CHAPTER 7
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH TOOLS

LEARNING OUTCOMES

After studying this chapter, you should be able to

1. List and understand the differences between qualitative research and quantitative research
2. Understand the role of qualitative research in exploratory research designs
3. Describe the basic qualitative research orientations
4. Prepare a focus group interview outline
5. Recognize technological advances in the application of qualitative research approaches
6. Recognize common qualitative research tools and know the advantages and limitations of their use
7. Know the risks associated with acting on only exploratory results

Chapter Vignette: What's in the Van?

Is this shoe too cool? That was really the question asked by VF Corporation when they acquired Vans, the company that makes the shoe shown here.[1] Vans traditionally are synonymous with skateboarding and skateboard culture. Readers that are unfamiliar with skateboarding may well have never heard of the company. However, a reader that is part of the skateboard culture is probably looking down at his or her Vans right now!

Former Vans CEO Gary Schoenfeld points out that a decade before the acquisition (a $396 million deal), Vans was practically a dead brand.[2] However, the last ten years have seen a revival in skateboard interest and Vans has remained the number one skateboard shoe provider. Now, the incoming management team has been given the task of deciding how to raise Vans sales to $500 million per year.

COURTESY: VANS CLASSIC SLIP-ON

Where will the growth come from? Should the company define itself as a "skateboard footwear" company, a "lifestyle" company, or as the icon for the skate culture? Answering this question will require a deeper interpretation of the meaning of the "Van."

Skateboarding is a dynamic activity. A study by Board-Trac suggests that today over one in four skateboarders is female, as opposed to fewer than one in ten as recently as 2000.[3] So, what exactly is in the mind and heart of a "boarder"? Two important research questions involve "What is the meaning of a pair of Vans?" and "What things define the skateboarding experience?"

Questions like these call for qualitative research methods.[4] Not just any researcher is "fit" for this job. One way to collect this data is to hire young, energetic research employees to become "boarders" and immerse themselves into the culture.

They may have to "Kasper" like a "flatland techer" while probing for meaning among the discussion and activities of the other boarders. Here, Vans may find that their brand helps identify a boarder and make them feel unique in some ways. If so, Vans may want to investigate increasing their product line beyond shoes and simple apparel.

Depth interviews of Vans wearers in which people describe in detail why they wear Vans will also be useful. Vans shouldn't be surprised if they find a significant portion of their shoes are sold to people like Mr. Samuel Teel, a retired attorney from Toledo, Ohio. Sam is completely unaware of the connection between Vans and skateboarding. He likes them because he doesn't have to bend to tie his shoes! Maybe there are some secondary segments that could bring growth to Vans. But marketing to them could complicate things—who knows?

Introduction

Chemists sometimes use the term *qualitative analysis* to mean research that determines what some compound is made of. In other words, the focus is on the inner meaning of the chemical—its *qualities*. As the word implies, qualitative research is interested more in *qualities* than quantities. Therefore, qualitative research is not about applying specific numbers to measure variables or using statistical procedures to numerically specify a relationship's strength.

What Is Qualitative Research?

Qualitative business research is research that addresses business objectives through techniques that allow the researcher to provide elaborate interpretations of market phenomena without depending on numerical measurement. Its focus is on discovering true inner meanings and new insights. Qualitative research is very widely applied in practice. There are many research firms that specialize in qualitative research.

Qualitative research is less structured than most quantitative approaches. It does not rely on self-response questionnaires containing structured response formats. Instead, it is more **researcher-dependent** in that the researcher must extract meaning from unstructured responses, such as text from a recorded interview or a collage representing the meaning of some experience, such as skateboarding. The researcher interprets the data to extract its meaning and converts it to information.

qualitative business research

Research that addresses business objectives through techniques that allow the researcher to provide elaborate interpretations of phenomena without depending on numerical measurement; its focus is on discovering true inner meanings and new insights.

researcher-dependent

Research in which the researcher must extract meaning from unstructured responses such as text from a recorded interview or a collage representing the meaning of some experience.

Uses of Qualitative Research

Mechanics can't use a hammer to fix everything that is broken. Instead, the mechanic has a toolbox from which a tool is matched to a problem. Business research is the same. The researcher has many tools available and the research design should try to match the best tool to the research objective. Also, just as a mechanic is probably not an expert with every tool, each researcher usually has special expertise with a small number of tools. Not every researcher has expertise with tools that would comprise qualitative research.

Generally, the less specific the research objective, the more likely that qualitative research tools will be appropriate. Also, when the emphasis is on a deeper understanding of motivations or on developing novel concepts, qualitative research is very appropriate. The following list represents common situations that often call for qualitative research:[5]

1. When it is difficult to develop specific and actionable problem statements or research objectives. For instance, if after several interviews with the research client the researcher still can't determine exactly what needs to be measured, then qualitative research approaches may help with problem definition. Qualitative research is often useful to gain further insight and crystallize the research problem.
2. When the research objective is to develop an understanding of some phenomena in great detail and in much depth. Qualitative research tools are aimed at discovering the primary themes indicating human motivations and the documentation of activities is usually very complete. Often qualitative research provides richer information than quantitative approaches.
3. When the research objective is to learn how a phenomena occurs in its natural setting or to learn how to express some concept in colloquial terms. For example, how do consumers actually use a product? Or, exactly how does the accounting department process invoices? While a survey can probably ask many useful questions, observing a product in use or watching the invoice process will usually be more insightful. Qualitative research produces many product and process improvement ideas.
4. When some behavior the researcher is studying is particularly context dependent—meaning the reasons something is liked or some behavior is performed depend very much on the particular situation surrounding the event.

Qualitative researchers can learn about the skating experience by becoming immersed in the culture.

S U R V E Y T H I S !

We have been working with the online survey in this class. This survey primarily deals with quantitative information rather than qualitative information. However, the question that asks the respondent to provide suggestions about improving the quality of business education at your school is qualitative in nature. Look over the comments provided by the students in your class. First, read through all the comments. Then, identify the major themes or issues that are present. You should be able to identify a small number of issues that are mentioned by multiple respondents. Based on these comments, what suggestion would you offer administrators at your school for improving the educational environment?

COURTESY OF QUALTRICS.COM

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Understanding why Vans are liked is probably difficult to determine correctly outside the skating environment.

5. When a fresh approach to studying some problem is needed. This is particularly the case when quantitative research has yielded less than satisfying results. Qualitative tools can yield unique insights, many of which may lead the organization in new directions.

Each of these describes a scenario that may require an exploratory orientation. Previously, we defined exploratory research as appropriate in ambiguous situations or when new insight is needed. We indicated that exploratory research approaches are sometimes needed just to reach the appropriate problem statement and research objectives. While equating qualitative research with exploratory research is an oversimplification, the application of qualitative tools can help clear up ambiguity and provide innovative ideas.

Qualitative "versus" Quantitative Research

In social science, one can find many debates about the superiority of qualitative research over quantitative research or vice versa.[6] We'll begin by saying that this is largely a superfluous argument in either direction. The truth is that qualitative research can accomplish research objectives that quantitative research cannot. Similarly truthful, but no more so, quantitative research can accomplish objectives that qualitative research cannot. The key to successfully using either is to match the right approach to the right research context.

Many good research projects combine both qualitative and quantitative research. For instance, developing valid survey measures requires first a deep understanding of the concept to be measured and a description of the way these ideas are expressed in everyday language. Both of these are tasks best suited for qualitative research. However, validating the measure formally to make sure it can reliably capture the intended concept will likely require quantitative research.[7] Also, qualitative research may be needed to separate symptoms from problems and then quantitative research can follow up to test relationships among relevant variables. The Research Snapshot on the next page describes one such situation.[8]

quantitative business research

Business research that addresses research objectives through empirical assessments that involve numerical measurement and analysis.

Quantitative business research can be defined as business research that addresses research objectives through empirical assessments that involve numerical measurement and analysis approaches. Qualitative research is more apt to stand on its own in the sense that it requires less interpretation. For example, quantitative research is quite appropriate when a research objective involves a managerial action standard. For example, a salad dressing company considered changing its recipe.[9] The new recipe was tested with a sample of consumers. Each consumer rated the product using numeric scales. Management established a rule that a majority of consumers rating the new product higher

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

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Surprises at P&G!

With literally thousands of products to manage, Procter & Gamble (P&G) finds itself in the situation to conduct qualitative research almost daily. P&G doesn't introduce a product that hasn't been reviewed from nearly every possible angle. Likewise, before taking a product to a new country, you can be confident that the product has been "focus grouped" in that environment.

P&G often uses qualitative research techniques to discover potential problems or opportunities for the company's products. For example, focus groups played a major role in Herbal Essences hair care's new logo, advertising copy, reformulated ingredients, and new bottle design. The redesigned bottles for shampoo and conditioner bottles are curved in a yin and yang fashion so they can fit together. "That significantly improved conditioner sales, because consumers are now buying them as a system," claims P&G's Claudia Kotchka.

At times, P&G seeks outside help for its research. Such was the case when P&G wanted a study of its own business problems. The researchers selected began by applying qualitative research techniques including depth interviews, observational techniques (shadowing), and focus groups on P&G managers and marketing employees. These interviews gave the researchers the idea that perhaps P&G was suffering more from a management problem than from a marketing problem. It helped form a general research question that asked whether business problems were really due to low morale among the employees. After a lot of qualitative interviews with dozens and dozens of P&G employees, a quantitative study followed up these findings and supported this idea and led to suggestions for improving employee morale!

Sources: Nelson, Emily, "Focus Groupies: P&G Keeps Cincinnati Busy with All Its Studies," *Wall Street Journal* 239 (January 24, 2002), A1, Eastern Edition; Stengel, J. R., A. L. Dixon, and C. T. Allen, "Listening Begins at Home," *Harvard Business Review* (November 2003), 106–116; Chang, Julia, "Designed to Sell: Procter & Gamble," *Sales and Marketing* (April 20, 2007), http://www.salesandmarketing.com/msg/content_display/marketing/e3if5981313dc92fc1aa0356d269d91ea74 (accessed February 6, 2009).

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than the old product would have to be established with 90 percent confidence before replacing the old formula. A project like this can involve both quantitative measurement in the form of numeric rating scales and quantitative analysis in the form of applied statistical procedures.

Contrasting Qualitative and Quantitative Methods

Exhibit 7.1 on the next page illustrates some differences between qualitative and quantitative research. Certainly, these are generalities and exceptions may apply. However, it covers some of the key distinctions. The Research Snapshot above also introduces qualitative research.

