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BRICOLAGE: Using Multiple Research Methods to Solve a Problem

by *Anni Macht Gibson*

Good research is all about getting to the heart of the question, problem or situation you are investigating. Often, this requires an iterative process that peels back the “proverbial onion” to arrive at the critical insights that will help you develop a better product or nail your communication with the consumer. In these situations, a strong qualitative research plan will incorporate multiple methodologies. This is also called a “bricolage,” study. Bricolage comes to English from French and Italian roots, and refers to the use of multiple, diverse research methods. Let’s examine several situations that call for this kind of multi-step process.

It’s All New to You - Perhaps your company wants to enter a new product category, reach a different target audience or examine an issue that has just recently come up. For example, although your brand may have been marketed traditionally to moms, you may have a new opportunity with teens – but you have no idea about how much money they have to spend, what their shopping habits are or what motivates them to select one brand over another. You might start out investigating the category as a whole, asking broad questions; but, you will learn as you go, zeroing in on the critical issues as you get further into the research. In this situation, Phase 1 of your research could consist of either an online bulletin board taking place over several days (allowing you to base Day 3 questions on the discussion to date) or a diary which asks teens to fill in detail about how they shop for the category as well as the usage experience as these events happen. Subsequently, in Phase 2, you would invite respondents who had participated in Phase 1 to a face-to-face discussion to work your way more deeply into the subject matter or to follow up on what has been learned via the diary. In some cases, a three-phased plan might be warranted, with each phase delving deeper into the consumer experience and motivations. Such a plan could begin with a diary or bulletin board, proceed to face-to-face groups and then, eventually, to in-depth-interviews that allow you to interview the consumer one-on-one.

Multiple Target Audiences – Sometimes a purchase decision involves several target audiences. Sticking with the teen target we discussed above, *parents* may be the buyers of a new car, but the *teen* in the family may be influencing the decision or may be the primary driver. In this situation, it would be important to talk to each target audience separately to examine their differing perceptions, attitudes, behaviors and motivations about the car-buying and car-driving processes. Subsequently, you may want to get parents and their teens in a room together to explore the dynamics between the two targets.

Qualitative and Quantitative Hybrids -- Qualitative research helps you to understand consumer attitudes, beliefs, experiences and behaviors; however, its base sizes are far too small to be projectable. Often, a combination of Phase 1 qualitative and Phase 2

quantitative research is used to first gain understanding and then to project the hard numbers of expected sales or to determine a “winner” from among a number of product concepts. In other situations, you may already have the “hard” numbers from a tracking study but may not understand the motivations. In this case, qualitative research can be done to understand *why* the numbers are as they are.

The actual combination of methodologies will be determined by the individual situation. However, hybrid studies can be very valuable for really delving deeply into a particular problem or subject matter or to combine the qualitative “depth” with the hard numbers required to justify an investment for your brand or company.

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