



B2B

International

a dentsu company

The Why Behind the What: The Ultimate Guide to Qualitative Research in B2B

Discover how B2B International uses qualitative research to uncover the true meanings, needs, and motivations that drive decision-making in B2B markets.

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Introduction & The Purpose of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is all about understanding. When we need to establish the true meanings that the market attaches to products, brands, and trends, we can use qualitative research methods to identify the underlying needs and motivations that drive decision making. It allows us to answer the 'why' questions, puts issues on the table, and helps us to understand markets.

There are three core principles of qualitative research that we should bear in mind:

1

Quality and depth over quantity

Qualitative research is all about the quality of respondents and the depth of information we can get from every respondent. Every single interview counts, as we focus on capturing as much depth as possible in each interview.

It is not necessarily the best tool to use when our client's key priority is measurement (in which case quantitative research would be better suited).

2

The research should be flexible and exploratory

Qualitative research gives us the opportunity to answer our clients' burning 'why' questions. We need to be flexible with our approach and discussion guides so that iterations can be made during fieldwork to address new themes or questions that have arisen.

The set up of the research and discussion guide design is critical to enable our research to be flexible and exploratory.

3

Interviewer / researcher skill is critical

A strong interviewer or moderator is critical to the success of a qualitative project, as they are responsible for gathering the data and probing for depth. A good interviewer or moderator will listen to what the respondent is saying and prompt accordingly on interesting topics set by our client, or on new topics.

Briefing interviewers well is essential to ensure that they understand the topic and client to effectively carry out the interview.

When Qualitative Research Might Be Right for You

Qualitative approaches can be used in a variety of applications for B2B research. Qualitative research can be used as stand-alone methodology or can be dovetailed with quantitative methodologies to create a unique and detailed piece of research.



UNDERSTANDING CUSTOMERS & BUYERS

When you're looking to understand your customers and buyers, qualitative research can bring a wealth of depth and understanding. Qualitative methods should be considered particularly where the respondent pool is small. Topics where qualitative research is particularly useful include:

- Customer journey mapping and uncovering business processes
- Developing customer value propositions
- Understanding customers' experiences
- Developing personas

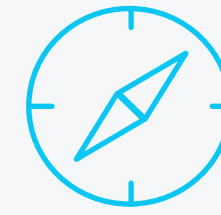


UNDERSTANDING PRODUCT & PRICING STRATEGIES

Qualitative research is especially useful in the following instances:

- Developing and testing new products, concepts and proposition
- Creative campaign testing

Qualitative research allows you to improve and refine strategies and outputs based on verbatim feedback, allowing the best strategy to be taken forward.



UNDERSTANDING MARKETS & OPPORTUNITIES

Whilst assessing market opportunities, sizes and potentials is typically a quantitative-focused area, there is room to use qualitative research to refine focus, add context to quantitative figures, and provide new avenues for organizations to explore. In particular, qualitative research could be especially useful for:

- Understanding overall market needs, trends and predictions
- Interviewing market experts to expand understanding on the topic at play, providing context and future potential to the research



UNDERSTANDING BRANDS & COMMUNICATIONS

In addition to standardized quantitative brand research, there is opportunity to use qualitative research to develop a deeper understanding of brand perceptions, and to explore the associations that the market has with a brand.



INSIGHTS FOR THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

We know that thought leadership makes the difference between a brand being selected in a B2B buying decision, and not. With the sheer volume of thought leadership published daily, there is a need for brands to ensure that what they share stands out from competitors. Qualitative research can be incorporated as a core part of thought leadership research, to:

- Add a point of difference to quantitative thought leadership – and make marketing materials stand out from competitors'
- Bring findings to life, using quotes, case studies and real-life examples, to make the research more tangible for readers
- Explore unique angles on existing topics, presenting a differentiated point of view on topics that have been previously explored

Selecting The Right Methodology

Selecting the right methodology is a critical step in any research, but especially in qualitative research where we need to get the most out of every interview and interaction. The methods that we can use in qualitative research are varied and can be carried out digitally or in person.

METHODOLOGY FACT FILE



In-depth interviews (IDIs)

WHAT IS THIS METHOD?

In-depth discussions with respondents that can be carried out either over the phone or via video call. IDIs can also be carried out face-to-face in some instances: we might want to use this method if we are speaking to very senior individuals, or we are testing a physical product.





STRENGTHS OF THE METHOD

- **Rich data:** We can access information and views from respondents that we cannot tap into using a quantitative method. We can build rapport with respondents and encourage deeper responses to the questions we ask.
- **Flexible & iterative:** The interviewer can prompt the respondent on topics of interest to the client, as well as any topics that arise during the interview that had not previously been considered.
- **Work well in conjunction with other methods:** IDIs work extremely well as a precursor to quantitative research to shape the questionnaire, or in parallel to add context to quantitative findings.
- **Ability to use projective techniques:** We can use different techniques to explore complex issues and make it easier for respondents to answer what would otherwise be challenging questions to answer.
- **Suitable for limited target audiences:** When the pool of individuals is small, IDIs allow research representation.

CONSIDERATIONS TO MAKE WHEN SUGGESTING IDIS

- **Sample sizes:** Qualitative sample sizes are not normally suitable when our client is looking for measurement over understanding of a topic.
- **Accessing Respondents:** Respondents are often senior and are expensive to recruit. We must use very targeted recruitment methods such as LinkedIn or our partner networks – these audiences have become more difficult to recruit over the last 12-18 months as they ‘know their worth’ in research and look for a premium price for their time.
- **Timelines:** Timelines for qualitative fieldwork using IDIs are typically longer than those using quantitative methodologies and interviews take up more of respondents’ time.