Quantitative researchers direct a considerable amount of activity toward measuring concepts with scales that either directly or indirectly provide numeric values. The numeric values can then be used in statistical computations and hypothesis testing. As will be described in detail later, this process involves comparing numbers in some way. In contrast, qualitative researchers are more interested in observing, listening, and interpreting. As such, the researcher is intimately involved in the research process and in constructing the results. For these reasons, qualitative research is said to be more **subjective**, meaning that the results are researcher-dependent. Different researchers may reach different conclusions based on the same interview. In that respect, qualitative research lacks **intersubjective certifiability** (sometimes called intersubjective verifiability), the ability of different individuals following the same procedures to produce the same results or come to the same conclusion. This should not necessarily be considered a weakness of qualitative research; rather it is simply a characteristic that yields differing insights. In contrast, when a survey respondent provides a commitment score on a quantitative scale, it is thought to be more objective because the number will be the same no matter what researcher is involved in the analysis.

subjective

Results are researcher-dependent, meaning different researchers may reach different conclusions based on the same interview.

intersubjective certifiability

Different individuals following the same procedure will produce the same results or come to the same conclusion.

Qualitative research seldom involves samples with hundreds of respondents. Instead, a handful of people are usually the source of qualitative data. This is perfectly acceptable in discovery-oriented research. All ideas would still have to be tested before adopted. Does a smaller sample mean that qualitative research is cheaper than qualitative? Perhaps not. Although fewer respondents have to be interviewed, the greater researcher involvement in both the data collection and analysis can drive up the costs of qualitative research.

Given the close relationship between qualitative research and exploratory designs, it should not be surprising that qualitative research is most often used in exploratory designs. Small samples, interpretive procedures that require subjective judgments, and the unstructured interview format all make traditional hypotheses testing difficult with qualitative research. Thus, these procedures are not best

EXHIBIT 7.1
Comparing Qualitative and Quantitative Research

Qualitative Research	Research Aspect	Quantitative Research
Discover Ideas, Used in Exploratory Research with General Research Objects	Common Purpose	Test Hypotheses or Specific Research Questions
Observe and Interpret	Approach	Measure and Test
Unstructured, Free-Form	Data Collection Approach	Structured Response Categories Provided
Researcher Is Intimately Involved. Results Are Subjective.	Researcher Independence	Researcher Uninvolved Observer. Results Are Objective.
Small Samples—Often in Natural Settings	Samples	Large Samples to Produce Generalizable Results (Results That Apply to Other Situations)
Exploratory Research Designs	Most Often Used	Descriptive and Causal Research Designs

qualitative data

Data that are not characterized by numbers, and instead are textual, visual, or oral; focus is on stories, visual portrayals, meaningful characterizations, interpretations, and other expressive descriptions.

quantitative data

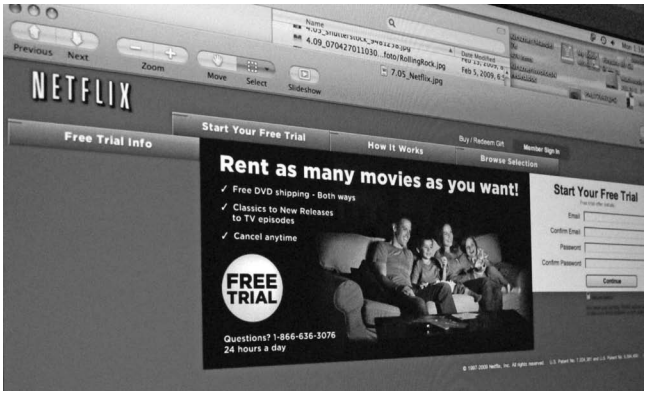
Represent phenomena by assigning numbers in an ordered and meaningful way.

suited for drawing definitive conclusions, as would be expected from causal designs involving experiments. These disadvantages for drawing inferences, however, become advantages when the goal is to draw out potential explanations because the researcher spends more time with each respondent and is able to explore much more ground due to the flexibility of the procedures.

Contrasting Exploratory and Confirmatory Research

Philosophically, research can be considered as either exploratory or confirmatory. Most exploratory research designs produce **qualitative data**. Exploratory designs do not usually produce **quantitative data**, which represent phenomena by assigning numbers in an ordered and meaningful way. Rather than numbers, the focus of qualitative research is on stories, visual portrayals, meaningful characterizations, interpretations, and other expressive descriptions. Often, exploratory research may be needed to develop the ideas that lead to research hypotheses. In other words, in some situations the outcome of exploratory research is a testable research hypothesis. Confirmatory research then tests these hypotheses with quantitative data. The results of these tests help decision making by suggesting a specific course of action.

NetFlix is one of the few companies that reported higher sales and revenue for the fourth quarter of 2008.



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For example, an exploratory researcher is more likely to adopt a qualitative approach that might involve trying to develop a deeper understanding of how families are impacted by changing economic conditions, investigating how people suffering economically spend scarce resources. This may lead to the development of a hypothesis that during challenging economic times consumers seek low-cost entertainment such as movie rentals, but would not test this hypothesis. In contrast, a quantitative researcher may search for numbers that indicate economic trends. This may lead to hypothesis tests concerning how much the economy influences rental movie consumption.

Some types of qualitative studies can be conducted very quickly. Others take a very long time. For example, a single focus group analysis involving a large bottling company's sales force can likely be conducted and interpreted in a matter of days. This would provide faster results than most descriptive or causal designs. However, other types of qualitative research, such as a participant-observer study aimed at understanding skateboarding, could take months to complete. A qualitative approach can, but does not necessarily, save time.

In summary, when researchers have limited experience or knowledge about a research issue, exploratory research is a useful step. Exploratory research, which often involves qualitative methods, can be an essential first step to a more conclusive, confirmatory study by reducing the chance of beginning with an inadequate, incorrect, or misleading set of research objectives.

TOTHEPOINT

The cure for boredom is curiosity. There is no cure for curiosity.

—Dorothy Parker

Orientations to Qualitative Research

Qualitative research can be performed in many ways using many techniques. Orientations to qualitative research are very much influenced by the different fields of study involved in research. These orientations are each associated with a category of qualitative research. The major categories of qualitative research include

1. Phenomenology—originating in philosophy and psychology
2. Ethnography—originating in anthropology
3. Grounded theory—originating in sociology
4. Case studies—originating in psychology and in business research

Precise lines between these approaches are difficult to draw and there are clearly links among these orientations. In addition, a particular qualitative research study may involve elements of two or more approaches. However, each category does reflect a somewhat unique approach to human inquiry and approaches to discovering knowledge. Each will be described briefly below.

Phenomenology

WHAT IS A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO RESEARCH?

Phenomenology represents a philosophical approach to studying human experiences based on the idea that human experience itself is inherently subjective and determined by the context in which people live.[10] The phenomenological researcher focuses on how a person's behavior is shaped by the relationship he or she has with the physical environment, objects, people, and situations. Phenomenological inquiry seeks to describe, reflect upon, and interpret experiences.

phenomenology
A philosophical approach to studying human experiences based on the idea that human experience itself is inherently subjective and determined by the context in which people live.

Researchers with a phenomenological orientation rely largely on conversational interview tools. When conversational interviews are face to face, they are recorded either with video or audiotape and then interpreted by the researcher. The phenomenological interviewer is careful to avoid asking direct questions when at all possible. Instead, the research respondent is asked to tell a story about some experience. In addition, the researcher must do everything possible to make sure a respondent is comfortable telling his or her story. One way to accomplish this is to become a member of the group (for example, becoming a skateboarder in the scenario described earlier in this chapter). Another way may be to avoid having the person use his or her real name. This might be particularly necessary in studying potentially sensitive topics such as smoking, drug usage, shoplifting, or employee theft.

Therefore, a phenomenological approach to studying the meaning of Vans may require considerable time. The researcher may first spend weeks or months fitting in with the person or group of interest to establish a comfort level. During this time, careful notes of conversations are made. If an interview is sought, the researcher would likely not begin by asking a skateboarder to describe his or her shoes. Rather, asking for favorite skateboard incidents or talking about what makes a skateboarder unique may generate productive conversation. Generally, the approach is very unstructured as a way of avoiding leading questions and to provide every opportunity for new insights.

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

"When Will I Ever Learn?"

A hermeneutic approach can be used to provide insight into car shopping experiences. The approach involves a small number of consumers providing relatively lengthy stories about recent car shopping experiences. The goal is trying to discover particular reasons why certain car models are eliminated from consideration. The consumer tells a story of comparing a Ford and a GM (General Motors) minivan. She describes the two vehicles in great detail and ultimately concludes, "We might have gone with the Ford instead because it was real close between the Ford and the GM." The Ford was cheaper, but the way the door opened suggested difficulties in dealing with kids and groceries and the like, and so she purchased the GM model. The researcher in this story goes on to interpret the plotline of the story as having to do with her responsibility for poor consumption outcomes. Consider the following passage.

"It has got GM defects and that is really frustrating. I mean the transmission had to be rebuilt after about 150 miles . . . and it had this horrible vibration problem. We took a long vacation where you couldn't go over sixty miles an hour because the thing started shaking so bad. . . . I told everybody, 'Don't buy one of these things.' We should have known because our Buick—the Buick that is in the shop right now—its transmission lasted about 3,000 miles. My husband's parents are GM people and they had one go bad. I keep thinking, When I am going to learn? I think this one has done it. I don't think I will ever go back to GM after this."[11]

The research concludes that a hermeneutic link exists between the phrase "When I am going to learn?" and the plot of self-responsibility. The resulting behavior including no longer considering GM products and the negative word-of-mouth behavior are ways of restoring esteem given the events.

Source: *Journal of Marketing Research* by Winer, Russ. Copyright 1997 by American Marketing Association (AMA) (CHIC). Reproduced with permission of American Marketing Association (AMA) (CHIC) in the format Textbook via Copyright Clearance Center; Thompson, Craig J., "Interpreting Consumers: A Hermeneutical Framework for Deriving Marketing Insights from the Tests of Consumers' Consumption Stories," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 34 (November 1997), 438–455 (see pp. 443–444 for quotation).

WHAT IS HERMENEUTICS?

hermeneutics
An approach to understanding phenomenology that relies on analysis of texts through which a person tells a story about him or herself.

hermeneutic unit
Refers to a text passage from a respondent's story that is linked with a key theme from within this story or provided by the researcher.

