

The metamorphosis of a qualitative researcher

Like many in the industry, I have shifted responsibilities from quantitative to primarily qualitative work. As I transform into the role of a qualitative research consultant (QRC) at M/A/R/C Research, I begin this path by confirming the notion that I have a knack for qualitative research.

Take a look at the definition of the word:

knack *n* : 1. A clever, expedient way of doing something. 2. A specific talent for something, especially one difficult to explain or teach. 3. A special skill, talent, or aptitude.

Some of those descriptors - “clever,” “specific” and “special” - describe the very nature of qualitative techniques. Interviews with a variety of qualitative experts provided rich insight to this notion and, ultimately, a list of primary characteristics of those who possess the qualitative knack. (Note: The term QRC is used to cover the full spectrum of qualitative work, not just interviewing and moderating.)

With qualitative research on an upswing in the research industry (based on U.S. market research spending, the segment grew by 3 percent and 6 percent in 2003 and 2004, respectively, according to *Inside Research*, May 2005), companies are finding more qualitative projects on the table and, consequently, are seeking expertise in qualitative design, interviewing/moderating, and

analysis. The typical research department is more likely to have trained, in-house moderators than ever before. According to RIVA Training Institute’s Executive Director H. Grace Fuller, seven of eight students in a typical training session represent corporations versus independent moderators, a reversal of the proportion 20 years ago.

Based on my qualitative experience at M/A/R/C thus far, the company feels I am cut out for a specialized qualitative role. I lean on the experts in the field to help me determine if this is my correct path, and by sharing this information, perhaps I can help others determine if they also have the knack.

It’s about people

When describing the characteristics of a good QRC, most are linked to an interest in people. Accordingly, if you are a “people per-



By Kelly Heatly

Part I: Do you have the knack?

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son” you also have a deep respect for others. Fuller shares the RIVA philosophy: having a deep respect for people is the basis for every interview. If you genuinely possess this characteristic, respondents will open up to you and reveal their true feelings and opinions.

Other QRC-endorsed characteristics of moderators stemming from a deep interest in and respect for people include the following:

Intense curiosity

Someone with a knack for qualitative research wants to see beyond the statistics: why people say what they say and do what they do. Even those experienced in quantitative research discover the knack and gravitate toward qualitative research due to strong curiosity about the people behind the data, the depth of their responses. Judith Langer, senior vice president, GfK/NOP Worldwide and author of *Behind the Mirrored Window*, describes her early career in quantitative research: “I felt like a misfit. The numbers didn’t ‘talk’ to me. I often felt frustration. Life doesn’t seem to fit into such easy boxes.” This intense curiosity drew her to interviewing and moderating, where she fulfilled a “strong need and drive to get into other people’s skins and ask, ‘What is it like to be you?’”

Unconditional positive regard (UPR)

Renowned psychologist Carl Rogers’ UPR concept is commonly applied to qualitative research and describes an interviewer’s objective, non-judgmental reaction to the respondent, regardless of personal opinions. Jeff Walkowski, principal of QualCore.com and president of the Qualitative Research Consultants Association, explains the importance of UPR when interviewing: “We may not like what we’re hearing, but we need to respect the respondent. You can’t bristle.” Conversely, you can’t reveal a “spark in your eye” when you hear something favorable.

“Everyone is equal. Put on your poker face. You need to keep your ego outside,” Walkowski says.

Patience

Qualitative interviewers use patience when drawing thoughts and opinions from respondents, especially the non-talkers and the non-stop talkers. However, the turnkey qualitative process requires patience throughout. Walkowski believes you need “patience all around” – with respondents, with clients, and with yourself. Given the complexities of collecting qualitative data and the “messy” nature of the data itself, a patient approach to design and analysis is necessary to nail down the client’s objectives.

Good communication

Being interested in people goes hand in hand with having good communication skills, essential to the interviewing process. QRCs are good at two-way communication – asking questions and listening – not just with respondents but with clients. Written communication is also a key characteristic in the reporting and analysis phase, given the complex nature of qualitative information.

Flexible

In addition to possessing “people” qualities, those with a qualitative knack can not only handle the lack of consistency across interviews and projects but they also thrive on variety and discovery of the unknown. Specifically, they are flexible and think quickly on their feet.