BEST USED FOR:

Any type of project which requires depth of understanding.



In-Person Focus Groups

WHAT IS THIS METHOD?

An in-person group discussion, moderated by a researcher, which relies heavily on discussion between the group members on the topic of the research. Focus groups typically comprise 5-10 individuals.



STRENGTHS OF THE METHOD

- **Rich depth of data & flexibility:** The moderator is able to prompt on topics which come up in the focus group and dive deep on topics which are important to individuals in the group.
- **Group dynamic:** Individuals are not under pressure to give responses to spontaneous questions and can digest and consider other perceptions to trigger their views and opinions.
- **Gathering non-verbal information:** We can read non-verbal cues which we cannot with other methods. This is particularly important when we are carrying out concept testing, for instance.

CONSIDERATIONS TO MAKE WHEN SUGGESTING IN-PERSON FOCUS GROUPS

- **Practicality:** In-person focus groups are not always practical, especially if the target audience is widespread and small.
- **Sensitive topic areas:** In-person focus groups are not suitable for discussing sensitive topics, such as the need to share personal information, disclosure of company financials, or discussion on production techniques for example.
- **The group 'hierarchy' effect:** We need to keep in-person focus group respondents at a similar level of responsibility so that everyone feels comfortable to share their views.
- **Differing personalities:** The moderator must ensure that equal share of voice has been given to respondents, and that the loudest respondents do not overshadow the group.

☆ BEST USED FOR:

Product development, identification of needs/challenges, exploring perceptions, unravelling complex processes (e.g., buying journey).



Online Focus Groups

WHAT IS THIS METHOD?

An online bullet-in board on which research questions are posted. Participants of the online focus group are asked to reply to each question, and are able to see the responses of other participants. Participants can engage in discussion under the questions asked, as well as reply to prompts from the moderator.



STRENGTHS OF THE METHOD

- **Flexibility:** Moderators can probe on topics which have come up in the group discussion.
- **Can be for sensitive topics:** Online focus groups can be anonymous, which means that they can be used for sensitive topics (e.g., including personal information), and respondents are typically more honest.
- **Logistically easy:** Respondents can be recruited from different geographies, which increases scope feasibility and representation. Furthermore, online focus groups are cost-friendly in not having to pay for venue fees and travel.
- **Lots of data can be collected:** An online focus group typically generates up to 12,000 words, and the transcript is available immediately on completion of the group. This output typically has more pertinent content than in-person focus groups, as participants tend to give more consideration to words that are typed than words that are spoken.
- **Using stimuli:** Online focus groups are extremely effective at providing on-screen visual stimuli to respondents, and are especially effective at testing creative campaigns.

CONSIDERATIONS TO MAKE WHEN SUGGESTING ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS

- **Limitations for representation:** Groups or geographies that have less access to technology, or are less technologically savvy, typically are not accessible through online focus groups.
- **Physical stimuli:** Online focus groups are not suitable for testing physical stimuli, unless our client is willing to send products or samples to respondents' home addresses.
- **No visual cues:** We are not able to judge non-verbal cues from respondents using online focus groups, unlike in-person groups.

☆ BEST USED FOR:

Campaign testing, sensitive topics, concept testing, identification of needs/challenges, exploring perceptions, unravelling complex processes (e.g., buying journey).



Ethnography

WHAT IS THIS METHOD?

Studying people or products in the environment that they work or are used in. It is commonly used in behavioral research, but we can use ethnography to assess how products are used in context in market research. Ethnography can be carried out in person, or digitally.



STRENGTHS OF THE METHOD

- **Flexibility:** The method can be adapted as we collect the findings, meaning that we can adjust our focus and gather the most insightful findings possible.
- **Authenticity:** We can gather authentic understanding of how products are used and the challenges faced when investigating them in situ.
- **Contextual understanding:** Ethnography allows us to understand social and cultural contexts of using products or services which we would not be able to get on the phone.
- **Bringing the research to life:** Ethnographic imagery can bring findings to life, by demonstrating the topic at hand in context.
- **Multi-Modal:** Ethnography can be carried out in person, or digitally. We can use social media scanning or ethnography alongside a method such as IDIs to gather images of products and processes in situ – emphasizing the first-hand experiences reported in verbatim comments.

CONSIDERATIONS TO MAKE WHEN SUGGESTING ETHNOGRAPHY

- **Time commitment:** Ethnography is time consuming, especially when travel is required to carry out the ethnography. Likewise, digital ethnography can demand more time and energy from respondents, meaning it is imperative to recruit the right audience.
- **Accessibility of audiences:** Some audiences are not accessible with in-person ethnography – but we can use digital ethnography to access these audiences if possible.
- **Subjectivity:** The method relies on interpretation, so we need to pair ethnography with another method to ensure that we capture a holistic picture of the market.

☆ BEST USED FOR:

Market assessment, understanding key challenges, new product development (showing how current products are used), assessing marketing or point of sale (POS) materials.



Stakeholder Workshops

WHAT IS THIS METHOD?

A gathering of stakeholders (in-person or digitally), which helps us to brainstorm ideas, map journeys or deep-dive on particular topics. They can be useful as part of the immersion stage of a project, or as a stand-alone method to simplify or challenge internal assumptions.



STRENGTHS OF THE METHOD

- **Discussion:** Workshops encourage different client teams to share ideas and discuss topics of interest – often leading to new ideas and opinions.
- **Insights to inform other primary research methods:** Stakeholder workshops are a great springboard to other methodologies, such as highlighting gaps in understanding or being able to assess internal versus external perceptions.
- **Engagement:** Stakeholder workshops ensure that all stakeholders are engaged in the research and have had a chance to share their views. This can increase buy-in, especially when there is more than one stage to the research.