The term hermeneutics is important in phenomenology. **Hermeneutics** is an approach to understanding phenomenology that relies on analysis of texts in which a person tells a story about him or herself.[12] Meaning is then drawn by connecting text passages to one another or to themes expressed outside the story. These connections are usually facilitated by coding the key meanings expressed in the story. While a full understanding of hermeneutics is beyond the scope of this text, some of the terminology is used when applying qualitative tools. For instance, a **hermeneutic unit** refers to a text passage from a respondent's story that is linked with a key theme from within this story or provided by the researcher.[13] These passages are an important way in which data are interpreted.

Computerized software exists to assist in coding and interpreting texts and images. ATLAS.ti is one such software package that adopts the term hermeneutic unit in referring to groups of phrases that are linked with meaning. Hermeneutic units and computerized software are also very appropriate in grounded theory approaches. One useful component of computerized approaches is a word counter. The word counter will return counts of how many times words were used in a story. Often, frequently occurring words suggest a key theme. The Research Snapshot above demonstrates the use of hermeneutics in interpreting a story about a consumer shopping for a car.

Ethnography

WHAT IS ETHNOGRAPHY?

ethnography
Represents ways of studying cultures through methods that involve becoming highly active within that culture.

participant-observation
Ethnographic research approach where the researcher becomes immersed within the culture that he or she is studying and draws data from his or her observations.

Ethnography represents ways of studying cultures through methods that involve becoming highly active within that culture. **Participant-observation** typifies an ethnographic research approach. Participant-observation means the researcher becomes immersed within the culture that he or she is studying and draws data from his or her observations. A *culture* can be either a broad culture, like American culture, or a narrow culture, like urban gangs, Harley-Davidson owners, or skateboarding enthusiasts.[14]

Organizational culture would also be relevant for ethnographic study.[15] At times, researchers have actually become employees of an organization for an extended period of time. In doing so, they become part of the culture and over time other employees come to act quite naturally around the

researcher. The researcher may observe behaviors that the employee would never reveal otherwise. For instance, a researcher investigating the ethical behavior of salespeople may have difficulty getting a car salesperson to reveal any potentially deceptive sales tactics in a traditional interview. However, ethnographic techniques may result in the salesperson letting down his or her guard, resulting in more valid discoveries about the car-selling culture.

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Ethnographic (participant-observation) approaches may be useful to understanding how children obtain value from their experiences with toys.

OBSERVATION IN ETHNOGRAPHY

Observation plays a key role in ethnography. Researchers today sometimes ask households for permission to place video cameras in their home. In doing so, the ethnographer can study the consumer in a "natural habitat" and use the observations to test new products, develop new product ideas, and develop strategies in general.[16]

Ethnographic study can be particularly useful when a certain culture is comprised of individuals who cannot or will not verbalize their thoughts and feelings. For instance, ethnography has advantages for discovering insights among children since it does not rely largely on their answers to questions. Instead, the researcher can simply become part of the environment, allow the children to do what they do naturally, and record their behavior.[17]

The opening vignette describing a participant-observer approach to learning about skateboarding culture represents an ethnographic approach. Here, the researcher would draw insight from observations and personal experiences with the culture.

TOTHEPOINT

I never predict. I just look out the window and see what is visible—but not yet seen.

—Peter Drucker

Grounded Theory

WHAT IS GROUNDED THEORY?

Grounded theory is probably applied less often in business research than is either phenomenology or ethnography.[18]

Grounded theory represents an inductive investigation in which the researcher poses questions about information provided by respondents or taken from historical records. The researcher asks the questions to him or herself and repeatedly questions the responses to derive deeper explanations. Grounded theory is particularly applicable in highly dynamic situations involving rapid and significant change. Two key questions asked by the grounded theory researcher are "What is happening here?" and "How is it different?"[19] The distinguishing characteristic of grounded theory is that it does not begin with a theory but instead extracts one from whatever emerges from an area of inquiry.[20]

grounded theory

Represents an inductive investigation in which the researcher poses questions about information provided by respondents or taken from historical records; the researcher asks the questions to him or herself and repeatedly questions the responses to derive deeper explanations.

HOW IS GROUNDED THEORY USED?

Consider a company that approaches a researcher to study whether or not its sales force is as effective as it has been over the past five years. The researcher uses grounded theory to discover

Qualitative research reveals that products that are perceived as "authentic" offer more value for consumers.

case studies
The documented history of a particular person, group, organization, or event.

themes
Identified by the frequency with which the same term (or a synonym) arises in the narrative description.

a potential explanation. A theory is inductively developed based on text analysis of dozens of sales meetings that had been recorded over the previous five years. By questioning the events discussed in the sales interviews and analyzing differences in the situations that may have led to the discussion, the researcher is able to develop a theory. The theory suggests that with an increasing reliance on e-mail and other technological devices for communication, the salespeople do not communicate with each other informally as much as they did five years previously. As a result, the salespeople had failed to bond into a close-knit "community."[21]

Computerized software also can be useful in developing grounded theory. In our Vans example, the researcher may interpret skateboarders' stories of good and bad skating experiences by questioning the events and changes described. These may yield theories about the role that certain brands play in shaping a good or bad experience. Alternatively, grounded theorists often rely on visual representations. Thus, the skateboarder could develop collages representing good and bad experiences. Just as with the text, questions can be applied to the visuals in an effort to develop theory.

Case Studies

WHAT ARE CASE STUDIES?

Case studies simply refer to the documented history of a particular person, group, organization, or event. Typically, a case study may describe the events of a specific company as it faces an important decision or situation, such as introducing a new product or dealing with some management crisis. Textbook cases typify this kind of case study. Clinical interviews of managers, employees, or customers can represent a case study.

The case studies can then be analyzed for important themes. **Themes** are identified by the frequency with which the same term (or a synonym) arises in the narrative description. The themes may be useful in discovering variables that are relevant to potential explanations.

HOW ARE CASE STUDIES USED?

Case studies are commonly applied in business. For instance, case studies of brands that sell "luxury" products helped provide insight into what makes up a prestigious brand. A business researcher carefully conducted case (no pun intended) studies of higher end wine labels (such as Penfold's Grange) including the methods of production and distribution. This analysis suggested that a key ingredient to a prestige brand may well be authenticity. When consumers know something is authentic, they attach more esteem to that product or brand.[22]

Case studies often overlap with one of the other categories of qualitative research. The Research Snapshot on the next page illustrates how observation was useful in discovering insights leading to important business changes.

A primary advantage of the case study is that an entire organization or entity can be investigated in depth with meticulous attention to detail. This highly focused attention enables the researcher to carefully study the order of events as they occur or to concentrate on identifying the relationships among functions, individuals, or entities. Conducting a case study often requires the cooperation of the party whose history is being studied. This freedom to search for whatever data an investigator deems important makes the success of any case study highly dependent on the alertness, creativity, intelligence, and motivation of the individual performing the case analysis.

It's Like Riding a Bike!

Schwinn has long relied on observational research in their exploratory research studies. Here is a description of a case study documented from observational techniques:

We had a very successful dealer on the West Coast. So it occurred to me that we'd go out and find out how he's doing it. So we go out. The guy's got a nice store out in Van Nuys. We sit in the back room and we listen. The first customers come in, a man and a woman with a boy about nine or ten years old. The dad says, "Which one is it?" The son says, "This one over here." Dad looks at it. He says to the clerk, "How much is it?" The clerk says, "$179.95." The father says, "Okay, we'll take it." It blew the whole bit [there were no magic sales approaches]. Suddenly it dawned on us that it's not what they say, it's the atmosphere of the store. Here was not Joe's old, dirty bike shop—it was a beautiful store on the main street. A big sign was in front, "Valley Cyclery," inside [were] fluorescent lights, carpeting on the floor, stereo music, air-conditioning, and a beautiful display of bicycles. It was like a magnet. People came in. So, we've tried to introduce that idea to other dealers. Put a bigger investment into your store and see what happens. Some of them did, and it happened [sales improved].

More recently, researchers documented with photographs the way that most people use their bicycles. Although the vast majority of bikes available for sale are multispeed racing or mountain bikes, even a cursory observation of the photos suggested that most people clearly do not race on their bikes nor use them off-road. As a result, Schwinn reintroduced the Cruiser with much success. The Cruiser is the 1950ish touring bike with the balloon tires, big cushioned seat, and upright handlebars. In fact, the Cruiser series proved to be so successful that over 20 different 2009 Cruiser models were produced. Observation is like riding a bike—once you learn, you shouldn't ever forget!

Sources: Burch, Ray (1973), "Marketing Research: Why It Works, Why It Doesn't Work," speech to the Chicago Chapter of the American Marketing Association, 1973, reprinted with permission of the Chicago Chapter of the American Marketing Association; Curry, A. and M. Silver, "One Speed Is Enough," *U.S. News and World Report* 136 (May 10, 2004), 67–68. A complete list of the models is available at http://www.schwinnbike.com/usa/eng/Products/Cruisers/.

Common Techniques Used in Qualitative Research

Qualitative researchers apply a nearly endless number of techniques. These techniques overlap more than one of the orientations previously discussed, although each category may display a preference for certain techniques. Exhibit 7.2 on the next page lists characteristics of some common qualitative research techniques. Each is then described.

What Is a Focus Group Interview?

The focus group interview is so widely used that many advertising and research agencies do nothing but focus group interviews. In that sense, it is wrongly synonymous with qualitative research. Nonetheless, focus groups are a very important qualitative research technique and deserve considerable discussion.

A **focus group interview** is an unstructured, free-flowing interview with a small group of people, usually between six and ten. Focus groups are led by a trained moderator who follows a flexible format encouraging dialogue among respondents. Common focus group topics include employee programs, employee satisfaction, brand meanings, problems with products, advertising themes, or new-product concepts.

focus group interview

An unstructured, free-flowing interview with a small group of around six to ten people. Focus groups are led by a trained moderator who follows a flexible format encouraging dialogue among respondents.

The group meets at a central location at a designated time. Participants may range from consumers talking about hair coloring, petroleum engineers talking about problems in the "oil patch," children talking about toys, or employees talking about their jobs. A moderator begins by providing some opening statement to broadly steer discussion in the intended direction. Ideally, discussion topics emerge at the group's initiative, not the moderator's. Consistent with phenomenological approaches, moderators should avoid direct questioning unless absolutely necessary.

