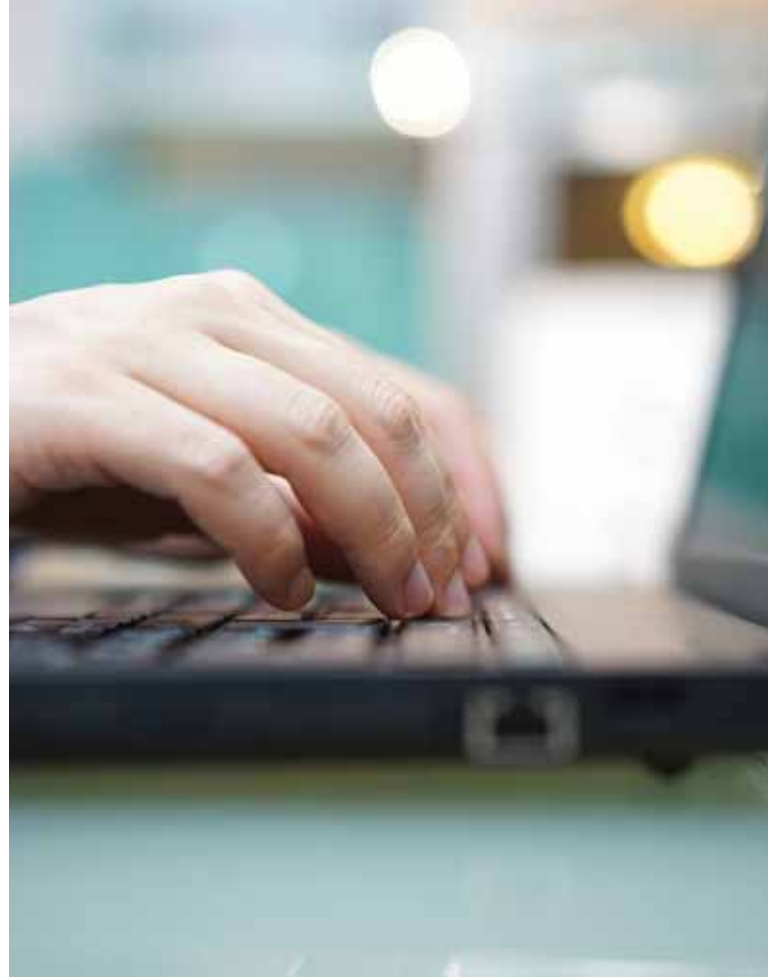


••• qualitative research

# Fast-casual MR

Leveraging online qualitative for fast delivery of insights

| By Isaac Rogers



## snapshot

How digital tools can help researchers keep pace with end-client demands for timely, usable insights.

Close your eyes for a minute and picture your favorite restaurant – your absolute top pick of all the places you’ve ever eaten. You may be picturing a lavish steakhouse, a sushi bar or perhaps a quiet Italian place in your neighborhood. In most cases, I bet you pictured a full-service, fine-dining experience. The food is wonderful, the atmosphere perfect and while it’s not the cheapest option, in your mind it’s worth it.

Keep the picture of that restaurant in your mind but ask yourself: If this is my favorite restaurant in the entire world, why don’t I eat every meal there? The answer of course is that it’s just not practical because of cost, time or convenience reasons. I mean, it’s the best and, while it’s what you would really love to visit most of the time, that is just not realistic.

In many ways, the gold-standard qualitative research project is very much like that fine-dining restaurant in the minds of researchers and clients. If we have enough time and budget, we seek out a picture-perfect project that we know will give us the rich insights we are hungry for. We know it’ll cost us a pretty penny and we know it’s not the fastest meal in town but sometimes it’s what we really need.

Because of the logistics and field times of traditional face-to-face qualitative, historically this was the most common option available to our clients. Fielding a qualitative study had certain cost and time parameters that we always had to deal with, so we had more luxury when it came to cost and time pressures. There simply wasn’t a way to get around the travel and in-person requirements that came with face-to-face qualitative – conducting a study always required a certain amount of time and budget to field. This is why many face-to-face projects have similar size and scopes: practically, there are only so many people you can fit around a focus group table and maintain a lively conversation; there is only so long you can keep those respondents in the room; and there are only so many groups a moderator can host in a single day before reaching a point of exhaustion.



[quirks.com/articles/2017/20170109.aspx](http://quirks.com/articles/2017/20170109.aspx)

As researchers, because we spent so much of our history in face-to-face qualitative research with a defined tool set and rigid constraints, we have honed our craft around these real-world boundaries. We mastered the process of focus groups and individual interviews. We standardized our processes to make them repeatable, reliable and consistent in quality. In many ways, we became really, really good at what we did – just like your favorite fine-dining restaurant has mastered delivering the experience that keeps customers coming back for more.

But herein lies a dilemma: We are so good at designing and executing traditional research that when customers with new desires and evolving taste buds began knocking on our door, we weren't fully prepared to evolve our menu of options.