CONSIDERATIONS TO MAKE WHEN SUGGESTING STAKEHOLDER WORKSHOPS

- **Geographical location:** It is difficult to get teams together when they are spread out across the globe, for instance. To overcome this, we can run online client workshops using online whiteboard tools, for stakeholders to share their views.
- **Internal view:** As a stand-alone method, stakeholder workshops can only capture the internal view. There is benefit in validating findings with customer or market research, especially if the project's aims are to better understand a market or a customer/buyer journey.

☆ BEST USED FOR:

Customer journey mapping, exploration of the employee experience, deep-dives on specific topics where lots of internal knowledge is held.

What Are Projective Techniques, And How Can We Use Them In Qualitative Research?

Respondents often struggle to express their true opinions when asked a direct question. Projective techniques allow us to uncover hidden customer thoughts, opinions and concerns, to allow us to dig deeper into our research questions. There are various projective techniques we can use in qualitative research. Six of these are:



LADDERING

We use laddering to uncover motivations and thoughts behind initial responses to questions. This might be as simple as questions such as 'why?' or 'how does that impact you?'.



WORD ASSOCIATION

We typically ask respondents the first three words that come to mind when they are thinking of a brand, which gives us an understanding of the top-of-mind perceptions of the brand, as well as the level of emotional connection with the brand. We can use this type of question for a variety of other applications, too.



SENTENCE COMPLETION

Involves respondents completing a sentence 'stem', which initiates true opinions from respondents, and is easier to answer than a complex open question.



DRAWING

We can use tasks that involve drawing to get to the bottom of knowledge and understanding. For instance, schematic diagrams of the customer journey, or drawn 'newspaper articles' of a brand in the future.



PERSONIFICATION

Asking respondents to describe a brand or service as a person, and how they would behave, to uncover hidden perceptions.



ANALOGIES

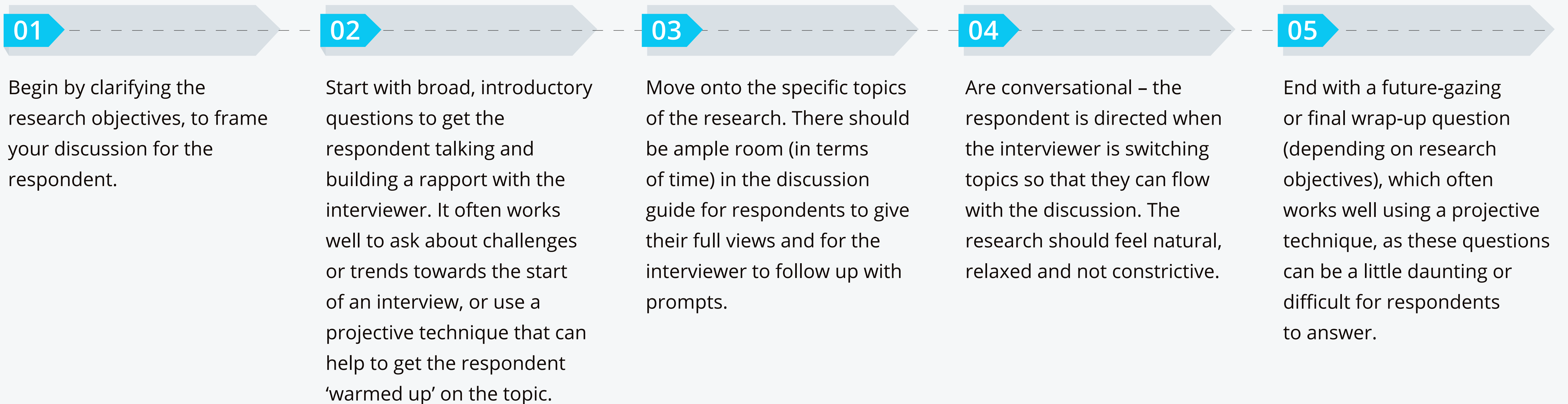
Asking for analogies such as 'if [BRAND] were an animal, what would it be and why?', to uncover brand strengths and weaknesses.

Getting The Most Out Of Qualitative Research

Aside from the collection of the data itself, there are two fundamental areas to get right when running a piece of qualitative research: discussion guide design and analysis.

What Makes A Great Discussion Guide?

Without a successful discussion guide, the outputs of qualitative research are going to miss the mark – it is one of the most critical stages of any project. A great discussion guide should be concise, focused on the research objectives, and simple for the respondent to follow. Best-practice discussion guides typically:



The biggest fundamental of qualitative discussion guide design is to ensure that there is enough time for the respondent to answer each question fully – often fewer questions that are more detailed gather the best data and keep the respondent focused.

Qualitative analysis is all about uncovering themes, unique ways of thinking about data, and extracting detail. This is not easy and often requires time investment and an iterative approach to ensure that the best story is created from the data we have. There are a number of qualitative analysis approaches to bear in mind during qualitative analysis:

Grounded Theory

To put it simply, grounded theory is where we develop theories and hypotheses based on the data (rather than focusing on a hypothesis set before collecting data). It is an inductive approach.

Grounded theory is an iterative process, where we collect and analyze data into themes until we reach 'theoretical saturation', where additional interview completes are not adding anything new into our theory and all issues are 'on the table'.

This technique is best used when our client does not have any hypotheses on topics, or any reasoning for a particular trend in their business.

