

RESEARCH • Apples and oranges

# Don't read research by the numbers

By STEPHEN J. HELLEBUSCH

Recently, a new oxymoron has arisen in the marketing research world — “qualitative numbers”. Used incorrectly, this technique can be dangerously misleading.

Qualitative research uses small, nonrepresentative samples of respondents to help refine concepts, obtain general reactions, learn consumer language, or explore new areas of opportunity. It specifically does not use numbers in reporting, and for good reasons. The discipline was developed to explore these nonstatistical concepts in research. The results usually are presented in the form of verbal statements or conclusions, supported by respondents; direct quotes. Such research generally has been done via one-on-one interviews or focus-group discussion conducted in-person, over the telephone or via computer.

Sometimes, the sample sizes get quite large by qualitative standards — for example, 50 one-on-one interviews or 10 focus groups. But the research is still qualitative; asking the same question in 10 focus groups of 10 respondents each presents the question in 100 undeniably different contexts, and is not the same thing as doing structured interviews with 100 respondents, because the questioning is not controlled or standardized. Even question wording may not be identical from occasion to occasion.

Qualitative numbers involve deriving tables and graphs representing numerical data from qualitative research. But a graph (especially one with no base sizes shown), depicting, say, the responses from 20 people in two

focus groups can be a very dangerous thing, representing misinformation of the highest order.

To take one example, suppose the qualitative numbers from two focus groups of 10 each show that 50% like Option A best, 30% like Option B best, and 20% pick Option C as best. Clearly, Option A is the big winner. Or is it?

The two main aspects of sampling are quality and quantity, where “quality” refers to how representative the sample is of the population with which the researcher is concerned. Typically, strict representation is not a concern in qualitative research, and the samples are somewhere in between being representative and being picked for convenience. In our example, unless the people in our example groups were selected to be representative, the results could be seriously distorted by the ways in which they are not. For instance, suppose the concepts being tested indirectly concerned a new computer design. If 80% of the respondents were low in computer literacy, and those with real computer savvy all love Option C, then Option A's “win” is suspect, at best. But as the end users, we may have no idea that this is the case.

Quantity is the other sampling issue. These qualitative numbers may not differ, statistically speaking. It would take an expert in statistical testing to determine if they do, and, even then, because of the quality issues, the results would be in doubt. A good sample for estimating or testing demands both quality and quantity.

Many large companies have marketing research departments, and often — in addition to a subcontractor's report — the researchers in those departments interpret and recommend courses of action based on the information. But the process may not stop there. To continue our example, suppose the graph of these results is lifted out of context by an assistant brand manager and presented to key decision makers as a justification

for going with Option A. At this point, marketing research has truly done the company a disservice by generating and disseminating bogus data.

Examining the number of respondents who prefer a given option can be useful to the interpretation of qualitative research. One can report that most preferred Option A, and the numbers are unnecessary. The true benefit of qualitative research is the ability to understand the respondents' motives and reasons for responding as they do. Such information is virtually impossible to capture in such depth from an open-ended question in a quantitative survey.

I suspect qualitative numbers are here to stay. I am told that some clients really like focus group reports with graphs and tables, and once Pandora's box is open, there is no closing it. I can only hope that those who understand research will make every effort to avoid misleading the end-users with them. ■

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**SPECIAL  
REPORT**

Knowing people's reasons and motives for responding is qualitative research's biggest benefit

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