### Has radically changed

The truth is we no longer live in the same one-size-fits-all world, and by “we” I mean brands and marketers, researchers and even respondents. The very nature of consumer behavior has radically changed over the last 15 years, as technology has transformed everything from shopping behavior to what we consider acceptable ways to interact and communicate with others.

Yet, in many ways, the research industry is still serving up a product that was carefully refined to deliver insights in a world that existed before the Internet, iPhone or Facebook. Even in our still-early days of digital qualitative methods, we're largely using project designs that were created for the face-to-face world and we've simply adapted them for use in digital platforms. We remodeled the restaurant and added a few menu items but we're still delivering an experience to our customers based on the fine-dining format that we've delivered for years in more traditional venues. And it is because we made only minor adaptations to our methods when we migrated to digital that we hear so many end-clients and marketers protest that online qualitative research is in many cases nearly as costly and time-consuming as more traditional methods.

So how do we shift our thinking

and processes to accommodate changing client expectations? Close your eyes and picture a different situation. Imagine yourself at the office on a Tuesday morning at 11:15, energy low because you skipped breakfast and you're the main speaker at an executive presentation at 1 p.m. You grab your coat and head to the door – you need something you can consume quickly and that you know will hit the spot and has healthy ingredients. Do you head toward your favorite restaurant from before? Probably not. There's a good chance you're destined for something like Chipotle, Panera or Five Guys. These sorts of fast-casual restaurants are just the right blend of streamlined process, quality ingredients and made-to-order customization. They are the “right meal, right now” when price, convenience and quality are all in careful balance.

With today's digital qualitative tools and methods, researchers are realizing they too can design entirely new insight experiences for their clients, experiences that deliver on the needs of today's corporate researcher who doesn't always have the time for a full-service, sit-down dining experience and instead needs a good meal that satisfies their needs on-time and on-budget.

And this is the great untapped potential of digital qualitative; we no longer need to design projects around the traditional expectations of the past. The incredible innovation we've seen in online qualitative platforms over the last 10 years provides researchers an array of options in how we engage respondents, the kinds of information and experiences they can share with us and even the effort and cost required to tap into these consumer insights.

Below are examples of the ways innovative qualitative researchers are adapting their approaches to better fit the digital world of today, delivering new and customer-centric research designs that eschew the standards of yesterday and instead focus on what the client really needs in that particular instance.

### Not 'quality research'

An unfortunately common misconception is that researchers perceive any

project that fields quickly and focuses on a short set of research objectives as not being “quality research.” They will often pick apart a quick-turn project like an acclaimed chef critiquing the quality of ingredients served up from a roadside hamburger joint. They will argue that there isn't enough “meat” in the discussion guide or that you simply didn't gather enough respondent attitudinal data to perform a proper screening. They'll argue that if you don't follow all the right steps you are falling short of what you could accomplish in a perfect qual project.

Unfortunately, these researchers are missing the point entirely.

The truth is, in today's world, not all projects are created equal. There are times when a fully robust, rigorously designed qualitative project is exactly what the client needs but there are also countless occasions when the client has a certain number of days and a certain budget and simply needs the best insights that can be gathered within these constraints.

A research agency client came to us some months ago with a challenge, asking us to help “right-size” their approach by creating a custom insights menu for their client. In this case, their client was a major cookware firm that was facing increased pressure on its product lines and was looking to rapidly evolve product marketing; the client felt it had “forgotten” what its customers really wanted and the various ways its products were used in kitchens across the country. It was set to embark on an entirely new brand position for its product lines and had only a few short months to understand its consumers and reshape the entire marketing portfolio in order to stay competitive.

However, the research agency did not fully account for these needs when it presented its first proposal to the client. The agency initially suggested a traditional approach to the problem, with corresponding fieldwork recommendations, timelines and costs; each phase of research would take six to eight weeks to complete and another two to three weeks for analysis. The proposed rigorous screening criteria meant skyrocketing fieldwork costs and lengthier recruiting timelines. The client refused the first recom-

mentation and stated that the agency needed to come back with a design that allowed brand managers to dip in and out of in-home digital ethnographies with various target audiences in a two-week timespan.

We worked with the agency to reboot the design process; in a couple of days we threw out all the nice-to-have screening questions, streamlined the fieldwork process and leveraged automated video transcription technology to speed the analysis process. The agency presented a retooled menu of options to the client that delivered just the right insights in the right amount of time with the right budget.

If the agency had been allowed to conduct a traditionally-scoped project, could this project have generated a larger number of insights or probed deeper into the unmet needs of the consumers? Perhaps. But frankly, it's irrelevant, since those potentially marginally better-quality results would have been delivered too late and at too high a cost. The insights would have never mattered because the company did not have the luxury of time; it needed the insights it could access quickly and efficiently in order to make agile marketing decisions.

### Lengthy process

When an agency partners with an end client to conduct a qualitative project today, there is a somewhat lengthy process just to get the project off the ground. Conference calls are held to establish scope and timelines. Separate e-mails and documents are circulated for days after to discuss and negotiate budget. A small committee forms to review a draft discussion guide. Four or five rounds of edits occur just to get the screener finalized. These expensive start-up costs take days or weeks (or in some cases months) and implicitly add significant costs to the research process itself.