Qualitative work often ebbs and flows, resulting in a hectic schedule with sporadic bursts of travel followed by days behind a desk. Undoubtedly, QRCs often find themselves working odd hours away from home. Langer describes qualitative work as a “vaga-bond lifestyle” despite the trend toward online and telephone focus groups. Those with the qualitative knack

accept this lack of routine and have the stamina to accommodate a non-traditional, ever-changing schedule.

Think on your feet

Due to the complexity of people, each interview or group has a unique dynamic and outcome. Therefore, interviewers are comfortable facing the unknown aspect of each interview and can adjust accordingly to meet the research objectives. Walkowski points out that interviewers may be forced to try something they have never done before, which requires tremendous creativity and confidence. Confidence makes it possible for a QRC to be comfortable working within a loosely defined process and changing a plan on a moment’s notice.

Proactive consultant

While all of the above characteristics are somewhat unique to the qualitative segment, QRCs are still required to be good consultants, regardless of research methodology. Carol Stuckhardt, director of custom research at Hearst Publishing, relies on the QRC to listen to the client’s objectives and provide a special “angle or viewpoint” that will make the research better. In addition, a good QRC should effectively manage client expectations throughout the process.

Psychologist-journalist

When asked to compare the characteristics of a QRC to those of other fields, the various experts I interviewed mentioned a psychologist and a journalist, the former more interpersonal than the latter yet sharing the common goal of gathering in-depth information from people.

Dr. Jean-Claude Wakim, clinical psychologist and assistant professor at University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, describes a good group therapist as having three basic skills:

Active listening: “People don’t

always say what they mean, so you must hear every word and decipher what they say," Wakim says.

Reflection: Say what was understood then confirm the meaning. In other words, the psychologist repeats the message in his/her own words then clarifies the content of the message with the respondent.

Directing the traffic: In group counseling, the psychologist must clarify one person's statement before moving to the next, occasionally interrupting a gregarious person or encouraging a shy one to talk.

Bob Lederer, founder of RFL Communications, Inc., and publisher of research industry newsletters, shared the primary characteristics that make up a good journalist, echoing the same qualities that make up a good QRC:

Intense curiosity: "You have to dig and be curious and never be totally satisfied with what you came up with," Lederer says.

The ability to think on your feet in an interview: In pursuit of the best story, "You must be quick on your feet in all ways and ready to switch gears very quickly."

Creativity contained within objectivity: Lederer believes good journalists use their own opinions to breed creativity yet know how to repress those same opinions and remain objective during the interview process and in the final sum-

mary.

Ingenuity: Good journalists find the respondent's hot buttons in order to extract the information necessary for an interesting story.

Are the characteristics and skills of a psychologist and a journalist any different from those of a professional interviewer or moderator? Certainly, a qualitative interviewer can apply the same characteristics and skills despite differences in interview objectives.

Skills can be learned

Based on the above characteristics, I feel that, overall, I do have the qualitative knack, though some characteristics are stronger than others. Fortunately, those in my situation who feel they are lacking key characteristics can acquire specific skills through learning. According to RIVA's H. Grace Fuller, once you determine you have a deep interest in and respect toward people, you can then be taught the skills that make up a good QRC. Fuller explains that it is critical to "put knowledge skills into body skills." Knowledge skills are learned "from a book" and through experience while body skills are acquired hands-on through practice. She uses an analogy: "You can learn the theory of music without actually knowing how to play the violin. This takes practice."

Similarly, Wakim emphasizes the

difficulty of teaching psychology students to master active listening, reflection and clarification, which, in his opinion, can only be effectively learned through two to four years of supervised practice, a "learn by doing" approach.

Know your knack, find your niche

Convinced that I do have the qualitative knack, based on the characteristics above, I draw from a solid foundation of experience from graduate school studies at University of Texas at Arlington, individual depth interviewing at M/A/R/C, and observing my colleagues. As I strengthen specific qualitative skills through learning and formal training, I know I can become a successful qualitative researcher by finding a niche role: research design, interviewing/moderating, analysis, reporting, or all or the above.

So here I am at the onset of my journey from quantitative to qualitative research. I'm going to take some advice from RIVA and use courses to help reinforce the experiences, learn new skills, and unlearn bad habits. I'll keep you posted as to my progress, so you can witness the metamorphosis and gain insight prior to following your own path, should you decide that you, too, have the knack. | Q