



QRCA

IDEAS & TOOLS  
FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

# VIEWS

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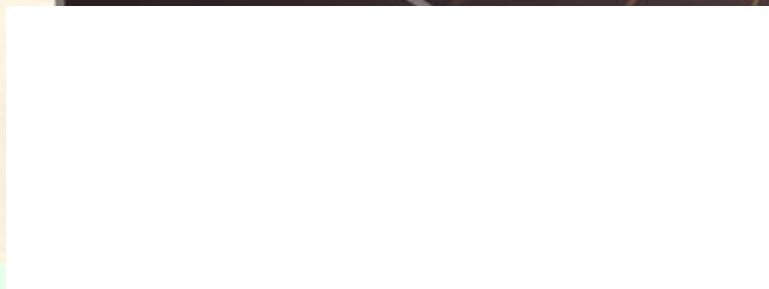
## Hanging Chads and Exuberant X's... Testing a Voting System for Usability

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# The Silver Lining



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The silver lining is that the concept of focus groups is now widely understood by the public — focus groups have “broken through” as a cultural phenomenon. The current criticism of qualitative research only works because the average person now knows generally what a focus group is.

In the last few years, it has become quite fashionable to criticize qualitative research. We certainly have seen a steady flow of articles and books that “bash” qualitative research generally or, in many cases, focus groups specifically. At first, such articles appeared in specialized research industry publications. Then they began to show up in the marketing industry press, then in business and management publications, and now increasingly in major mainstream, general-population newspapers and magazines. Focus groups are even becoming fodder for movies, television shows and advertisements.

Invariably, the critics are far from objective — it turns out they have a jaded perspective or even a vested interest in putting down “traditional” qualitative research. Some of these critics are seeking to create a sensation in order to sell more books. Others offer an “alternative” research methodology that, upon closer scrutiny, looks suspiciously like the very focus group methodology that they are putting down.

Many in the research industry are concerned by these criticisms, as we should be. But I believe that there is also something good and valuable to be found underlying these barbs: the silver lining shining through.

To be fair, we should recognize that there is some truth to the common criticisms — but only when looking at poorly conducted, badly run qualitative research. I agree to criticize unprofessional qualitative research that only explores rational thought processes without probing deeper, that allows dominators to take over and that takes no precautions against cheaters and repeaters. However, these criticisms are simply not valid for the vast majority of qualitative research being conducted today by the dedicated professionals in our industry. And therein lies the problem: these criticisms have been expanded and generalized to all qualitative research.

Just why is qualitative research such a popular target of criticism? First off, for someone who has never done it, moderating focus groups looks deceptively easy. They think, “Hey, anyone can talk to a group of people for a couple of hours, reading off a list of questions. What’s the skill in that?” As we all know, however, moderating focus groups professionally takes tremendous skill and discipline. True professionals always make it look easy.

Another reason qualitative research is such a popular target of criticism is that, in general, people do not like to think that they can be “figured out.” Critics of qualitative research can score a cheap shot by playing into this fear when they portray focus groups as a tool for misrepresenting or misleading people. By portraying qualitative research as some sort of instrument of manipulation, the critics can strike a chord with readers. Yet, properly conducted qualitative research is best for understanding what people need and want so that companies can serve them better — it is part of a process by which products and services are pulled to market by consumers, not pushed onto them.

While we should be concerned about this unwarranted criticism, we should also look deeper at what this criticism signals. The silver lining in all of this is that the concept of focus groups is now widely understood by the public — focus groups have “broken through” as a cultural phenomenon. The current criticism of qualitative research only works because the average person now knows generally what a focus group is.


So, we have seen focus groups go from an obscure, little-understood, specialized business activity to a common, widely known part of the general consumer landscape. The popular media would never consider bashing focus groups unless they were commonly understood. Qualitative research has become an easy target, not because it is deserving of criticism, but because it is one of the few “insider” business tools to reach a mass awareness and understanding, a corporate world secret that everyone knows about. I see this as a very positive development for the industry as a whole.

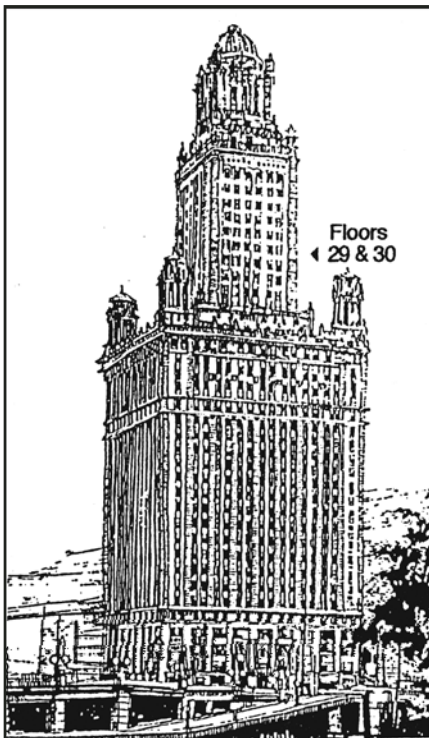
*(continued on page 12)*

I believe the increase in awareness and knowledge of qualitative research in general, and of focus groups in particular, could bode well for our industry. What an opportunity we have now that the term “focus group” has joined the popular lexicon! As more people become familiar with the idea of qualitative research, they may be more likely to participate, leading to improvements in response rates and recruiting productivity. This increased familiarity should also help gain even greater acceptance among clients, not just in marketing departments, but also in the boardroom and in the cubicles. And that is already happening — in spite of the criticisms, qualitative research is growing.

Nonetheless, we know that qualitative research is not above reproach and that we should listen closely to the critics; they just might have something valuable they are trying to tell us. For example, we are well aware that there is definitely a trend by both research consultants and clients to look for ways to conduct research that gets closer to the respondent’s experience. There also is a trend to utilize technology more in the qualitative research process. We welcome these trends, as well as any other developments that lead to better

information for clients to act upon. We embrace these new ideas as additional options that, on a case-by-case basis, might represent the best balance of productive research and economical efficiency. And in many cases, that best balance continues to fall to “traditional” focus groups and depth interviews.

Any endeavor has its potential for abuse and inept application. QRCA has always recognized the potential pitfalls of poorly conducted qualitative research and has worked diligently to enhance the professionalism of our members. QRCA members are dedicated to advancing the qualitative research profession, and in so doing, we are becoming more than just qualitative research practitioners to our clients — we are becoming true, trusted advisors and consultants. One of the ways we provide value to clients is to conduct qualitative research professionally, according to codes of ethics and individual dedication. We are ready to tell our clients whether “traditional” methods or a new approach will be best for their needs. And we will listen to, but not be distracted by, the critics because, deep down, we understand that all the hoopla means we have “made it.” 



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