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qualitatively speaking

By Laura Cusumano

How big pharma is misusing qualitative marketing research

Over the past five years I have seen a disturbing trend in the pharmaceutical qualitative marketing research area. Because of increasing cost pressures, many larger pharma companies are not commissioning qualitative research appropriately. (They are still conducting qualitative research, albeit less often and on a smaller scale - but that is another issue entirely.)

The problem is that some companies are pushing qualitative research into one of two inappropriate and

ineffective directions: using qualitative research as a substitute for quantitative or skipping qualitative in favor of quantitative research.

Most experienced researchers would agree that qualitative research is not a substitute for quantitative research. Qualitative is limited in sample size and geographic distribution, so the findings are not quantifiable or projectable. However, qualitative uncovers and clarifies concepts, ideas and perceptions and

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provides direction. As stand-alone research, it can be used to explore, experiment and challenge new or existing ways of thinking.

Most experienced researchers would also agree that qualitative research should not be skipped or conducted in lieu of quantitative research. Designing a quantitative study requires a clear understanding of issues and nuances of a marketplace. Qualitative research

snapshot

Qualitative shouldn't be substituted for quantitative, nor should it be overlooked in favor of quantitative. Yet, the author argues, that's just what some pharmaceutical firms are doing.

determines the setting and direction for follow-up quantitative research. If that background is not clearly established, a quantitative study may not produce meaningful or actionable findings.

Using qualitative research as a substitute for quantitative research has resulted in some companies making marketing decisions with inadequate data and a lack of geographic representation. Skipping qualitative altogether in favor of quantitative not only can leave gaps in understanding the landscape but may result in a study design based on a company's perceptions (or biases) instead of the customer's opinion.

The most painful outcome of this misuse is that these companies will not realize what they have missed or lost until it is too late: the positioning does not make clinical sense to the physician audience; the messaging is more closely associated with another brand; or the DTC ad fails to address one of the target audience's key concerns.

More common misuse

Forgoing qualitative in favor of quantitative research seems to be the more

common misuse. However, using qualitative research as a substitute for quantitative is likely to cause more damage and misunderstanding of the brand and market. If qualitative research is skipped and information gaps identified, then qualitative research can still be conducted to fill in the full market picture. This "after the fact" qualitative research is generally very focused as it addresses specific issues. However, by conducting quantitative before qualitative the broader landscape of the issues can be lost. In other words, "You don't know what you don't know."

For example, conducting an online quantitative study can determine which concept to use for a promotional campaign. The results may clearly point to a concept to further develop but the whys and explanations are often missing. Understanding why a concept is preferred can be as useful as identifying which concept is preferred. If a company knows the whys, then the tactical details of the marketing plan are richer and consistent with the marketplace.

The far more dangerous misuse is conducting qualitative research as a substitute for quantitative. Sometimes a company does this by over-analyzing qualitative research findings or having too few respondents in total or by sample segment.

Qualitative research can be designed to secure detail but its findings are not projectable to the universe. Generally, findings from qualitative research are directional and are reported as "all," "essentially all," "most," or "a few." They are not intended to secure specific quantitative or count data.

Providing direction

Qualitative research serves a distinct and vital role in marketing that can't be replaced. Think of it as providing guidance like a compass, north/south/east/west. It tells us which direction to move and, hopefully, why. Quantitative research provides the specific street directions to the road to success. Without the initial direction from qualitative research, the brand may end up on the right road in the wrong city. | Q

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