautiful specimen of creativity. Such artistry simply would not fit with the structure and discipline of survey sciences. The artists and the scientists diverged, and this created a qual/quant divide that few knew how to bridge.

Integrated research is the bridge that brings qualitative and quantitative together and eliminates the division. Under this new paradigm, each will work together to create integrated research that delivers actionable, insightful information to the client faster and more vividly than ever before.

By implementing integrated research, large research firms will work to more fully incorporate their qualitative and quantitative teams; small research practitioners will develop additional skills or stronger, complementary collaboration networks. All researchers will access more tools, leading to more insight opportunities and faster delivery of results than ever before.

One day, we will no longer call ourselves qualitative researchers or quantitative researchers. On that day, we will be puzzled as to why there was ever a great divide in the first place. **RW**



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