



Focus group recruiting in the era of big data

| By Robert Horowitz

snapshot

Robert Horowitz reflects on the role of recruiting in the qualitative process and argues for the value of taking the steps to do it right.

S ometime after the turn of the 20th century, battalions of captivating, resourceful, gregarious entrepreneurs established businesses on which rests the foundation of all marketing research.

At the time, mostly women, who knew how to network before networking had a name, recruited participants for focus groups. Armed with little more than a box of index cards (or notebooks), a rotary phone and practically an oil lamp to light the way, these pioneers understood how to bring people together while navigating complicated priorities. Often empathic, these were emissaries of the research; they were the people who knew people and when asked, they would tell you they had an inherent gift – people would tell them anything.

As the demands of marketing research blossomed the “kitchen table” recruiters were in the background making research happen. With almost no technology beyond the phone and electricity, recruiters and researchers held late-night clandestine street-corner meetings to exchange paperwork. It was expected that recruiting took three to four weeks and changes on the fly were uncommon, as they were almost impossible to navigate.

These days, the work, as always, remains frenetic and dynamic but it feels like we are losing our way. As was the case in many industries, the fax machine changed everything. As if by magic, a widely available, reasonably-priced device sucked in screeners and shot them across the

planet as bits of data one dot at a time. The pace quickened, only to be followed by the advent of e-mail. As fax machines found themselves room in the garage next to the horse and buggy, the speed of fieldwork accelerated exponentially. Technology advances continue to hasten the process but expedience has not altered the axiomatic core of marketing research, which lies within the subtlety of human nature.

In our fervor to win the pitch, get the communication check done or just do the research, there is a presumption within our industry that the complexity of human nature coexists magically with the requisition. Clients rely heavily on technology and micromanagement to implement the matchmaking of respondent to research. The result can be that we fail to remember the consequence of making absurd demands in the field and fail to fully recognize the significance that speed and automation may have on the delicate balance of getting the best recruit.

Worse yet is our clients' attempts to micro-manage the subjective. A thin sample is only as good as the marriage we arrange between respondents and moderator. No algorithm or diminutive particularization of a segmentation will make a quantifiable difference, especially if the respondent is discreditable or the researcher does not connect. Good recruiting is as much of an art as the research itself and great recruiters know not only how to manage expectations but balance the research design with the perfect imperfections of individuality that keep our industry alive. Sagacity does not come from asking a stranger what deceased person they wish to dine with, what can be done with a paper clip

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or brick or by requesting they turn the cloud outside their window into a Rorschach test.

It is easy to yield to the temptation of recruiting the masses by means of social media. It is cheap, quick and easy. Blanketing the Internet with the promise of easy money for sharing an opinion builds a database and can produce instant results of professional Craigslist respondents ad nauseam, but to what end?

We have created an industry-culture that demands and expects panels of human beings to be pre-classified into discrete buckets of age, gender, ethnicity, geography and a host of predilections to be at the ready for solving our most complex issues. It is presupposed that panelists be trustworthy, sincere, insightful and not prejudicial or biased. This new paradigm obscures the extraordinary value that transcends ticking off boxes in an algorithm; and dissuades collaboration of shrewd, tenacious, perceptive recruiters who understand the very spirit of the respondents the researchers really want to speak with in the first place.

Time-honored old-fashioned recruiting is falling out of favor because, it is, by its very nature, a highly inefficient practice. It takes an inordinate amount of time to seek out the best respondents. This can also be very expensive to do correctly. High-quality recruiting requires some of the rarest commodities on Earth: time, money and smart, intuitive recruiters with exceptional common sense and creativity.

The cornerstone of superlative qualitative research begins with comprehensive fieldwork. This necessitates highly skilled recruiters who can evaluate and scrutinize often flawed and imperfect human beings across a host of parameters and also consider the research design and objectives throughout the selection process. The best insights universally demand a collaborative sensibility for the research objective to be conscientiously actualized.

Curious by nature, what I have always loved so much about this industry is the heterogeneity of not only the respondents but the clients we serve and the often vigorous nature of the projects on which we facilitate. In response to recent more fiscally conservative times, our firm, a marketing research recruiting and fieldwork agency, has demonstrated to our clients that we can produce a result with intense cost control at a breakneck pace. Because quotas are met, algorithms completed and people turn up, there is a presumption that the research has been dutifully accomplished. I remain unconvinced that the fast-paced, low-cost results outweigh the critically valuable selective insights derived by partnering with the “kitchen table” recruiters. If we are not speaking with the most appropriate – and, by extension, most valuable – respondents, what are we really researching after all?

Our firm has seen substantial changes over the past three decades. Despite the vicissitude of the last few years in marketing research, I am start-

ing to see a shift back to our roots, as clients recognize the ineradicable value of specialized recruiting.

The art of recruiting is like the age-old challenge of matchmaking. Speed-dating, Internet dating sites and advanced algorithms haven’t improved the quality of good relationships; good intuitive matchmaking does. The best recruiters balance the research needs and enhance the research, producing better results for clients using time-intensive, intuitive methods of matchmaking.

Big data may efficiently provide the “when, where and how often” of consumer behavior but it will never properly ascertain the passions, motivations and tangible meaning behind people’s behavior, which can only be uncovered by thorough, observant research with the correct audience. I look forward to getting back to basics. I embrace being recognized as partner in the process rather than someone who ticks the boxes and fills the seats.

As researchers, we rely on the art of our craft to capture the emotions of human experience. When we lose the perspective that recruiting is the canvas on which the art is displayed, we run the risk of rendering a murky, abstract result, without the form or definition necessary to communicate the sum and substance of what we are trying to uncover. 

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