The use of grounded theory method has several benefits:

- Less bias from existing hypotheses
- All findings are driven by the data
- Finding unique themes and trends in the data



Getting The Most Out Of Qualitative Research

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

The point of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is to understand how respondents make sense of what happens to them. In short, its key goal is to understand respondents' lived experiences.

Like grounded theory, IPA is an inductive technique which uses specific examples and experiences to create bigger themes and theories.

IPA is more than relaying individual experiences, and aims to dive deeper into personal meanings and the impact of experiences on individuals' worlds. It focuses on emotionally-charged situations and experiences rather than on mundane or day-to-day experiences.

In a market research context, we could use IPA for:

- Healthcare research when speaking to patients or HCPs
- Persona profiling



Discourse Analysis

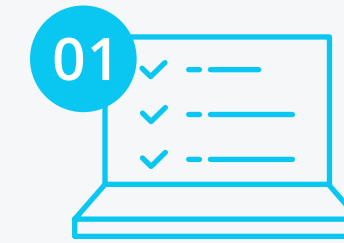
Discourse analysis is all about understanding language in its social and cultural context, and how language is used to engage actions and experiences.

We can use the language used in interviews to understand:

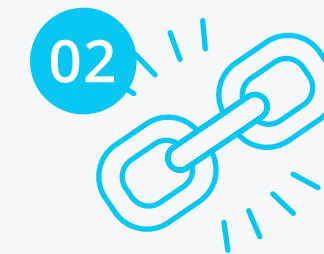
- Power dynamics – differing language will be used with peers versus superiors (think about use in focus groups).
- How language can be used to persuade or inform (think about use in campaign testing / website development).
- The depth of connection with a brand (i.e., are associations functional, or is the brand eliciting an emotional response?).

Discourse analysis is most suited to focus groups in a market research context, though there is also opportunity to understand the emotions that brands elicit from respondents.

In carrying out qualitative analysis, we can think of four stages of ‘sophistication’ within our analysis, that each add value as the stages are moved through. The more sophisticated the analysis, the more action that will be driven by qualitative research and analysis. It makes sense for analysis to become more sophisticated as the stages are progressed through.



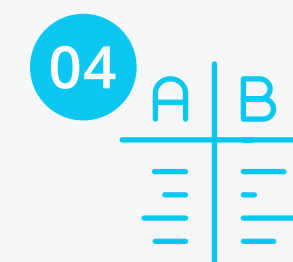
Description: this stage includes looking at what respondents are saying at each question, what is common, what is unique, and looking at which language or terminology is being used.



Finding Linkages & Connections: this stage includes looking at connections and links between topics and questions, and how those link to the project objectives. We might also look at what is surprising or unusual at this stage.



Themes: this stage starts to look at common themes which cut across all sections, and which determine behaviors and actions, the variables that are critical in determining themes, and how these findings contribute to the overall research findings.



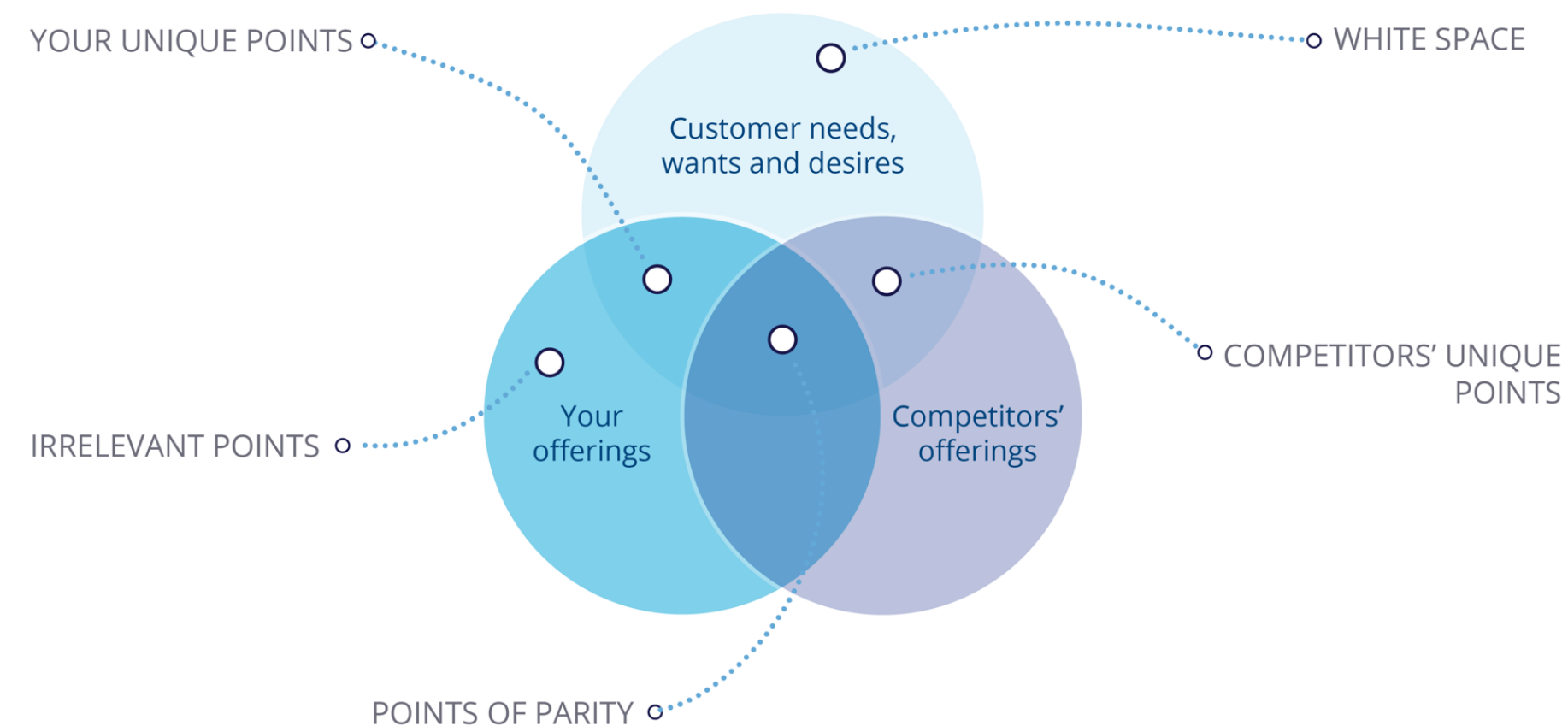
Frameworks: this is the stage where existing and bespoke frameworks are applied to draw the information together and tease out the story from the qualitative data. This is the stage where findings should be tangibly linked to the research, business and strategic objectives, and drive action from the research.

