



Tips for Observing Qualitative Research

Welcome, especially, to those for whom this is a first observation of a qualitative research interview. As an observer of a group discussion or individual interview, your ultimate objective is to understand the participants' comments and responses to your issues and questions. This document is intended to help you maximize your understanding by offering suggestions for watching and listening more effectively. If possible, please read this before the session begins.

Things You Should Know:

- Prior to the session, familiarize yourself with the discussion guide. It provides an overview of the topics and their importance. You may also wish to review the respondent spreadsheets or any other information provided about the participants so you will be familiar with their backgrounds.
- The discussion guide that has been carefully prepared is just that, a *guide*. Questions may be reworded and tailored to the immediate understanding of respondents. The order in which topics will be covered will generally be based on the flow of the discussion, which may not be in the same sequence as on the guide. A professional moderator will monitor the time spent on each topic during the session, but if an issue is particularly "hot" for respondents, more time may be allocated than originally anticipated. Every effort will be made to cover all the issues on the guide.
- A group interview is not conducted serially, where the participants take turns responding to a list of questions. Rather, the moderator encourages a natural interaction to evolve in which some members play more active roles and others are followers. Nonetheless, you should expect the moderator to actively prompt all respondents to contribute to the discussion. As the session progresses, the moderator will work to bring out the quieter ones.

- Some professional moderators like to let people ramble a little at first, to see who's who and to encourage free discussion. This also tells the respondents that all opinions are important and that they should feel free to express their thoughts. As the interview progresses, the moderator will regulate the flow of the discussion so that respondents' comments become more focused and succinct.
- You may also see the moderator use other techniques to elicit responses, such as playing the devil's advocate or acting dumb. When appropriate, the moderator may even use self-revelation to legitimize discussion of a sensitive issue.
- At times, respondents in focus groups may influence one another and cause shifts in attitude. Rather than considering this to be a negative outcome of the group's interaction, be pleased that you have uncovered a potentially valuable piece of information: you have identified a possible catalyst for creating changes in the minds of those constituencies that are important to you.
- If respondents have questions or incorrect information, the interview is not necessarily the place to educate them. Respondents are there to educate you. Be aware that their lack of knowledge, their questions, and confusion can provide useful information. If respondents do need to understand information before they can express their opinions, the information should be presented in an objective way. The moderator's job is to uncover opinions, not to directly influence or persuade the participants.
- Expect that not every minute of the session will provide meaningful information. For example, sometimes respondents appear to be off-subject when they are actually thinking through their opinions aloud. For the observer, be aware that insight learning often happens here. A professional moderator will soon bring participants back to the issues at hand.
- Remember that the purpose of the research is to find out what the respondents really think and feel. In the case of a product, service, or a social issue the purpose is not so much to get respondents to like it, but to find out what factors might make them like or dislike it.

Things You Should Do:

- Be a positive, active listener. Start with a "clean slate," setting aside your own point of view. Attempt to follow the respondents' logic by linking

individual respondents' backgrounds and comments with their opinions and reactions.

- Allow the moderator time to establish “ground rules” and rapport with the respondents. It is only when the participants feel secure and relaxed with the moderator, and with one another, that they will begin to express themselves openly.
- Listen to everyone, especially the quiet ones. The outspoken, articulate, or loud respondent does not necessarily represent the group's opinion. A professional moderator will make every effort to draw out the quiet ones, but remember that some individuals are more naturally reticent than others.
- At the same time, be careful not to dismiss the opinions of inarticulate, misinformed, or seemingly non-insightful respondents. These people are your constituency, too.
- Be sensitive to the language that respondents use to express themselves. They may not use the terms from your particular field of interest but it is insightful to understand how they refer to your product/service/issues.
- Pay attention to the emotional level of the respondents, both in the way they express themselves verbally, and in their non-verbal facial expressions and body language. Silences, confusion, gasps and other vocal utterances can be relevant information. This is one of the major values of qualitative research; you cannot tap this information in a survey.
- Some observers like to take notes, others prefer to simply listen. Both can be effective; it's a matter of personal preference. Whichever method you use to absorb the information, look for *patterns* of comprehension, acceptance, rejection, intensity, believability, motivation, etc.
- Be ready to hear misinformation and misperceptions about your product, issue or your organization. Although it may be frustrating when a respondent says something negative about things important to you, there is much to learn by being non-judgmental. Turn off your internal censors and accept criticism as a learning experience. It's all part of the research process.
- A note about notes: Be aware that sending in a note breaks the flow of the discussion, distracts the respondents, and reminds them of the presence of observers. Moreover, it often takes precious moments to re-start the discussion flow. Most moderators prefer to come to the back room toward the end of the session to collect any outstanding questions. This allows the moderator to cover these final issues in a structured, uninterrupted manner. It's best to check with the moderator prior to the group to determine the most appropriate way for notes to be handled.

Things You Should Avoid:

- Commenting on people's appearance, intelligence or behavior: Making fun of the participants is one way of reacting to the voyeuristic atmosphere of the back room, but doing this has the potential to skew your reactions to their remarks. Thus, it's best to avoid such comments and try to concentrate on what people are saying.
- Typecasting: Avoid the tendency to view respondents as not representative of your customers or target market and thereby dismiss their opinions. All participants have been carefully selected based on predetermined specifications in keeping with the research objectives.
- Disruptive backroom behavior: Outbursts of laughter, thumping on tables or loud talking may disrupt the flow of the session if this behavior can be heard in the front room. More seriously, it reminds people of your presence and could discourage further free expression.
- Putting too much stock in numbers: Although the number of participants who feel a certain way in a focus group or series of interviews may be noteworthy, it in no way reflects how many people might feel the same way in the constituencies they represent. Statistically projectable research can only come from a quantitative survey using appropriate sampling methodologies. What is crucial in qualitative research is the range of emotional response and the underlying motivations and rationales that elicit the responses.
- Premature conclusions: One comment, in one discussion, does not necessarily make a valuable truth, and not every comment heard during a discussion is significant. Keep in mind that meaningful research findings come through a synthesis of many comments from a number of respondents across a series of group discussions or individual interviews. Each should make a contribution to the final learning but no single session should be expected to provide "the answer." As an observer, you are looking for patterns across participants and across sessions.

Enjoy each session...and benefit from the learning!

This document was prepared by members of the Professionalism Committee of the Qualitative Research Consultants Association (QRCA): George Balch, Susan Denton, Christopher Herbert, Barbara Rosenthal,

George Silverman and J. R. Harris. The Committee wishes to thank those who have helped us develop this document: Pierre Belisle, Curtis Fedder, Linda LaScola, Jan Lohs and Dorrie Paynter. Their contributions were invaluable and much appreciated. If you have any comments or questions, please forward them via email to the Professionalism Committee Chair, J. Robert Harris, at jrobharris@cs.com.