ADVANTAGES OF FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

Focus groups allow people to discuss their true feelings, anxieties, and frustrations, as well as the depth of their convictions, in their own words. While other approaches may also do much the

EXHIBIT 7.2 **Four Common Qualitative Research Tools**

Tool	Description	Type of Approach (Category)	Key Advantages	Key Disadvantages
Focus Group Interviews	Small group discussions led by a trained moderator	Ethnography, case studies	• Can be done quickly • Gain multiple perspectives • Flexibility	• Results dependent on moderator • Results do not generalize to larger population • Difficult to use for sensitive topics • Expensive
Depth Interviews	One-on-one, probing interview between a trained researcher and a respondent	Ethnography, grounded theory, case studies	• Gain considerable insight from each individual • Good for understanding unusual behaviors	• Result dependent on researcher's interpretation • Results not meant to generalize • Very expensive
Conversations	Unstructured dialogue recorded by a researcher	Phenomenology, grounded theory	• Gain unique insights from enthusiasts • Can cover sensitive topics • Less expensive than depth interviews or focus groups	• Easy to get off course • Interpretations are very researcher-dependent
Semi-Structured Interviews	Open-ended questions, often in writing, that ask for short essay-type answers from respondents	Grounded theory, ethnography	• Can address more specific issues • Results can be easily interpreted • Cost advantages over focus groups and depth interviews	• Lack the flexibility that is likely to produce truly creative or novel explanations
Word Association/ Sentence Completion	Records the first thoughts that come to a consumer in response to some stimulus	Grounded theory, case studies	• Economical • Can be done quickly	• Lack the flexibility that is likely to produce truly creative or novel explanations
Observation	Recorded notes describing observed events	Ethnography, grounded theory, case studies	• Can be unobtrusive • Can yield actual behavior patterns	• Can be very expensive with participant-observer series
Collages	Respondent assembles pictures that represent their thoughts/feelings	Phenomenology, grounded theory	• Flexible enough to allow novel insights	• Highly dependent on the researcher's interpretation of the collage
Thematic Apperception/ Cartoon Tests	Researcher provides an ambiguous picture and respondent tells about the story	Phenomenology, grounded theory	• Projective, allows to get at sensitive issues • Flexible	• Highly dependent on the researcher's interpretation

same, focus groups offer several advantages:

1. Relatively fast
2. Easy to execute
3. Allow respondents to piggyback off each other's ideas
4. Provide multiple perspectives
5. Flexibility to allow more detailed descriptions
6. High degree of scrutiny

Speed and Ease

In an emergency situation, three or four group sessions can be conducted, analyzed, and reported in a week or so. The large number of research firms that conduct focus group interviews makes it easy to find someone to host and conduct the research. Practically every state in the United States

contains multiple research firms that have their own focus group facilities. Companies with large research departments likely have at least one qualified focus group moderator so that they need not outsource the focus group.

Focus group facilities typically include a comfortable room for respondents, recording equipment, and a viewing room via a two-way mirror.

Piggybacking and Multiple Perspectives

Furthermore, the group approach may produce thoughts that would not be produced otherwise. The interplay between respondents allows them to **piggyback** off of each other's ideas. In other words, one respondent stimulates thought among the others and, as this process continues, increasingly creative insights are possible. A comment by one individual often triggers a chain of responses from the other participants. The social nature of the focus group also helps bring out multiple views as each person shares a particular perspective.

piggyback

A procedure in which one respondent stimulates thought among the others; as this process continues, increasingly creative insights are possible.

Flexibility

The flexibility of focus group interviews is advantageous, especially when compared with the more structured and rigid survey format. Numerous topics can be discussed and many insights can be gained, particularly with regard to the variations in consumer behavior in different situations. Responses that would be unlikely to emerge in a survey often come out in group interviews: "*If* the day is hot and I have to serve the whole neighborhood, I make Kool-Aid; otherwise, I give them Dr Pepper or Coke" or "Usually I work on my projects at home in the evenings, *but* when it is a team project we set aside time on Monday morning and all meet in the conference room."

If a researcher is investigating a target group to determine who consumes a particular beverage or why a consumer purchases a certain brand, situational factors must be included in any interpretations of respondent comments. For instance, in the preceding situation, the fact that a particular beverage is consumed must be noted. It would be inappropriate to say that Kool-Aid is preferred in general. The proper interpretation is situation specific. On a hot day the whole neighborhood gets Kool-Aid. When the weather isn't hot, the kids may get nothing, or if only a few kids are around, they may get lucky and get Dr Pepper. Thus, Kool-Aid can be interpreted as appropriate for satisfying large numbers of hot kids while Dr Pepper is a treat for a select few. Similarly, individual assignments are worked on at home in the evenings, while team projects are in the morning in the conference room.

Scrutiny

A focus group interview allows closer scrutiny in several ways. First, the session can be observed by several people, as it is usually conducted in a room containing a two-way mirror. The respondents and moderator are on one side, and an invited audience that may include both researchers and decision makers is on the other. If the decision makers are located in another city or country, the session may be shown via a live video hookup. Either through live video or a two-way mirror, some check on the eventual interpretations is provided through the ability to actually watch the research being conducted. If the observers have questions that are not being asked or want the moderator to probe on an issue, they can send a quick text message with instructions to the moderator.

Second, focus group sessions are generally recorded on audio or videotape. Later, detailed examination of the recorded session can offer additional insight and help clear up disagreements about what happened.

FOCUS GROUP ILLUSTRATION

Focus groups often are used for concept screening and concept refinement. The concept may be continually modified, refined, and retested until management believes it is acceptable. While RJR's initial attempts at smokeless cigarettes failed in the United States, Philip Morris is developing a smokeless cigarette for the U.K. market. Focus groups are being used to help understand how the product will be received and how it might be improved.[23] The voluntary focus group respondents are presented with samples of the product and then they discuss it among themselves. The interview results suggest that the key product features that must be conveyed are the fact that it produces no ashes, no side smoke, and very little odor. These beliefs are expected to lead to a positive attitude. Focus group respondents show little concern about how the cigarette actually functioned. Smokers believe they will use the product if nonsmokers are not irritated by being near someone using the "electronic cigarette." Thus, the focus groups are useful in refining the product and developing a theory of how it should be marketed.

GROUP COMPOSITION

The ideal size of the focus group is six to ten people. If the group is too small, one or two members may intimidate the others. Groups that are too large may not allow for adequate participation by each group member.

Homogeneous groups seem to work best because they allow researchers to concentrate on consumers with similar lifestyles, experiences, and communication skills. The session does not become rife with too many arguments and different viewpoints stemming from diverse backgrounds. Also, from an ethnographic perspective, the respondents should all be members of a unique and identifiable culture. Vans may benefit from a focus group interview comprised only of skateboard enthusiasts. Perhaps participants can be recruited from a local skate park. However, additional group(s) of participants that are not boarders might be useful in gaining a different perspective.

When the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention tested public service announcements about AIDS through focus groups, it discovered that single-race groups and racially diverse groups reacted differently. By conducting separate focus groups, the organization was able to gain important insights about which creative strategies were most appropriate for targeted versus broad audiences.

Imagine the differences in reactions to legislation further restricting smoking behavior that would be found among a group of smokers compared to a group of nonsmokers.

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For example, for focus groups regarding employee satisfaction, we might want to recruit homogeneous groups based on position in the organization. The researcher may find that entry-level employees have very different perspectives and concerns than those of middle or upper-level management. Also, it is fully understandable that employees might be hesitant to criticize their supervisors. Therefore, researchers may consider interviewing different levels of employees in separate groups.

RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

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Overworked and Overpaid? Ethical Issues in Choosing Focus Group Respondents

Focus groups are one of the most sought-after services provided by research firms. What is a research supplier's responsibility when recruiting individuals to participate in a focus group? Practically every focus group interview requires that respondents be selected based on some relevant characteristic. For example, if the topic involves parochial school education, the group should probably not include nonparents or nonparents with no plans of having children or ever putting a child through school. Consumers that fit the desired profile sometimes make poor focus group participants. When a researcher finds good focus group participants, he or she may be tempted to use them over and over again. Is this appropriate? Should respondents be recruited because they will freely offer a lot of discussion without being overbearing or because they have the desired characteristics given the focus group topic? This is a question the focus group planner may well face.

For example, a research client observed a focus group interview being conducted by a research supplier that had previously performed several other projects for the client, each dealing with a quite unique topic. During the interview, the client noticed that some focus group respondents looked familiar.

A few days later, the client reviewed video recordings of the session alongside videotapes from two previous focus groups outsourced to the same company. She found that eight of the ten respondents in the latest focus group had appeared in one of the previous interviews as well. She was furious and considered whether or not she should pay for the interview or bother having a report prepared.

The focus group researcher had taken this approach to make sure the session went smoothly. The moderator solicited subjects who in the past had been found to be very articulate and talkative. In this case, the focus group respondents are more or less "professional," paid participants. It is questionable whether such "professional respondents" can possibly offer relevant opinions on all these topics. The question is, has the research firm acted in an ethical manner?

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Researchers who wish to collect information from different types of people should conduct several focus groups. A diverse overall sample may be obtained by using different groups even though each group is homogeneous. For instance, in discussing household chores, four groups might be used:

- Married men
- Married women
- Single men
- Single women

Although each group is homogeneous, by using four groups, researchers obtain opinions from a wide degree of respondents.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS

A focus group session may typically take place at the research agency in a room specifically designed for this purpose. Research suppliers that specialize in conducting focus groups operate from commercial facilities that have videotape cameras in observation rooms behind two-way mirrors and microphone systems connected to tape recorders and speakers to allow greater scrutiny as discussed above. Refreshments are provided to help create a more relaxed atmosphere conducive to a free exchange of ideas. More open and intimate reports of personal experiences and sentiments can be obtained under these conditions.

THE FOCUS GROUP MODERATOR

The **moderator** essentially runs the focus group and plays a critical role in its success. There are several qualities that a good moderator must possess:

1. The moderator must be able to develop rapport with the group to promote interaction among all participants. The moderator should be someone who is really interested in people, who

moderator

A person who leads a focus group interview and ensures that everyone gets a chance to speak and contribute to the discussion.

listens carefully to what others have to say, and who can readily establish rapport, gain people's confidence, and make them feel relaxed and eager to talk.