Now, a growing number of researchers are finding that these inherent inefficiencies in the project-based approach can be avoided for some of their clients. By leveraging a concept we call always-on research, the agency moves away from thinking strictly of independent projects and instead designs a more continuous insights process.

In one example, a research firm designed a long-term qualitative insight panel for a major office supply chain. Rather than splitting up the annual research calendar into five-to-seven independent, heavily-nuanced projects, they worked together to recruit 100 office supply purchasers who broadly fit the chain's overall target customer base. We manage this qualitative insight panel as a segregated, always-on group of respondents. The agency works with the client to develop a continuous stream of research needs. One week, for example, we might dip into the panel to invite 15 customers to Webcam interviews where they will review new product concepts and provide interactive feedback. Two weeks later, we may invite 50 of the respondents to complete a diary exercise where they document all of their office supply purchases via smartphone and discuss their purchasing needs in an online group discussion. The following month, the researcher could invite the entire audience to complete an online survey that captures their opinions on Web-based vs brick-and-mortar retailer products.

This structure is not a typical "project" but instead a continuous design focused on what was really important to the end client. In this case, they needed an extremely nimble way to tap into the insights of their target customers over the course of 12 months. They wanted nearly instantaneous access to their feedback and sought to avoid the expensive start-up process of independent projects. By rethinking the entire research process and building around what was possible with digital research tools, we delivered an always-on approach that fit the client's insight needs.

### Leveraging operational efficiencies

The genius of many fast-casual restaurants is that they give the consumer a reasonable amount of customization over their meal while leveraging operational efficiencies by limiting the overall scope of the menu. This allows them to prepare a meal customized to each patron but only use a handful of ingredients and cooking methods.

Many of our clients are taking this same "productized" approach to their

research portfolio. They develop a repeatable, digitally-driven approach to common research needs – think concept testing, habits and practice feedback or shop-alongs – and rather than treat each project as entirely customized, they offer their clients a preset version that delivers insights faster and more easily than the traditional fully-tailored approach.

One of the agencies we work with has achieved success by productizing their day-in-the-life ethnographic method. They give their clients a defined set of parameters for what is possible with this boxed solution – a fixed amount of screening criteria, one to two observational objectives and 10 respondents. That's it. If the client has needs outside of the scope of the product, it becomes a custom proposal. They have a standard blueprint for the process that allows them to go from client kickoff discussion to analysis in 10 business days, while reducing the overall cost of the research as compared to a similar custom project.

These kinds of productized approaches are becoming increasingly popular. As we are finding the best-use cases for digital qualitative tools in insight gathering, researchers are finding that they can create solutions that cater to their specific skill sets and talents, lower execution costs and reduce the amount of back-and-forth common in traditional proposals.

For the end client, these productized solutions provide the ability to tackle research needs in bite-sized chunks; smaller, more budget-friendly options mean conducting two to three smaller projects within the same time frame and budget as a single, traditional custom research project. We are seeing more and more end clients move away from long projects with multiple objectives and instead leaning toward smaller, leaner, more focused research "sprints." This allows them to get in and out of the research process rapidly in order to answer critical business questions quickly.

### Panic attack

There are still many in our industry who equate fast with low-quality research and shallow insights and the mere mention of a quick-turn request gives them a panic attack. What these

researchers fail to realize is that technology is now deeply embedded into nearly all parts of the research fieldwork, data collection and insight-gathering process and that these technologies have the capability to change the concept of what goes into a “typical research project.” Today’s technology gives innovative marketers and researchers new ways to engage their customers, faster methods to gather feedback and more efficient methods to analyze results.

Just because the approach puts speed of delivery above other aspects of the design doesn’t mean it’s a poor-quality project. In fact, I believe that mentality is holding our industry back. There an increasing number of occasions when clients would rather have access to good insights on-time, rather than perfect insights too late. By recognizing that we must adapt our

research designs to accommodate for more than just a single type of experience, we offer our clients a wider array of solutions to their problems.

We must to remind ourselves that nobody needs market research. People need the insights that the market research can deliver. If some of those insights are needed faster than traditional research methods can deliver, it’s our responsibility to find new ways to deliver the highest-quality insights we can on timelines that work within the business cycle of our clients.

### Quiet revolution

Qualitative research is in the midst of a quiet revolution and one that I believe will allow our industry to flourish and expand into entirely new markets. By embracing digital tools, taking advantage of process automation and leveraging reporting analyt-

ics, we have the opportunity to deliver valuable, business-changing qualitative insights to our current client base of enterprise corporate researchers and marketers while also expanding our reach into mid-sized firms and into departments such as operations, R&D and human resources that typically don’t have the budgets and timelines that allow for qualitative research.

We might be stealing a page from the playbook of the fast-casual restaurants popping up on almost every street corner by becoming more streamlined and right-sized to fit our varying customers’ needs but I believe this revolution will allow us to serve more customers in more ways than we ever thought possible. 📌

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