Qualitative Frameworks To Use

The use of frameworks is imperative in qualitative research, as they help to simplify extensive amounts of data into bite-sized actions. We can create bespoke frameworks for qualitative outputs, as well as popular existing models, such as:

The Three Circles Model

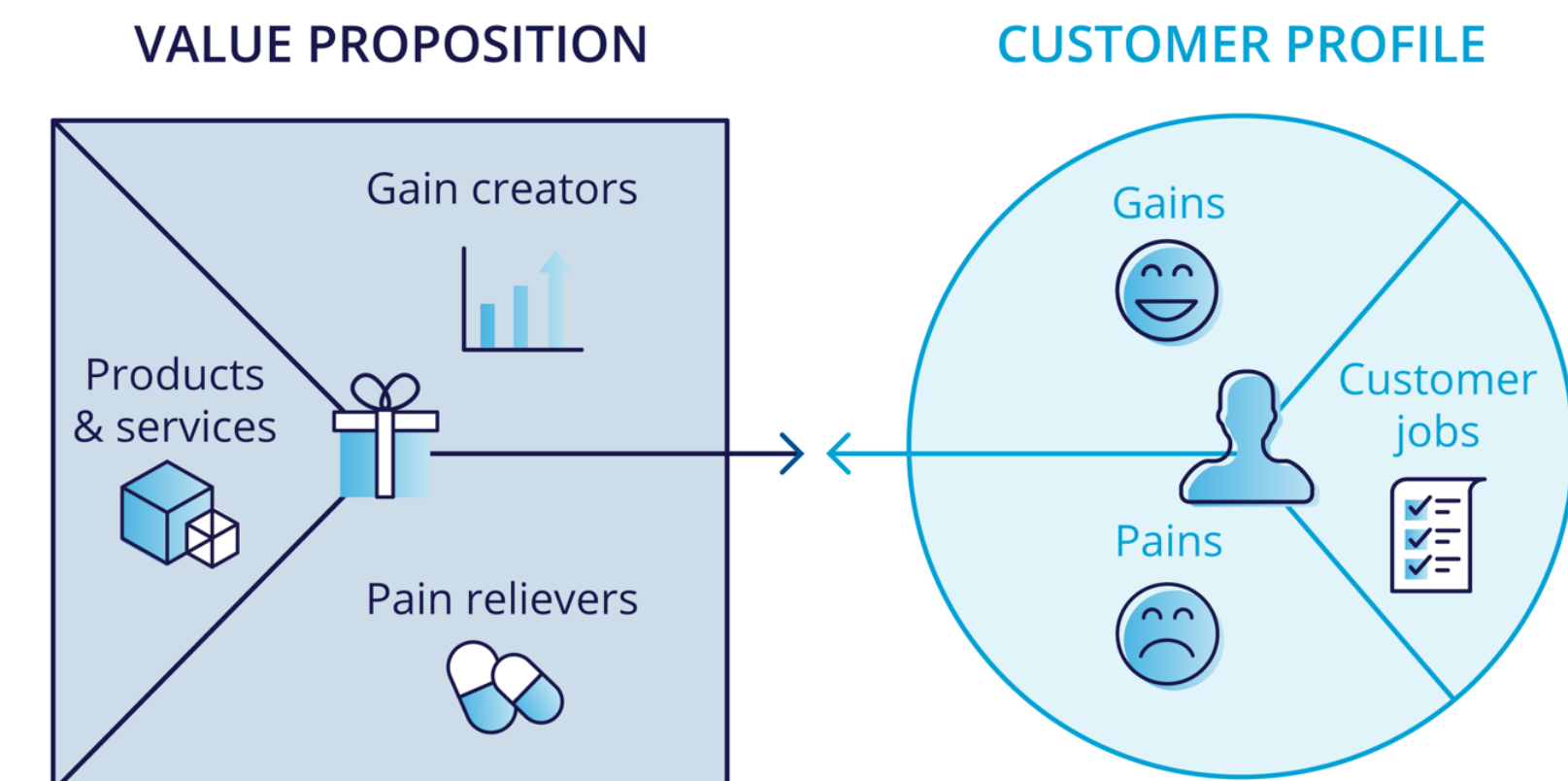
The Three Circles Framework consists of customer needs, company strengths, and competitor strengths, and each of these areas interlink to reveal the points of parity in the market and the points of differentiation our clients or their competitors may have. These insights help to understand which customer needs are currently being met and by which companies, and understand where a company currently sits in the market space against competitors.