2. The moderator must be a good listener. Careful listening is especially important because the group interview's purpose is to stimulate spontaneous responses. Without good listening skills, the moderator may direct the group in an unproductive direction.
3. The moderator must try not to interject his or her own opinions. Good moderators usually say less rather than more. They can stimulate productive discussion with generalized follow-ups such as, "Tell us more about that incident," or "How are your experiences similar or different from the one you just heard?" The moderator must be particularly careful not to ask leading questions such as "You are happy to work at Acme, aren't you?"
4. The moderator must be able to control discussion without being overbearing. The moderator's role is also to focus the discussion on the areas of concern. When a topic is no longer generating fresh ideas, the effective moderator changes the flow of discussion. The moderator does not give the group total control of the discussion, but he or she normally has prepared questions on topics that concern management. However, the timing of these questions in the discussion and the manner in which they are raised are left to the moderator's discretion. The term *focus group* thus stems from the moderator's task. He or she starts out by asking for a general discussion but usually *focuses* in on specific topics during the session.

PLANNING THE FOCUS GROUP OUTLINE

discussion guide

A focus group outline that includes written introductory comments informing the group about the focus group purpose and rules and then outlines topics or questions to be addressed in the group session.

Focus group researchers use a discussion guide to help control the interview and guide the discussion into product areas. A **discussion guide** includes written introductory comments informing the group about the focus group purpose and rules and then outlines topics or questions to be addressed in the group session. Thus, the discussion guide serves as the focus group outline. Some discussion guides will have only a few phrases in the entire document. Others may be more detailed. The amount of content depends on the nature and experience of the researcher and the complexity of the topic.

A cancer center that wanted to warn the public about the effects of the sun used the discussion guide in Exhibit 7.3. The business researchers had several objectives for this question guide:

- The first question was very general, asking that respondents describe their feelings about being out in the sun. This opening question aimed to elicit the full range of views within the group. Some individuals might view being out in the sun as a healthful practice, whereas others view the sun as deadly. The hope is that by exposing the full range of opinions, respondents would be motivated to fully explain their own position. This was the only question asked specifically of every respondent. Each respondent had to give an answer before free discussion began. In this way, individuals experience a nonthreatening environment encouraging their free and full opinion. A general question seeking a reaction serves as an effective icebreaker.
- The second question asks whether participants could think of any reason they should be warned about sunlight exposure. This question was simply designed to introduce the idea of a warning label.
- Subsequent questions were asked and became increasingly specific. They were first asked about possible warning formats that might be effective. Respondents are allowed to react to any formats suggested by any other respondent. After this discussion, the moderator will introduce some specific formats the cancer center personnel have in mind.
- Finally, the "bottom-line" question is asked: "What format would be most likely to induce people to take protective measures?" There would be probing follow-ups of each opinion so that a respondent couldn't simply say something like "The second one." All focus groups finish up with a catchall question asking for any comments including any thoughts they wanted passed along to the sponsor (which in this case was only then revealed as the Houston-based cancer center).

Researchers who planned the outline established certain objectives for each part of the focus group. The initial effort was to break the ice and establish rapport within the group. The logical

EXHIBIT 7.3 Discussion Guide for a Focus Group Interview

Thank you very much for agreeing to help out with this research. We call this a focus group; let me explain how it works, and then please let me know if something isn't clear.

This is a discussion, as though you were sitting around just talking. You can disagree with each other, or just comment. We do ask that just one person talk at a time, because we tape-record the session to save me from having to take notes. Nothing you say will be associated with you or your church—this is just an easy way for us to get some people together.

The subject is health risk warnings. Some of you may remember seeing a chart in a newspaper that gives a pollen count or a pollution count. And you've heard on the radio sometimes a hurricane watch or warning. You've seen warnings on cigarette packages or cigarette advertising, even if you don't smoke. And today we're going to talk about warnings about the sun. Before we start, does anybody have a question?

1. OK, let's go around and talk about how often you spend time in the sun, and what you're likely to be doing. (FOR PARENTS): What about your kids—do you like them to be out in the sun?
2. OK, can you think of any reason that somebody would give you a warning about exposure to the sun?

(PROBE: IS ANY SUN EXPOSURE BAD, OR ONLY A CERTAIN DEGREE OF EXPOSURE, AND IF SO, WHAT IS IT? OR IS THE SUN GOOD FOR YOU?)

3. What if we had a way to measure the rays of the sun that are associated with skin problems, so that you could find out which times of the day or which days are especially dangerous? How could, say, a radio station tell you that information in a way that would be useful?
4. Now let me ask you about specific ways to measure danger. Suppose somebody said, "We monitored the sun's rays at noon, and a typical fair-skinned person with unprotected skin will burn after 40 minutes of direct exposure." What would you think?
5. Now let me ask you about another way to say the same kind of thing. Suppose somebody said, "The sun's rays at noon today measured 10 times the 8:00 A.M. baseline level of danger." What would you think?
6. OK, now suppose that you heard the same degree of danger expressed this way: "The sun's rays at noon today measured 8 on a sun danger scale that ranges from one to ten." What would you think?
7. What if the danger scale wasn't in numbers, but words? Suppose you heard, "The sun's rays at noon showed a moderate danger reading," or "The sun's rays showed a high danger reading." What would you think?
8. And here's another possibility: What if you heard "Here's the sun danger reading at noon today—the unprotected skin of a typical fair-skinned person will age the equivalent of one hour in a ten-minute period."
9. OK, what if somebody said today is a day to wear long sleeves and a hat, or today is a day you need sunscreen and long sleeves? What would you think?
10. OK, here's my last question. There are really three things you can do about sun danger: You can spend less time in the sun, you can go out at less dangerous times of day, like before 10:00 in the morning or after 4:00 in the afternoon, and you can cover your skin by wearing a hat or long sleeves, or using protective sunscreen lotion. Thinking about yourself listening to the radio, what kind of announcement would make you likely to do one or more of those things? (PARENTS: WHAT WOULD MAKE YOU BE SURE THAT YOUR CHILD WAS PROTECTED?)
11. And what would you be most likely to do to protect yourself? (YOUR CHILD?)
12. Before we break up, is there anything else you think would be useful for M. D. Anderson's people to know? Do you have any questions about any aspect of this interview?

OK, thank you very much for your help.

Gelb, Betsy D. and Michael P. Eriksen, "Market Research May Help Prevent Cancer," *Marketing Research* (September 1991), 46. Published by American Marketing Association. Reprinted with permission.

flow of the group session then moved from general discussion about sunbathing to more focused discussion of types of warnings about danger from sun exposure.

In general, the following steps should be used to conduct an effective focus group discussion guide:

1. Welcome and introductions should take place first.
2. Begin the interview with a broad icebreaker that does not reveal too many specifics about the interview. Sometimes, this may even involve respondents providing some written story or their reaction to some stimulus like a photograph, film, product, or advertisement.
3. Questions become increasingly more specific as the interview proceeds. However, the moderator will notice that a good interview will cover the specific question topics before they have to be asked. This is preferable as respondents are clearly not forced to react to the specific issue; it just emerges naturally.
4. If there is a very specific objective to be accomplished, such as explaining why a respondent would either buy or not buy a product, that question should probably be saved for last.
5. A debriefing statement should provide respondents with the actual focus group objectives and answering any questions they may have. This is also a final shot to gain some insight from the group.

FOCUS GROUPS AS DIAGNOSTIC TOOLS

Focus groups are perhaps the predominant means by which business researchers implement exploratory research designs. Focus groups also can be helpful in later stages of a research project, particularly when the findings from surveys or other quantitative techniques raise more questions than they answer. Managers who are puzzled about the meaning of survey research results may use focus groups to better understand what survey results indicate. In such a situation, the focus group supplies diagnostic help after quantitative research has been conducted.

Focus groups are also excellent diagnostic tools for spotting problems with ideas. For instance, idea screening is often done with focus groups. An initial concept is presented to the group and then they are allowed to comment on it in detail. This usually leads to lengthy lists of potential product problems and some ideas for overcoming them. Mature products can also be "focus-grouped" in this manner.

VIDEOCONFERENCING AND FOCUS GROUPS

With the widespread utilization of videoconferencing, the number of companies using these systems to conduct focus groups has increased. With videoconference focus groups, managers can stay home and watch on television rather than having to take a trip to a focus group facility.

FocusVision (http://www.focusvision.com/) is a business research company that provides videoconferencing equipment and services. The FocusVision system is modular, allowing for easy movement and an ability to capture each group member close up. The system operates via a remote keypad that allows observers in a far-off location to pan the focus group room or zoom in on a particular participant. Managers viewing at remote locations can send the moderator messages during the interview.

INTERACTIVE MEDIA AND ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS

online focus group
A qualitative research effort in which a group of individuals provides unstructured comments by entering their remarks into an electronic Internet display board of some type.

Internet applications of qualitative exploratory research are growing rapidly and involve both formal and informal applications. Formally, the term **online focus group** refers to a qualitative research effort in which a group of individuals provides unstructured comments by entering their remarks into an electronic Internet display board of some type, such as a chat-room session or in the form of a blog. Because respondents enter their comments into the computer, transcripts of verbatim responses are available immediately after the group session. Online groups can be quick and cost-efficient. However, because there is less personal interaction between participants, group synergy and snowballing of ideas may be diminished.

focus blog
A type of informal, "continuous" focus group established as an Internet blog for the purpose of collecting qualitative data from participant comments.

Several companies have established a form of informal, "continuous" focus group by establishing an Internet blog for that purpose.[24] We might call this technique a **focus blog** when the intention is to mine the site for business research purposes. General Motors, American Express, and Lego all have used ideas harvested from their focus blogs. When operating, the Lego blog can be found at http://legoisfun.blogspot.com. While traditional focus group respondents are generally paid $100 or more to show up and participate for 90 minutes, bloggers and online focus group respondents often participate for absolutely no fee at all! Thus, technology provides some cost advantages over traditional focus group approaches.[25]

ONLINE VERSUS FACE-TO-FACE FOCUS GROUP TECHNIQUES

A research company can facilitate a formal online focus group by setting up a private chat room for that purpose. Participants in formal and informal online focus groups feel that their anonymity is very secure. Often respondents will say things in this environment that they would never say otherwise. For example, a lingerie company was able to get insights into how it could design sexy products for larger women. Online, these women freely discussed what it would take "to feel better about being naked."[26] One can hardly imagine how difficult such a discussion might be face to face. Increased anonymity can be a major advantage for a company investigating sensitive or embarrassing issues.

TOTHEPOINT

Necessity, mother of invention.

—William Wycherley

Because participants do not have to be together in the same room at a research facility, the number of participants in online focus groups can be larger than in traditional focus groups. Twenty-five participants or more is not uncommon for the simultaneous chat-room format. Participants can be at widely separated locations since the Internet does not have geographical restrictions. Of course, a major disadvantage is that often the researcher does not exercise as much control in precisely who participates. In other words, a person could very easily not match the desired profile or even answer screening questions in a misleading way simply to participate.

