

Qual Research's Journey Out of the Rabbit Hole

No Comments



“But I don’t want to go among mad people,” Alice remarked. “Oh, you can’t help that,” said the Cat: “We’re all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad.” “How do you know I’m mad?” said Alice. “You must be,” said the Cat, “or you wouldn’t have come here.”

—*Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

Qualitative research sometimes seems a bit like Alice in Wonderland: It consists of a few people trying to understand why other people do the things that they do, and how to get them to do more of it. The sense of wonder, amazement and even confusion has been magnified in recent years with an explosion of new technologies, new methods and new ideas. So how did we get here, and how are we better?

The *Leave It To Beaver* Years

“Begin at the beginning,” the King said, very gravely, “and go on till you come to the end: Then stop.”

From the 1960s through the 1990s, qualitative research experienced its *Leave It To Beaver* years. They were years of relative stability and calm. Focus groups ruled. Qualitative researchers crisscrossed the country with clients in tow. Research designs focused on the number of focus groups to conduct and what cities to visit. The great debates often centered on whether six people in a focus group were too few or 10 people were too many. Qualitative research was in its heyday.

A Digital Explosion

“My dear, here we must run as fast as we can, just to stay in place. And if you wish to go anywhere, you must run twice as fast as that.”

The new millennium ushered in a new, more fragmented era, driven by the Internet and digital research. New platforms and capabilities emerged daily. Traditional focus groups were augmented or replaced by online bulletin boards, chat-based focus groups, webcam groups and interviews, mobile interviews, social media research, online communities, digital ethnographies, virtual intercepts and many more.

The rate of change has been staggering, and difficult to follow. It seems as if no one can keep up with all of the new possibilities. Few researchers could utilize all of the tools filling up their research toolboxes.

Equilibrium

“How puzzling all these changes are! I’m never sure what I’m going to be, from one minute to another.”

Today, the pace of change is slowing. Research thought leaders have shifted from creating more methods to creating more value. They have narrowed the scope of change and focused on where it can do the most good. Researchers and technologists are collaborating better than ever before. They are learning how to conduct not just faster and cheaper research, but enhanced research using digital methods alone or in tandem with in-person methods. The result is more applicable technology, leading to better research.

The New Normal

Is research better for all of this turmoil? The past couple of years would indicate that the answer is an unequivocal “yes,” and examples abound.

Researchers are using mobile and webcam streaming to interact with consumers in their home or at the exact point of sale, where they can see the environment and interview the respondent without intrusion. Live mobile interviewing provides insight and context that truly is faster, cheaper and better than the old alternatives.

Researchers are combining deep-dive qualitative webcam or bulletin board methods with online surveys to provide more qualitative context and deeper insights for the client team than survey methods alone.

Researchers are recruiting directly from social media or panels into live online interviews to compress research project execution from weeks to hours. Such “instant interviews” allow research to be done at the speed of business.

Researchers are creating hybrid projects with various combinations of online bulletin boards, or other

activities and focus groups to extract the best of online qualitative and in-person methods.

Technology advances in market research have created far richer insights than before. Researchers can probe deeper, more often and in different contexts. Mobile allows for respondent “show and tell” in real time, eliminating behavior recall problems. Digital and longitudinal ethnography give researchers the ability to build a truly 360-degree understanding of the respondents’ worlds, leading to a better understanding of purchase behavior, intent and motivation.

Thus, research insights now can be more actionable, with learnings that marketers can bank on. Better insights also mean more confident decision-making, which translates to the bottom line.

We Are Different Now

“I can’t go back to yesterday because I was a different person then.”

The world has changed, research has changed and marketing has changed. The *Leave It To Beaver* days of research are over, and we find ourselves in a new wonderland. Researchers and marketers have more tools in a bigger toolbox and are smarter about using them. We are not going back.

*Jim Bryson is founder and CEO of Nashville, Tenn.-based qualitative research firm **20/20 Research**.*