

WHY QUAL COUNTS



With organisations increasingly focusing on big data, it's important not to lose sight of qualitative research – not in the sense of it existing, but in the sense of it having something distinct and valuable to offer.

When we talk about drilling down, for example, we increasingly imagine getting not just beyond people's top of mind responses (the job of any good moderator), but – via tools such as implicit and facial coding – beneath their conscious thought processes. This kind of drill down may yield new insight, but it cannot yield *all* available insight. This is because people may *respond* to the world in non-verbal ways, but we also *communicate* verbally. Our impressions and decisions are shaped and reshaped by what we say and hear, by what we pass on to one another. In short, by dialogue.

In fact, to talk of drill down and granular findings in a qual context is to ask the wrong questions: these are terms drawn from information technology and database hierarchies. Qual offers something different – a human dynamic. In all the formats listed below, from large-scale workshops to individual depths, there is an exchange of opinion, there is dialogue, and there is the opportunity for an experienced moderator to gauge strength of sentiment via words, facial expression, body language and the mood in the room. With this in mind, we should perhaps review our use of the word 'respondent' – and replace it with 'participant'.

Liberating qual in the big data era

We're all familiar with discussion guide overkill: when the creative challenge that prompted the research is squeezed half to death by supplementary questions and additional stimulus to cover things off.

But instead of front- and back-loading discussion guides with preparatory context and additional detail, we can now cover this off in affordable surveys. This frees up qual discussion not just to pinpoint but to roam; not just to cover off, but to uncover.

Quant research is by definition based on single completes: it's a series of individual snapshots that make up a whole. Qual is more of a *shared incomplete*, where discussion yields unexpected insights and the moderator is part of the process – in groups and at the analysis stage. It isn't clinical: it's a participatory process that demands trust from participants, researchers and clients alike.

This is not to suggest that qual is an inexact or approximate art, rather that it offers something distinct and valuable. If successful content creation is about establishing a human connection, it makes sense to retain and value human connection in the research process.

The fact that we offer quant as well as qual, and blend techniques from both disciplines within and across projects, gives us the confidence to see discussion groups in a new light. Rather than shepherding respondents through a tightly-controlled discussion guide, we can focus on designing environments in which dialogue can flourish, feelings can be expressed and ideas can breathe.

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Our discussion formats

We've never seen standard 8-respondent focus groups as a button to push when a client commissions some qual. To us they're more like the middle position on a dial: something that works well a lot of the time, but which isn't the only useful setting.

Dial up and we have more people for more time (Open Space) dial down and we have fewer people for less time (Social Hubs) – all in interesting combinations and in varied environments. Not rocket science, really. But subtle differences in group dynamics and environmental context are just what qual can deliver.

For example we might meet one side of Jay, 35, after work in someone else's home and in the company of seven strangers. But we might see another side, something closer to the real person, if we met him with friends at his favourite bar; with work colleagues in Starbucks; in his own home with his partner and children; even with his mum. He might give us considered answers to questions in a focus group, but he might make extensive and engaged suggestions in a different setting.

This is why we offer so many variations on the focus group format, including...

Digital Voices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 30-50 Respondents, asynchronous online qual • For geographic spread; extensive, asynchronous discussion over a period of days or weeks; building a research community for later recontact
Open Space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 24 Respondents, 3 moderators, 3 hours • For wide lens research into audience needs; brand experience and expectations; audience segmentation; product range
Audience Labs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 16 Respondents, 2 moderators, 2.5 hours • Suits intensive work on stimulus or proposition-based, early stage creative development
Focus Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8 Respondents, 1 moderator, 1.5 hours • Still remarkably adaptable, as useful in brand health-checks and early-stage creative development as in final stage content / product testing
Social Hubs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 Respondents, 1 moderator, 1 hour • Suits behavioural or social research; public issues
Friendship and Family Depths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2-4 Respondents, 1 moderator, 45 minutes
Bring Your Own Device BYOD Depths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2-4 Respondents, 1 moderator, 45 minutes • Ideal for research into online / mobile content, platforms, behaviour

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