A major drawback with online focus groups is that moderators cannot see body language and facial expressions (bewilderment, excitement, boredom, interest, and so forth). Thus, they cannot fully interpret how people are reacting. Also, moderators' ability to probe and ask additional questions on the spot is reduced in online focus groups. Research that requires focus group members to actually touch something (such as a new easy-opening packaging design) or taste something is not generally suitable for an online format.

DISADVANTAGES OF FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups offer many advantages as a form of qualitative research. Like practically every other research technique, the focus group has some limitations and disadvantages as well. Problems with focus groups include those discussed below.

First, focus groups require objective, sensitive, and effective moderators. It is very difficult for a moderator to remain completely objective about most topics. In large research firms, the moderator may be provided only enough information to effectively conduct the interview, no more. The focus group interview obviously shouldn't reduce to, or even be influenced by, the moderator's opinion. Also, without a good moderator, one or two participants may dominate a session, yielding results that are really the opinion of one or two people, not the group. The moderator has to try very hard to make sure that all respondents feel comfortable giving their opinions and even a timid respondent's opinion is given due consideration. While many people, even some with little or no background to do so, conduct focus groups, good moderators become effective through a combination of naturally good people skills, training (in qualitative research), and experience.

Second, some unique sampling problems arise with focus groups. Researchers often select focus group participants because they have similar backgrounds and experiences or because screening indicates that the participants are more articulate or gregarious than the typical consumer (see the Research Snapshot on page 145). Such participants may not be representative of the entire target market. Thus, focus group results are not intended to be representative of a larger population.

Third, although not so much an issue with online formats where respondents can remain anonymous, traditional face-to-face focus groups may not be useful for discussing sensitive topics. A focus group is a social setting and usually involves people with little to no familiarity with each other. Therefore, issues that people normally do not like to discuss in public may also prove difficult to discuss in a focus group.

Fourth, focus groups do cost a considerable amount of money, particularly when they are not conducted by someone employed by the company desiring the focus group. As research projects go, there are many more expensive approaches, including a full-blown mail survey using a national random sample. This may cost thousands of dollars to conduct and thousands of dollars to analyze and disseminate. Focus group prices vary regionally, but the following figures provide a rough guideline:

Renting facilities and equipment	$500
Recruiting of respondents ($75 person)	$750
Paying respondents ($100/person)	$1,000
Researcher costs	
• Preparation	$750
• Moderating	$1,000
• Analysis and report preparation	$1,500
Miscellaneous expenses	$250

Thus, a client can expect a professional focus group to cost over $5,000 in most situations. Further, most business topics will call for multiple focus groups. There is some cost advantage in this, as some costs will not change proportionately just because there are multiple interviews. Preparation costs may be the same for one or more interviews; the analysis and report preparation will likely only increase slightly because two or three interviews are included instead of one.

Depth Interviews

depth interview
A one-on-one interview between a professional researcher and a research respondent conducted about some relevant business or social topic.

An alternative to a focus group is a depth interview. A **depth interview** is a one-on-one interview between a professional researcher and a research respondent. Depth interviews are much the same as a psychological, clinical interview, but with a different purpose. The researcher asks many questions and follows up each answer with probes for additional elaboration. An excerpt from a depth interview is given in Exhibit 7.4.

EXHIBIT 7.4 Excerpt from a Depth Interview

An interviewer (I) talks with Marsha (M) about furniture purchases. Marsha indirectly indicates she delegates the buying responsibility to a trusted antique dealer. She has already said that she and her husband would write the dealer telling him the piece they wanted (e.g., bureau, table). The dealer would then locate a piece that he considered appropriate and would ship it to Marsha from his shop in another state.

M: . . . We never actually shopped for furniture since we state what we want and (the antique dealer) picks it out and sends it to us. So we never have to go looking through stores and shops and things.
I: You depend on his (the antique dealer's) judgment?
M: Uh, huh. And, uh, he happens to have the sort of taste that we like and he knows what our taste is and always finds something that we're happy with.
I: You'd rather do that than do the shopping?
M: Oh, much rather, because it saves so much time and it would be so confusing for me to go through stores and stores looking for things, looking for furniture. This is so easy that I just am very fortunate.
I: Do you feel that he's a better judge than . . .
M: Much better.
I: Than you are?
M: Yes, and that way I feel confident that what I have is very, very nice because he picked it out and I would be doubtful if I picked it out. I have confidence in him, (the antique dealer) knows everything about antiques, I think. If he tells me something, why I know it's true—no matter what I think. I know he is the one that's right.

This excerpt is most revealing of the way in which Marsha could increase her feeling of confidence by relying on the judgment of another person, particularly a person she trusted. Marsha tells us quite plainly that she would be doubtful (i.e., uncertain) about her own judgment, but she "knows" (i.e., is certain) that the antique dealer is a good judge, "no matter what I think." The dealer once sent a chair that, on first inspection, did not appeal to Marsha. She decided, however, that she must be wrong, and the dealer right, and grew to like the chair very much.

From Cox, Donald F., Ed. *Risk Taking and Information Handling in Consumer Behavior* (Boston: Division of Research, Harvard Business School, © 1967), 65–66. Reprinted with permission.

Like focus group moderators, the interviewer's role is critical in a depth interview. He or she must be a highly skilled individual who can encourage the respondent to talk freely without influencing the direction of the conversation. Probing questions are critical.

laddering
A particular approach to probing, asking respondents to compare differences between brands at different levels that produces distinctions at the attribute level, the benefit level, and the value or motivation level.

Laddering is a term used for a particular approach to probing, asking respondents to compare differences between brands at different levels. What usually results is that the first distinctions are attribute-level distinctions, the second are benefit-level distinctions, and the third are at the value or motivation level. Laddering can then distinguish two brands of skateboarding shoes based on a) the materials they are made of, b) the comfort they provide, and c) the excitement they create.

Each depth interview may last more than an hour. Thus, it is a time-consuming process if multiple interviews are conducted. Not only does the interview have to be conducted, but each interview produces about the same amount of text as does a focus group interview. This has to be analyzed and interpreted by the researcher. A third major issue stems from the necessity of recording both surface reactions and subconscious motivations of the respondent. Analysis and interpretation of such data are highly subjective, and it is difficult to settle on a true interpretation.

Depth interviews provide more insight into a particular individual than do focus groups. In addition, since the setting isn't really social, respondents are more likely to discuss sensitive topics than are those in a focus group. Depth interviews are particularly advantageous when some unique or unusual behavior is being studied. For instance, depth interviews have been usefully applied to reveal characteristics of adolescent behavior, ranging from the ways they get what they want from their parents to shopping, smoking, and shoplifting.[27]

Depth interviews are similar to focus groups in many ways. The costs are similar if only a few interviews are conducted. However, if a dozen or more interviews are included in a report, the costs are higher than focus group interviews due to the increased interviewing and analysis time.

Conversations

conversations
An informal qualitative data-gathering approach in which the researcher engages a respondent in a discussion of the relevant subject matter.

Holding **conversations** in qualitative research is an informal data-gathering approach in which the researcher engages a respondent in a discussion of the relevant subject matter. This approach is almost completely unstructured and the researcher enters the conversation with few expectations. The goal is to have the respondent produce a dialogue about his or her lived experiences. Meaning will be extracted from the resulting dialogue.

A conversational approach to qualitative research is particularly appropriate in phenomenological research and for developing grounded theory. In our Vans experience, the researcher may simply tape-record a conversation about becoming a "skater." The resulting dialogue can then be analyzed for themes and plots. The result may be some interesting and novel insight into the consumption patterns of skaters, for example, if the respondent said,

"I knew I was a real skater when I just had to have Vans, not just for boarding, but for wearing."

This theme may connect to a right-of-passage plot and show how Vans play a role in this process.

Technology is also influencing conversational research. Online communications such as the reviews posted about book purchases at **http://www.barnesandnoble.com** can be treated as a conversation. Companies may discover product problems and ideas for overcoming them by analyzing these computer-based consumer dialogues.[28]

A conversational approach is advantageous because each interview is usually inexpensive to conduct. Respondents often need not be paid. They are relatively effective at getting at sensitive issues once the researcher establishes a rapport with them. Conversational approaches, however, are prone to produce little relevant information since little effort is made to steer the conversation. Additionally, the data analysis is very much researcher-dependent.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Semi-structured interviews usually come in written form and ask respondents for short essay responses to specific open-ended questions. Respondents are free to write as much or as little as they want. The questions would be divided into sections, typically, and within each section, the opening question would be followed by some probing questions. When these are performed face to face, there is room for less structured follow-ups.

The advantages to this approach include an ability to address more specific issues. Responses are usually easier to interpret than other qualitative approaches. Since the researcher can simply prepare the questions in writing ahead of time, and if in writing, the questions are administered without the presence of an interviewer, semi-structured interviews can be relatively cost-effective.

Some researchers interested in studying car salesperson stereotypes used qualitative semi-structured interviews to map consumers' cognitions (memory). The semi-structured interview began with a free-association task:

List the first five things that come into your mind when you think of a "car salesman."

This was followed up with a probing question:

Describe the way a typical "car salesman" looks.

This was followed with questions about how the car salesperson acts and how the respondent feels in the presence of a car salesperson. The results led to research showing how the information that consumers process differs in the presence of a typical car salesperson, as opposed to a less typical car salesperson.[29]

SOCIAL NETWORKING

Social networking is one of the most impactful trends in recent times. For many consumers, particularly younger generations, social networking sites like MySpace, Second Life, Zebo, and others have become the primary tool for communicating with friends both far and near and known and unknown. Social networking has replaced large volumes of e-mail and, many would say, face–to-face communications as well. While the impact that social networking will eventually have on society is an interesting question, what is most relevant to marketing research is the large portion of this information that discusses marketing and consumer related information.

Companies can assign research assistants to monitor these sites for information related to their particular brands. The information can be coded as either positive or negative. When too much negative information is being spread, the company can try to react to change the opinions. In addition, many companies like P&G and Ford maintain their own social networking sites for the purpose of gathering research data. In a way, these social networking sites are a way that companies can eavesdrop on consumer conversations and discover key information about their products. The textual data that consumers willingly put up becomes like a conversation. When researchers get the opportunity to react with consumers or employees through a social network site, they can function much like an online focus group or interview.

Free-Association/Sentence Completion Method

free-association techniques
Record respondents' first (top-of-mind) cognitive reactions to some stimulus.

