

QUIRK'S



qualitatively speaking

By Gwyn Gibbs

How to put qualitative respondents at ease

Since many of us have been executing qualitative research for years, the scenario has become all too familiar: the faceless building of the research facility, the hurried staff, the long hallway to the research room, the one-way mirror, the darkened client lounge, the bottles of water and the precarious videotaping equipment.

Even when we are in different cities across the nation or internationally, all of these elements are repeated in each and every facility, and this familiarity provides us with the canvas

for the main event to happen ... the research. As we await the rich responses of our participants that will shed light, give direction and offer strategies, the facility is our office away from the office.

We researchers craft and script our discussion guides to delicately (and not so delicately) mine for the jewels waiting to be uncovered. We write out our questions and our follow-up probes and have it all timed meticulously like a well-written song with a tempo, a bridge and a story from

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beginning to end. We take pride in structuring the guide so that honest feedback will flow with ease from the respondents, answering all of our clients' inquiries.

Although many discussion guides simply start with the word "Intro" and end with "Wrap Up," these are key components of the interview. We must remember back to the days when this was new to all of us. Recall our beginner's mind; it was once so unfamiliar. For some of our respondents, this may well be their first time in a research facility. They've cleared

snapshot

While the qualitative process is commonplace for the moderator and observers, for many respondents, it's an unfamiliar and potentially unsettling experience. Using the acronym WALK, the author explains how to calm their nerves and get them into the discussion flow.

their calendars; perhaps they've gotten lost on the way or went to the wrong floor; they aren't sure where the restrooms are; they've walked in and signed their name and are sitting in a waiting room wondering what it's going to be like. Even seasoned respondents may have some anxiety about the next 45 minutes of their lives when they are swept into a room and asked if they "want something to drink" and told to "disregard the people behind the mirror but they're listening closely."

More than three minutes

Building rapport and making respondents comfortable takes more than three minutes. It is essential to accessing deeper truths and more meaningful responses. The following are "must dos" during the introduction, whether it is a one-on-one interview, dyad, triad or a focus group. WALK each respondent through it:

Welcome them in the waiting room. Greet the respondent by their first name, introduce yourself and walk them back to the interview

room. This is a good time to thank them for coming and ask them if they found the facility without any trouble. They will start to feel comfortable and look to you as the friendly face amongst the strangers.

Acclimate them to the unfamiliar research room. Gently direct them to the seat you'd like them to take and offer them a beverage to show hospitality, tell them about the friendly mirror and the videotaping. This gives them a few minutes to settle into the new environment in which they will be spending the next 45 minutes or so.

Link them in with a shared goal. Inform them of the duration of the research and clearly and in detail describe to them the purpose or goal of the research. Explain that their input is extremely valuable and will be of great use in guiding future decisions. It is crucial that respondents feel a certain "call to action" to align with you and help you to meet the research objectives. They will try harder and focus more if they feel a part of the process and joined with you to reach for a common goal.

Keep the dialogue open. Ask them

if they have any questions and assure them they can ask you a question at any time if anything is unclear.

The wrap-up is also critical, as the respondent is unsure if they've been helpful or if they even want to participate in future research. Be sure to thank them again for their participation and let them know that their input was extremely useful and that you appreciate their time.

Precious resource

As recruiting requirements become more stringent, access to respondents more limited, and illumination of respondents' insights more and more valued, we must tend to this precious resource. Just like any new interaction with someone, whether it be a job interview, selecting a personal physician, choosing a tutor or buying a car, we must remember the beginner's mind, which is anxious in anticipation of something new and unfamiliar. We must help to make it more comfortable, which will lead to more richness in our qualitative research findings for clients and will benefit our professional image as researchers. | Q

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