The Value Proposition Canvas

The Value Proposition Canvas is a framework which can help ensure that a product or service is positioned around what the customer values and needs.

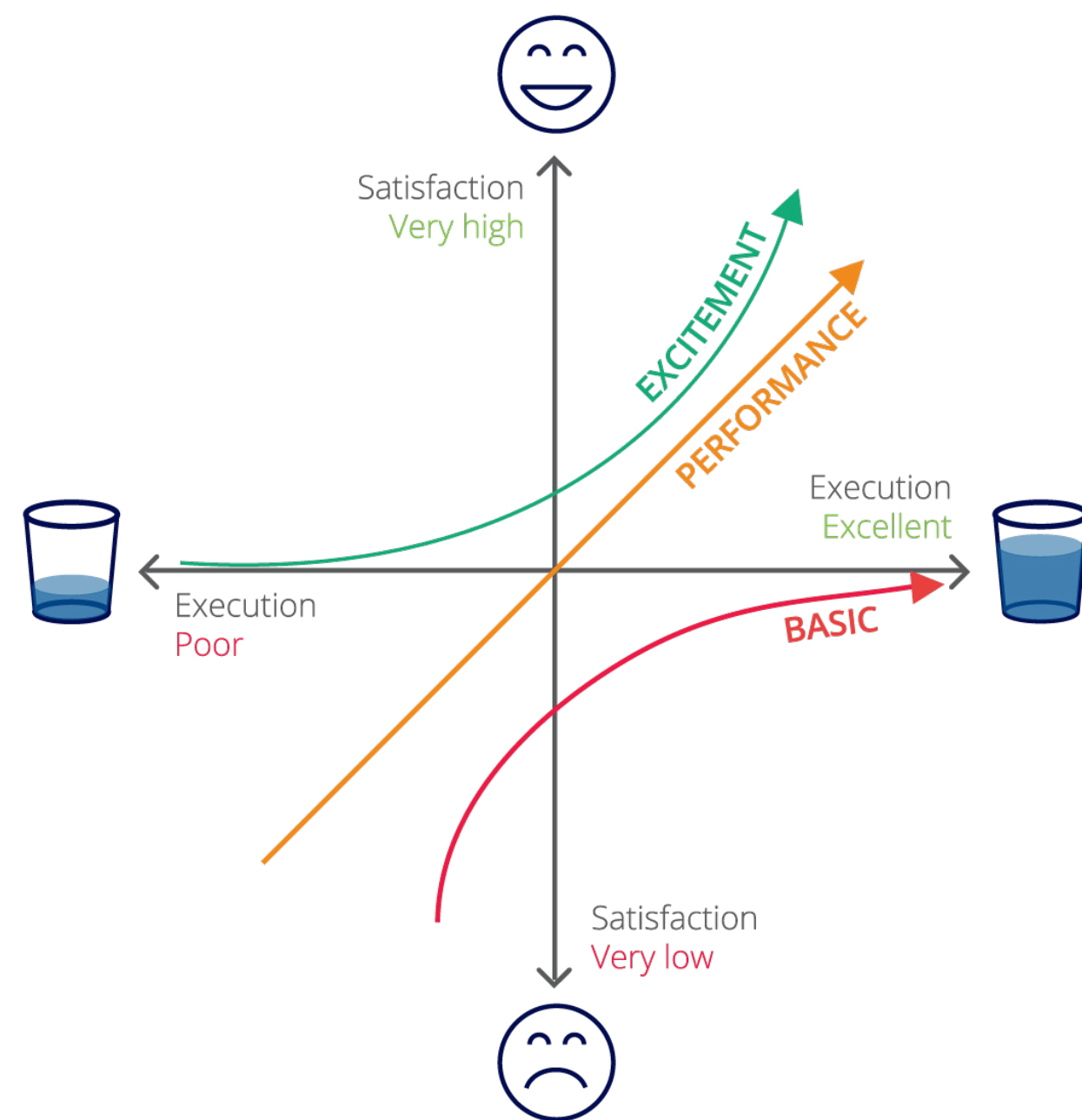
The Value Proposition Canvas can be used when there is need to refine an existing product or service offering or where a new offering is being developed from scratch.



