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Marketing Researchers

Bringing marketing theory and research into focus

Energize Your Qualitative Research Reports

by Dona Vitale

Qualitative research can be exciting. Seeing consumers come alive when discussing a common problem in a focus group, watching a homemaker use your brand in her own kitchen or observing shoppers as they make their decisions in the supermarket are vivid experiences for team members, who can come away from their participation with new ideas and new energy.

To get the most from a qualitative project, it's important to maintain that excitement and energy as the team goes back to crunching numbers, attending meetings and making plans to grow the brand or improve the company's performance. That's why the permanent record of the project – the written report -- should be as vivid and meaningful as the rest of the experience.

What makes a report as exciting as the project it documents? Here are five easy ways that qualitative research consultants can bring new energy to reporting.

1. Turn “respondents” into people. A qualitative project offers the opportunity for observers to come face to face (or computer screen to computer screen) with their target audience. That experience can be preserved by bringing respondents back to life in the report, with a picture of the focus group participants, short bios of ethnographic subjects or pictures of online respondents' homes or pets. Keeping it real keeps it interesting.

2. Tell a story. A research projects always begins with a problem or a goal, and everything that takes place during the process should relate to reaching a solution. It's a quest for understanding, so treat it as a classic quest saga. A report is non-fiction, but look for a storyline with the basic facts at the beginning, clues along the way, and a climax with the key findings and insights toward the end.

3. Lay out a map. No respectable quest takes place without a map. That map often comes in the form of a Table of Contents and a one-page summary at the very beginning of the document. Simple organizational devices can map out the structure of the report. Headlines can summarize section content – for instance, “Packaging Defects Outweigh Other Benefits” instead of “Findings on User Satisfaction.” Or maybe the narrative is divided into color-coded sections, or symbols are used to identify all findings that relate to a single topic.

4. Use illustrations and diagrams to make your points. A picture can be worth a thousand words, but every visual should be worth its weight in content. Instead of clip-art or stock photos, diagrams might better convey the meaning. If respondents were asked to list their favorite flavors or top brands, --- the results could be shown in a word cloud. Perceptual maps or diagrams can be used to highlight comparisons, or flow charts to show a process. Mind maps are a good way to visually summarize how respondents

think about a complex issue. Illustrations should be supplemented with words to make them clear, rather than using illustrations to make long blocks of words more interesting.

5. Lead readers to the experience of insight. Everyone wants insight from their research, but the researcher's insight becomes just another finding unless the report can create an “aha!” moment of clarity. So, reports should build from facts to conclusions to insights and use “insights boxes” or color codes to separate pure research findings from the implications and direction that can be drawn from them.

Dona Vitale is a member of the [Qualitative Research Consultants Association](#) and owns [Strategic Focus, Inc.](#) in Chicago. She has more than 20 years of experience in qualitative research consulting and is the author of “Consumer Insights 2.0: How Smart Companies Apply Customer Knowle