Free-association techniques simply record a respondent's first cognitive reactions (top-of-mind) to some stimulus. The Rorschach or inkblot test typifies the free-association method. Respondents view an ambiguous figure and are asked to say the first thing that comes to their mind. Free-association techniques allow researchers to map a respondent's thoughts or memory.

The sentence completion method is based on free-association principles. Respondents simply are required to complete a few partial sentences with the first word or phrase that comes to mind. For example:

People who drink beer are _____.
A man who drinks a dark beer is _____.
Imported beer is most liked by _____.
The woman drinking beer in the commercial _____.

Answers to sentence-completion questions tend to be more extensive than responses to word-association tests. Although the responses lack the ability to probe for meaning as in other qualitative techniques, they are very effective in finding out what is on a respondent's mind. They can also do so in a quick and very cost-effective manner. Free-association and sentence-completion tasks are sometimes used in conjunction with other approaches. For instance, they can sometimes be used as effective icebreakers in focus group interviews.

OBSERVATION

Observation can be a very important qualitative tool. The participant-observer approach typifies how observation can be used to explore various issues. Meaning is extracted from field notes.

field notes
The researcher's descriptions of what actually happens in the field; these notes then become the text from which meaning is extracted.

Field notes are the researchers' descriptions of what actually happens in the field. These notes then become the text from which meaning is extracted.

Observation may also take place in visual form. Researchers may observe employees in their workplace, consumers in their home, or try to gain knowledge from photographic records of one type or another. Observation can either be very inexpensive, such as when a research associate sits and simply observes behavior, or it can be very expensive, as in most participant-observer studies.

Observational research is keenly advantageous for gaining insight into things that respondents cannot or will not verbalize. Observation research is a common method of data collection and is the focus of a later chapter.

COLLAGES

Business researchers sometimes have respondents prepare a collage to represent their experiences. The collages are then analyzed for meaning much in the same manner as text dialogues are analyzed. Computer software can even be applied to help develop potential grounded theories from the visual representations.

Harley-Davidson commissioned research in which collages depicting feelings about Harley-Davidson were compared based on whether the respondent was a Harley owner or an owner of a competitor's brand. The collages of "Hog" owners revealed themes of artwork and the freedom of the great outdoors. These themes did not emerge in the non-Hog groups. This led to confirmatory research which helped Harley continue its growth, appealing more specifically to its diverse market segments.[30]

Like sentence completion and word association, collages are often used within some other approach, such as a focus group or a depth interview. Collages offer the advantage of flexibility but are also very much subject to the researcher's interpretations.

PROJECTIVE RESEARCH TECHNIQUES

A **projective technique** is an indirect means of questioning enabling respondents to project beliefs and feelings onto a third party, an inanimate object, or a task situation. Projective techniques usually encourage respondents to describe a situation in their own words with little prompting by the interviewer. Individuals are expected to interpret the situation within the context of their own experiences, attitudes, and personalities and to express opinions and emotions that may be hidden from others and possibly themselves. Projective techniques are particularly useful in studying sensitive issues.

projective technique
An indirect means of questioning enabling respondents to project beliefs and feelings onto a third party, an inanimate object, or a task situation.

There is an old story about asking a man why he purchased a Mercedes-Benz. When asked directly why he purchased a Mercedes, he responds that the car holds its value and does not depreciate much, that it gets better gas mileage than you'd expect, or that it has a comfortable ride. If you ask the same person why a neighbor purchased a Mercedes, he may well answer, "Oh, that status seeker!" This story illustrates that individuals may be more likely to give true answers (consciously or unconsciously) to disguised questions, and a projective technique provides a way of disguising just who is being described.

THEMATIC APPERCEPTION TEST (TAT)

A **thematic apperception test (TAT)**, sometimes called the *picture interpretation technique,* presents subjects with an ambiguous picture(s) and asks the subject to tell what is happening in the picture(s) now and what might happen next. Hence, themes (*thematic*) are elicited on the basis of the perceptual-interpretive (*apperception*) use of the pictures. The researcher then analyzes the contents of the stories that the subjects relate. A TAT represents a projective research technique.

thematic apperception test (TAT)
A test that presents subjects with an ambiguous picture(s) in which consumers and products are the center of attention; the investigator asks the subject to tell what is happening in the picture(s) now and what might happen next.

Frequently, the TAT consists of a series of pictures with some continuity so that stories may be constructed in a variety of settings. The first picture might portray a person working at their desk; in the second picture, a person that could be a supervisor is talking to the worker; the final picture might show the original employee and another having a discussion at the water cooler. A Vans TAT might include several ambiguous pictures of a skateboarder and then show him or her heading to the store. This might reveal ideas about the brands and products that fit the role of skateboarder.

The picture or cartoon stimulus must be sufficiently interesting to encourage discussion but ambiguous enough not to disclose the nature of the research project. Clues should not be given to the character's positive or negative predisposition. A pretest of a TAT investigating why men might purchase chainsaws used a picture of a man looking at a very large tree. The research respondents were homeowners and weekend woodcutters. They almost unanimously said that

they would get professional help from a tree surgeon to deal with this situation. Thus, early in pretesting, the researchers found out that the picture was not sufficiently ambiguous. The tree was too large and did not allow respondents to identify with the tree-cutting task. If subjects are to project their own views into the situation, the environmental setting should be a well-defined, familiar problem, but the solution should be ambiguous.

An example of a TAT using a cartoon drawing in which the respondent suggests a dialogue in which the characters might engage is provided in Exhibit 7.5. This TAT is a purposely ambiguous illustration of an everyday occurrence. The two office workers are shown in a situation and the respondent is asked what the woman might be talking about. This setting could be used for discussions about the organization's management, store personnel, particular software products, and so on.

EXHIBIT 7.5
An Example of a TAT Picture

Exploratory Research in Science and in Practice

Misuses of Exploratory and Qualitative Research

Any research tool can be misapplied. Exploratory research cannot take the place of conclusive, confirmatory research. Thus, since many qualitative tools are best applied in exploratory design, they are likewise limited in the ability to draw conclusive inferences—test hypotheses. One of the biggest drawbacks is the subjectivity that comes along with "interpretation." In fact, sometimes the term *interpretive* research is used synonymously with qualitative research. When only one researcher interprets the meaning of what a single person said in a depth interview or similar technique, one should be very cautious before major business decisions are made based on these results. Is the result replicable? **Replication** means that the same results and conclusions will be drawn if the study is repeated by different researchers with different respondents following the same methods. In other words, would the same conclusion be reached based on another researcher's interpretation?

replication
The same interpretation will be drawn if the study is repeated by different researchers with different respondents following the same methods.

Indeed, some qualitative research methodologies were generally frowned upon for years based on a few early and public misapplications during what became known as the "motivational research" era. While many of the ideas produced during this time had some merit, as can sometimes be the case, too few researchers did too much interpretation of too few respondents. Compounding this, managers were quick to act on the results, believing that the results peaked inside one's subliminal consciousness and therefore held some type of extra power. Thus, often the research was flawed based on poor interpretation, and the decision process was flawed because the deciders acted prematurely. As examples, projective techniques and depth interviews were frequently used in the late 1950s and early 1960s, producing some interesting and occasionally bizarre reasons for consumers' purchasing behavior:

- A woman is very serious when she bakes a cake because unconsciously she is going through the symbolic act of giving birth.
- A man buys a convertible as a substitute mistress and a safer (and potentially cheaper) way of committing adultery.
- Men who wear suspenders are reacting to an unresolved castration complex.[31]

About two decades later, researchers for McCann-Erickson advertising agency interviewed low-income women using a form of TAT involving story completion regarding attitudes toward insecticides. Themes noted included:

- The joy of victory over roaches (watching them die or seeing them dead)
- Using the roach as a metaphor through which women can take out their hostility toward men (women generally referred to roaches as "he" instead of "she" in their stories).[32]

Certainly, some useful findings resulted. Even today, we have the Pillsbury Doughboy as evidence that useful ideas were produced. In many of these cases, interpretations were either misleading or too ambitious (taken too far). However, many companies became frustrated when decisions based upon motivational research approaches proved poor. Thus, researchers moved away from qualitative tools during the late 1960s and 1970s. Today, however, qualitative tools have won acceptance once again as researchers realize they have greater power in discovering insights that would be difficult to capture in typical survey research (which is limited as an exploratory tool).

SCIENTIFIC DECISION PROCESSES

Objectivity and replicability are two characteristics of scientific inquiry. Are focus groups objective and replicable? Would three different researchers all interpret focus group data identically? How should a facial expression or nod of the head be interpreted? Have subjects fully grasped the idea or concept behind a nonexistent product? Have respondents overstated their satisfaction because they think their supervisor will read the report and recognize them from their comments? Many of these questions are reduced to a matter of opinion that may vary from researcher to researcher and from one respondent group to another. Therefore, a focus group, or a depth interview, or TAT alone does not best represent a complete scientific inquiry.

However, if the thoughts discovered through these techniques survive preliminary evaluations and are developed into research hypotheses, they can be further tested. These tests may involve survey research or an experiment testing an idea very specifically (for example, if a certain advertising slogan is more effective than another). Thus, exploratory research approaches using qualitative research tools are very much a *part* of scientific inquiry. However, before making a *scientific* decision, a research project should include a confirmatory study using objective tools and an adequate sample in terms of both size and how well it represents a population.

But is a *scientific* decision approach always used or needed? In practice, many business decisions are based solely on the results of focus group interviews or some other exploratory result. The primary reasons for this are (1) time, (2) money, and (3) emotion.

TIME

Sometimes, researchers simply are not given enough time to follow up on exploratory research results. Companies feel an increasingly urgent need to get new products to the market faster. Thus,

TIPS OF THE TRADE

- Keep in mind two key differentiators between qualitative and quantitative research:
  - Qualitative research does not necessarily possess inter-subjective certifiability. Two researchers can have the same experience or observe the same phenomena and have different interpretations.
  - We do not have the ability to make statistical generalizations from qualitative data. While numbers might appear—for example, we may observe that eight of the ten focus group participants mentioned the need for better on-the-job training—we cannot project this onto the population (i.e., we cannot conclude 80 percent of all employees feel we need better on-the-job training).
- It is incorrect to conclude one type of research is "better" than another, but certainly one type is more appropriate in a given set of circumstances. Qualitative research tends to be well suited for exploratory purposes, including clarifying the research objective and identifying testable hypotheses. Qualitative research is often followed up by a quantitative study for confirmation. However, there are also instances when qualitative research follows a quantitative study for "sense making" and deeper insight into numerical results.
- Focus groups and depth interviews are the most common qualitative research techniques.

a seemingly good idea generated in a focus group (like Clear, Vanilla, or Cherry Dr Pepper) is simply not tested with a more conclusive study. The risk of delaying a decision may be seen as greater than the risk of proceeding without completing the scientific process. Thus, although the researcher may warn against it, there may be logical reasons for such action. The decision makers should be aware, though, that the conclusions drawn from exploratory research designs are just that—exploratory. Thus, there is less likelihood of good results from the decision than if the research process had involved further testing.