The KANO Model

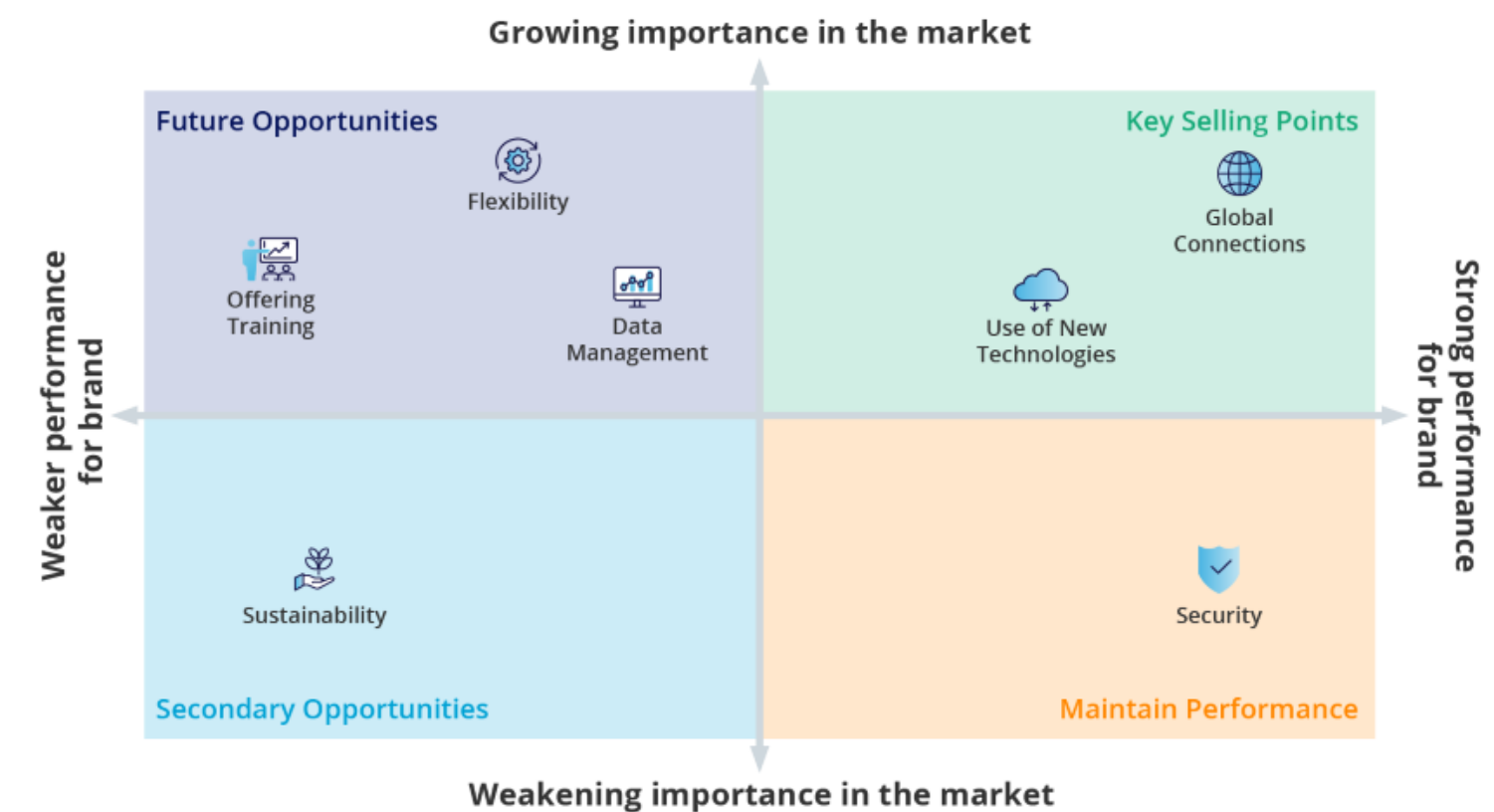
We can use the KANO model to map out different expectations that customers have and the factors which will delight them.

We can use this model in product development, and also in assessing what brands can do to delight their customers when assessing customer experience.



The Directional Policy Matrix

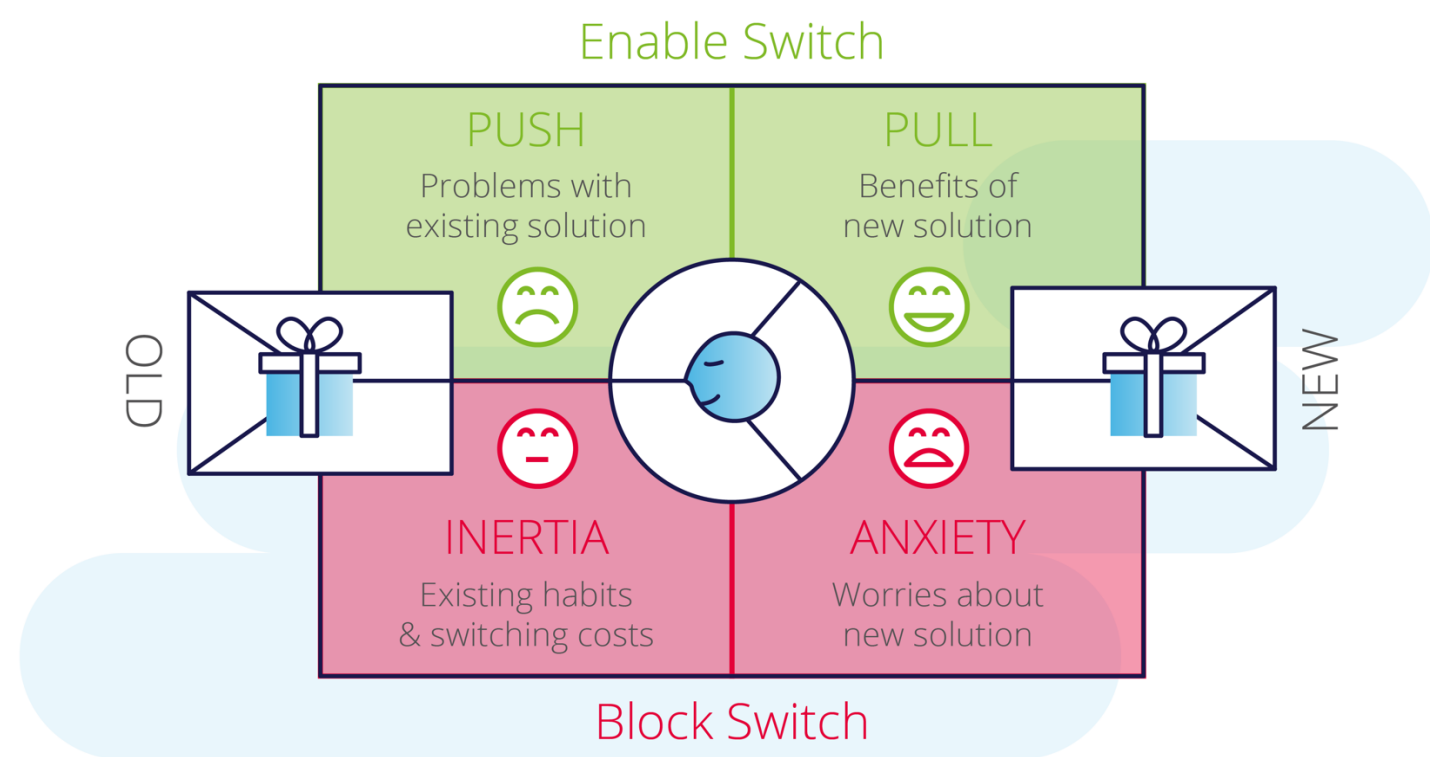
The principles of the directional policy matrix can be translated to qualitative research. It is especially useful to highlight company strengths and weaknesses, whilst also looking at market attractiveness. We may look at comments relating to future opportunities to establish market attractiveness. Plotting these factors on the same chart allows us to draw clear conclusions on where the opportunity lies for the organization, and which products or services are less attractive. This can help to direct strategy and focus for organizations, even without conducting quantitative research.



