

# An essential guide to getting the best out of qualitative research

*Martyn Richards* proposes an alternative approach to the commissioning process

## 1. Turn the accepted model on its head

Currently, the accepted wisdom in terms of commissioning any kind of research is:

- identify your problem
- write a brief
- send it out to tender
- select an agency or research consultant on the basis of their proposal.

The real danger of the current modus operandi is the supplier gets told what to do; the client gets an anodyne set of findings; the supplier walks away, job done; leaving you to try to fit what's been given to you to the needs of your business. I suggest turning the established model on its head. Select your researcher first.

## 2. Select your researcher first

By choosing who you want to work with up front, the process of defining a brief and working up the research design can be done together.

Through you, the agency or person you select will understand the culture of your organisation, and the context within which the research is to be set. If they're good they will be feeding into your marketing thinking long before the first debrief.

## 3. Sourcing potential researchers

Ask others in similar roles to you. Ring a few up and ask them who they've used, whether they would recommend them and why. Type *qualitative market research* and your local city/town name into Google and see who comes up, or search on the Association of Qualitative Research (AQR) or Independent Consultants Group (ICG) websites.<sup>1</sup>

## 4. Check credentials

Your potential researchers will probably have a website. Look who they have worked for and give them a call.

Are they members of the AQR or Market Research Society (MRS)? As member-organisations you won't get specific endorsement but membership at least shows application to the industry.

There is no 'stamp' that guarantees a quality of consultancy. What you get with an MRS trademark assigned to your research provider is a confidence that the researcher or agency you use is committed to professional standards, aware of guidelines in key areas, personally bound by that strict Code of Conduct, kept in touch with industry trends and developments and compliant with the Data Protection Act of 1998.





## 5. Good recruitment

If recruiting from your own database, ensure your data collection and usage are compliant with data protection guidelines. For example, have your users provided informed consent to be contacted for market research purposes? Is your organisation registered as a data processor with the Information Commissioners Office (ICO)?<sup>22</sup>

If recruiting external to your own database, there are a number of professional agencies who can provide recruitment services for you. Try the AQR website [www.aqr.org.uk](http://www.aqr.org.uk) for details.

## 6. Don't cut corners

Arts organisations have historically spent as little as they felt they could 'get away with' in terms of commissioning research. While this is understandable with limited budgets, the paying of incentives should not be scrimped on.

The accepted practice in qualitative research is to incentivise or reward respondents for their participation. Most often this is in the form of cash, at a level that represents a 'Thank you'; the going rate for focus group attendance is around £30. The provision of an incentive gives the researcher greater confidence that

the respondents will attend on the night and the ability to control the size of the group, by 'paying off' additional attendees, recruited to ensure a full complement.

Beware the corner-cut which is giving vouchers or tickets for your organisation. It may appear to be a cost-saver, but not if it fails to ensure attendance by all, especially if you are wanting to learn about the feelings and attitudes of non-attenders.

## 7. Overview

In the world of qualitative research, the key elements to providing you with a good job are:

- knowing that the respondents in the survey are the people you want to hear from: – good researchers will use reliable recruiters who are fastidious in ensuring they get the right people for the brief
- peace of mind that the respondents used in the survey do not feel in any way taken advantage of or misused before, during or after the process
- knowing that the researcher understands the issues and has the skills required to use the interviews with customers to aid the requisite business decision. ■

1. [www.aqr.org.uk](http://www.aqr.org.uk)  
[www.indepconsultants.org](http://www.indepconsultants.org)

2. [www.ico.gov.uk](http://www.ico.gov.uk)



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