MONEY

Similarly, researchers sometimes do not follow up on exploratory research results because they believe the cost is too high. Realize that tens of thousands of dollars may have already been spent on qualitative research. Managers who are unfamiliar with research will be very tempted to wonder, "Why do I need yet another study?" and "What did I spend all that money for?" Thus, they choose to proceed based only on exploratory results. Again, the researcher has fulfilled the professional obligation as long as the tentative nature of any ideas derived from exploratory research has been relayed through the research report.

Again, this isn't always a bad approach. If the decision itself does not involve a great deal of risk or if it can be reversed easily, the best course of action may be to proceed to implementation instead of investing more money in confirmatory research. Remember, research shouldn't be performed if it will cost more than it will return.

EMOTION

Time, money, and emotion are all related. Decision makers sometimes become so anxious to have something resolved, or they get so excited about some novel discovery resulting from a focus group interview, that they may act rashly. Perhaps some of the ideas produced during the motivational research era sounded so enticing that decision makers got caught up in the emotion of the moment and proceeded without the proper amount of testing. Thus, as in life, when we fall in love with something, we are prone to act irrationally. The chances of emotion interfering in this way are lessened, but not reduced, by making sure multiple decision makers are involved in the decision process.

In conclusion, we began this section by suggesting that exploratory, qualitative research cannot take the place of a confirmatory study. However, a confirmatory study cannot take the place of an exploratory, qualitative study either. While confirmatory studies are best for testing specific ideas, a qualitative study is far better suited to developing ideas and practical theories.

Summary

1. List and understand the differences between qualitative research and quantitative research. The chapter emphasized that any argument about the overall superiority of qualitative versus quantitative research is misplaced. Rather, each approach has advantages and disadvantages that make it appropriate in certain situations. The presence or absence of numbers is not the key factor discriminating between qualitative and quantitative research. Qualitative research relies more on researchers' subjective interpretations of text or other visual material. In contrast, the numbers produced in quantitative research are objective in the sense that they don't change simply because someone else computed them. Thus, we expect quantitative research to have intersubjective certifiability, while qualitative research may not. Qualitative research typically involves small samples while quantitative research usually uses large samples. Qualitative procedures are generally more flexible and produce deeper and more elaborate explanations than quantitative research.

2. Understand the role of qualitative research in exploratory research designs. The high degree of flexibility that goes along with most qualitative techniques makes it very useful in exploratory research designs. Therefore, exploratory research designs most often involve some qualitative research technique.

3. Describe the basic qualitative research orientations. Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to studying human experiences based on the idea that human experience itself is inherently subjective and determined by the context within which a person experiences something. It lends itself well to conversational research. Ethnography represents ways of studying cultures through methods that include high involvement with that culture. Participant-observation is a common ethnographic approach. Grounded theory represents inductive qualitative investigation in which the researcher continually poses questions about a respondent's discourse in an effort to derive a deep explanation of their behavior. Collages are sometimes used to develop grounded theory. Case studies simply are documented histories of a particular person, group, organization, or event.

4. Prepare a focus group interview outline. A focus group outline should begin with introductory comments followed by a very general opening question that does not lead the respondent. More specific questions should be listed until a blunt question directly pertaining to the study objective is included. However, a skilled moderator can often lead the group without having to explicitly state these questions. It should conclude with debriefing comments and a chance for question-and-answers with respondents.

5. Recognize technological advances in the application of qualitative research approaches. Videoconferencing and online chat rooms are more economical ways of trying to do much the same as traditional focus group interviews. Some companies have even established a focus blog that is a source for continuous commentary on a company. While they are certainly cost advantageous, there is less control over who participates.

6. Recognize common qualitative research tools and know the advantages and limitations of their use. The most common qualitative research tools include the focus group interview and the depth interview. The focus group has some cost advantage per respondent because it would take ten times as long to conduct the interview portion(s) of a series of depth interviews compared to one focus group. However, the depth interview is more appropriate for discussing sensitive topics.

7. Know the risks associated with acting on only exploratory results. Companies do make decisions using only exploratory research. There are several explanations for this behavior. The researcher's job is to make sure that decision makers understand the increased risk that comes along with basing a decision only on exploratory research results.

Key Terms and Concepts

case studies, *140*
conversations, *151*
depth interview, *150*
discussion guide, *146*
ethnography, *138*
field notes, *152*
focus blog, *148*
focus group interview, *141*
free-association techniques, *152*
grounded theory, *139*
hermeneutic unit, *138*
hermeneutics, *138*

intersubjective certifiability, *135*
laddering, *150*
moderator, *145*
online focus group, *148*
participant-observation, *138*
phenomenology, *137*
piggyback, *143*
projective technique, *153*
qualitative business research, *133*
qualitative data, *136*
quantitative business research, *134*
quantitative data, *136*
replication, *154*
researcher-dependent, *133*
subjective, *135*
thematic apperception test (TAT), *153*
themes, *140*

Questions for Review and Critical Thinking

1. Define *qualitative* and *quantitative* research. Compare and contrast the two approaches.
2. Why do exploratory research designs rely so much on qualitative research techniques?
3. Why do causal designs rely so much on quantitative research techniques?
4. What are the basic orientations of qualitative research?
5. Of the four basic orientations of qualitative research, which do you think is most appropriate for a qualitative approach designed to better define a business situation prior to conducting confirmatory research?
6. What type of exploratory research would you suggest in the following situations?
   a. A product manager suggests development of a nontobacco cigarette blended from wheat, cocoa, and citrus.
   b. A research project has the purpose of evaluating potential names for a corporate spin-off.
   c. A human resource manager must determine the most important benefits of an employee health plan.
   d. An advertiser wishes to identify the symbolism associated with cigar smoking.
7. What are the key differences between a focus group interview and a depth interview?
8. **'NET** Visit some Web sites for large companies like Honda, Qantas Airlines, Target, Tesco, and Marriott. Is there any evidence that they are using their Internet sites in some way to conduct a continuous online focus blog or intermittent online focus groups?
9. What is *laddering?* How might it be used in trying to understand which fast-food restaurant customers prefer?
10. Comment on the following remark by a business consultant: "Qualitative exploration is a tool of research and a stimulant to thinking. In and by itself, however, it does not constitute business research."
11. **ETHICS** A researcher tells a manager of a wine company that he has some "cool focus group results" suggesting that respondents like the idea of a screw-cap to top wine bottles. Even before the decision maker sees the report, the manager begins purchasing screw-caps and the new bottling equipment. Comment on this situation.
12. A packaged goods manufacturer receives many thousands of customer letters a year. Some are complaints, some are compliments. They cover a broad range of topics. Are these letters a possible source for exploratory research? Why or why not?

Research Activities

1. **'NET** How might the following organizations use an Internet chat room for exploratory research?
   a. A provider of health benefits
   b. A computer software manufacturer
   c. A video game manufacturer
2. Go back to the opening vignette. What if Vans approached you to do a focus group interview that explored the idea of offering casual attire (off-board) aimed at their primary segment (skateboarders) and offering casual attire for male retirees like Samuel Teel? How would you recommend the focus group(s) proceed? Prepare a focus group outline(s) to accomplish this task.
3. Interview two people about their exercise behavior. In one interview, try to use a semi-structured approach by preparing questions ahead of time and trying to have the respondent complete answers for these questions. With the other, try a conversational approach. What are the main themes that emerge in each? Which approach do you think was more insightful? Do you think there were any "sensitive" topics that a respondent was not completely forthcoming about?

Case 7.1 Disaster and Consumer Value

In February 2009, bushfires raced across the Australian state of Victoria. This terrible tragedy resulted in the loss of over 300 lives, Australia's highest ever loss of life from a bushfire. In addition, more than 2,000 homes were destroyed and insurance losses are estimated to exceed $2 billion.[33] While rebuilding will take years, at some point after these disasters, it is time to get back to business. But major catastrophic events are likely to leave permanent changes on consumers and employees in the affected areas.

Suppose you are approached by the owner of several full-service wine stores in Victoria. It is January 2010, and they want to get back to business. But they are uncertain about whether they should simply maintain the same positioning they had previous to the bushfires. They would like to have a report from you within 60 days.

Questions

1. How could each orientation of qualitative research be used here?
2. What qualitative research tool(s) would you recommend be used and why?
3. Where would you conduct any interviews and with whom would you conduct them?
4. **ETHICS** Are there ethical issues that you should be sensitive to in this process? Explain.
5. What issues would arise in conducting a focus group interview in this situation?
6. Prepare a focus group outline.

Case 7.2 Edward Jones

Edward Jones is one of the largest investment firms in the United States, with over 4,000 branch offices in this country, Canada, and the United Kingdom. It is the only major brokerage firm that exclusively targets individual investors and small businesses, and it has nearly 6 million clients.

Edward Jones' philosophy is to offer personalized services to individual clients starting with a one-on-one interview. During the interview, investment representatives seek to identify each client's specific goals for investing. Richard G. Miller, one such representative, says that he needs to thoroughly understand what a client wants before he can build an investment strategy for that person. His initial conversation starts with, "Hey, how are you?" Gregory L. Starry, another representative, confirms the Edward Jones philosophy: "Most of my day is spent talking with and meeting clients [rather than placing stock trades]."

Only after learning these goals do the representatives design an investment strategy that will provide a client with income, growth, and safety. Each client's goals also evolve over time. Young people are focused on earning enough money to make a down payment on their first home or to buy a car. Clients in the 35 to 45 age range are concerned about getting their children through school and about their own retirement. Those in retirement want to make sure that they have an adequate income level. Miller notes, "It's not the timing in the market, but the time in the market" that will help clients achieve their goals.

Questions

1. Many people in minority groups, including African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans, do not invest. What exploratory research should Edward Jones do to develop business with these minority markets?
2. Another group with low investment activity includes those who stopped their education at the high school level. What factors should Edward Jones representatives consider in designing focus groups with these potential clients?