Qualitative Frameworks To Use





The Push-Pull Model

The push-pull model is a framework that is best used when organizations are looking to introduce a new product or solution to the market but are unsure of the enablers and barriers that customers see when thinking about switching solutions. The framework allows us to explore a variety of reasons why customers might want to stick with their current solution or move to use a new product or solution. Through its use, the push-pull model can inform organizations of what is going to enable or block a switch to the new solution, and hence can help to develop strategy to overcome any barriers to the use of the new solution or product.



SWOT Analysis

This well-known framework can help us to identify strengths and weaknesses of the brands. We can also assess opportunities and threats from the wider market landscape that need to be considered by our clients.

	HELPFUL	HARMFUL
INTERNAL	 STRENGTHS	 WEAKNESSES
EXTERNAL	 OPPORTUNITIES	 THREATS

What's Next For Qualitative Research?

Like all areas of market research, qualitative research is in a period of change, driven by the increasing development of AI tools and growing focus on digital approaches. Whilst the fundamentals of qualitative research remain steady, there is room for market researchers to adopt new technologies and collection methods to enhance the approach.

Enhancing the use of digital methods

Throughout this paper, we have highlighted digital tools and collection methods, which are relatively recent developments in qualitative research. We anticipate even greater use and adoption of digital methods, allowing us to recruit and research more specific and difficult-to-reach audiences. As well as improving the diversity of our respondents, we will be better able to:

- Enhance the agility of research compared to traditional methods – making qualitative research an option for fast turnaround projects
- Collect real-time feedback on online bulletin boards
- Gather real-life imagery, showing customers' challenges, product use and areas of importance – even from remote locations



What's Next For Qualitative Research?

Using AI to streamline qualitative analysis

Qualitative analysis by nature is time-intensive and requires significant immersion from the researcher to derive the story and insight from the data. In order for qualitative research to be more accessible to more types of research, improving its speed is key, and there are a variety of tools that we can use to help to streamline qualitative analysis:

- AI-powered transcription tools, so that we can view data more quickly
- Text analysis software which supports the development of high-level themes, so that researchers can deliver top-line findings more quickly
- Tools which analyze voice and emotion during the interview, so that we can offer the benefits of a face-to-face qualitative interview over the phone

Whilst these tools are useful in supporting qualitative analysis, they are not replacements for human interpretation and story development at this stage in time. Researchers should embrace the streamlining of analysis with AI to allow more time to spend on creating actionable insights from qualitative data – we fundamentally still need to answer the 'why' questions that qualitative research is designed to answer.



Mixing qualitative and quantitative methodologies to deliver the best of both approaches

Mixing methodological approaches to research is not a new concept, but there is a trend towards the need to both measure and explore topics within market research. There are significant benefits to incorporating qualitative research within quantitative research, namely that:

- The research is more unique and tailored to research objectives
- The research will be able to offer new points of view
- The research will be 'brought to life' more, through direct examples, quotes and case studies

Qualitative research is not just a research 'add on' – but a core component to making a mixed-method project unique, interesting and different to what has been done before.



What's Next For Qualitative Research?

Big qual: A future opportunity?

Even with the use of mixed methodologies, sometimes we can still miss the full picture in market research. 'Big qual' is a hybrid method, drawing on both qualitative and quantitative research, providing the understanding that qualitative research delivers, combined with the reach of quantitative studies. The method uses AI to analyze open-ended questions from a large sample of respondents (significantly larger than in traditional qualitative research) to create rich, representative insights.

Big qual could provide huge opportunities in the future for market research, especially in longitudinal or tracking market research. For now, we need to consider:

- The need for very large sample sizes in qualitative research, or whether a more traditional approach suffices
- Whether AI for analysis takes away from the 'human' or 'hands on' approach to dealing with qualitative analysis
- How we define big qual within market research, and how this differs to large-scale quantitative research, once data is themed, grouped or coded



Conclusion

Qualitative research is a fundamental tool in understanding and exploring perceptions, needs, challenges and opinions in market research. There is a wealth of methods available to use, which allow qualitative exploration to suit the topic and audience at hand, and increasing digital methods are enabling us to gather qualitative information at greater speed.

The challenge for qualitative research in the face of advancing AI and methodologies is to retain its core principles – understanding the ‘why’ behind opinions, and drawing on researcher skill to get the best out of the data. We must balance using AI and technology to enhance and speed up the qualitative research process, without removing the human touch of qualitative research that allows us to create tangible insights and drive action from data.

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