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Qualitative Marketing Research—An overview

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The use of qualitative Marketing Research can be traced back to the early days of World War II. During this period, two social scientists, Robert Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld had been trying to probe into the nature and after-effect of the impact of war-related communications. For their research, they developed an interview technique which is presently known as focus group. In their study, the methods were used to assess a radio programme intended to boost morale of people during War. While listening to a programme, the listeners pressed a red button if they had a negative reaction and a green button, for a positive one. Later, the researchers used these records collectively to inquire about the people's reactions and comments on those parts of the programme that were especially positive or negative. This methodology was named focused interview.

INTRODUCTION

QUALITATIVE Marketing Research is almost entirely synonymous with focus group interviews. Most of the Marketing Research text books talk about focus group interviews in the context of exploratory research. Exploratory research is critically important for problem identification as well as crisp formulation of problems. This is an extremely important step in the research process because a very accurate answer to a wrong question has no value, while even an approximately right answer to the right question is immensely useful. Assuming that one has identified the right set of questions, for obtaining even approximately correct answers to them, two things are essential. First, appropriate and reliable data. Second, methods of data analysis that is capable of generating output which can be useful input to the design making process. Generally, the task of data collection is performed through a suitably designed sample survey with the use of one or more of the well-tested and established instruments such as questionnaire. Once the data have been collected they are subjected to a battery of statistical procedures for description and inference. The basic argument in favour of the use of statistical techniques is that they are scientifically valid and the outcomes can be reproduced and verified as and when necessary.

The advocates of focus group interviews for non-exploratory research emphasize, that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible in some cases, to extract true data from the respondents through routine use of questionnaire or interviews. Thus, howsoever valid a statistical procedure one may use, one is liable to obtain output which is remotely useful to the decision-maker. This group of researchers, therefore, contend that through properly designed focus group interviews it is possible to generate information, that can be useful input to the decision making process. It may be almost impossible to generate such information through other methods of research. In this context, I thought it necessary to understand more deeply the process of qualitative research, i.e. focus group interviews.

The most common source of marketing data is communication with respondents. It is logical to acquire data from people through questioning—especially from persons whom the concerned authorities consider to be knowledgeable. The research design can range from questioning a handful or respondents to surveying a large number of people. Data collection methods include personal interviews, telephone communication and mail questionnaires. Qualitative Marketing Research is a more involved and intense way of gathering such information. The popularity and significance of qualitative Marketing Research has increased considerably in the recent years. From the point of view of application, it has been found to be highly versatile.

As stated earlier, Qualitative Marketing Research hinges mainly on a practice known as the so-called focus group interviews or discussions. A group of 8-12 respondents is selected from a data base of willing people supplied by a local facility, belonging to the venue of the focus group session. The participants discuss and later give opinions on criteria such as product quality availability, packaging, user-friendliness etc. A moderator conducts the session and elicits comments from the participants. As an

(b) A second version is to view focus groups as a way of generating ideas. The moderator enlists comments regarding product features, service requirements etc. The groups explore issues that the researcher has not previously thought of. The focus groups also enable the researcher to assess the number of people who think a certain idea is a good or a bad one.

(c) The last version is used to stimulate the decision makers. Very often, advertising agencies have copy-writers watch a focus group discussion- which they believe would give them fresh ideas and develop their creativity.

4. OTHER APPROACHES

These focus group innovations are not distinct new approaches but procedural changes of the conventional methods.

Of late there has been a growing interest in *mini-focus-group*. These groups consist of as little as four members- thus bringing about the advantage of group discussion as well as individual interviews. Another aspect is that different approaches are mixed together; researchers have also been blending different approaches within the same session. The innovation has received severe criticism from different quarters.

FOCUS GROUPS VS INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

Although focus groups have dominated Qualitative Marketing Research for several decades, there are several advantages of the individual interview method. In situations where the topic is not useful for general discussion, individual interviews are obviously more relevant. Moreover, focus groups take up considerable amount of time, repeat the same comments,

spend endless time on a single issue- as a result of which a balanced analysis is not possible. On the contrary, with individual questioning it is easier for the interviewer to control discussion on issues and also the time.

Another psychological aspect is that people are more spontaneous and candid when interviewed alone. The interviews tend to be more personal. Moreover, the fact that certain people get easily influenced by the overpowering personalities of fellow respondents does not come into play in personal interviews. The goal of individual interviews is to bring the researcher in touch with the idiosyncratic thinking of the individual.

CONCLUSION

Despite its fallibility in terms of its interpretations being subjective, there are many instances where focus groups have been found to be extremely useful and their findings helped improve the marketing management process significantly. The utility of focus groups can also be judged from its high level of use. It is reported that in the US as many as 700 focus group discussions take place in a single day. The users of focus group say that it provides them with a gut level grasp of their customers. Focus group findings have been found to be extremely useful when used with the findings of other methods. These groups should not be viewed only as an exploratory study for a bigger research project involving quantitative techniques, nor should be viewed as a complementary method to the other well established and scientifically valid methods. The message is: qualitative research methods should be judiciously used in tandem with quantitative research methods for better understanding of the market and in turn for better and effective marketing management.

Reference

1. Principles of Marketing Research, 1994, edited by RP Bagozzi, Basil Blackwell Ltd., USA.