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Community-based methods for multicultural research

Editor's note: The authors are principals and associates of QualiData Research Inc., Brooklyn, New York.

Conventional qualitative research methods often do not work effectively with ethnic research studies. Researchers face such problems as targeted consumers who may be suspicious of participating in market research, invisibility of subjects to outsiders, and participants' lack of access to the research infrastructure.

Community-based methods - going into the field directly and recruiting and interviewing respondents in their own neighborhoods - is a valuable alternative approach for conducting research with different ethnic groups, especially in urban areas. Standard qualitative methods work with relatively assimilated ethnics but less so with newcomers, elders and children.

These methods are of particular importance to companies and organizations whose customers and marketing strategies are neighborhood-based, such as banks and other financial service providers, utilities, health care providers, not-for-profits, retail chains and government agencies.

Community-based methods for ethnic research are not for the inexperienced or the timid. Researchers must be ready to adapt and find solutions to last-minute contingencies without the assistance of hosts or facility managers. In planning the project, you must be able and willing to navigate your way around in unfamiliar subcultures.

Limitations of traditional research methods

Targeted respondents may be hard to find, first of all, because they may not be full participants in mainstream middle class American social life. They are not likely to be listed in the directories, mailing lists and databases where average consumers can be located.

Furthermore, many ethnics are uncomfortable and suspicious of outsiders asking questions over the phone. Recent immigrants, for example, may be unfamiliar with American cultural norms or their command of English may be shaky. In some contexts, persons may be inhibited from answering screening questions because they view them as a threat to their safety or livelihood, particularly if they happen to be undocumented immigrants or unconventionally employed.

Recently, while screening Asian-American teenagers, several prefaced their agreement to respond by asking whether or not their answers would somehow get back to the government. They were apprehensive about inadvertently involving their families in the bureaucracy of the U.S. government - a situation that immigrants typically prefer to avoid.

Many potential respondents from ethnic neighborhoods may also lack access to the research infrastructure which is typically located in downtowns, upscale shopping malls and office parks. We implemented a community-based study for an HMO that serves low-income and elderly ethnics, for example, because potential participants refused to travel to a research facility located outside of their neighborhoods. There was no problem with the show rate when the groups were scheduled at local community centers and, in one case, at a neighborhood delicatessen.

The barriers to access are as likely to be cultural or social class-based as geographic. For example, it may not be customary for women to travel outside of the neighborhood alone in the evening. Similarly, ethnic families may be reluctant to allow elders, teenagers, and children to leave their neighborhoods. For this reason, to interview Hispanic pre-teens for a Manhattan performing arts center, we set up groups in the basement community room of a barrio music school rather than at a Manhattan research facility.

Holding groups at neighborhood daycare centers, community centers and churches was the solution for a government agency responsible for planning an immunization database for New York City's children. "We needed to pick places for the interviews that were neutral in the community," says Dr. Gerry Hendrickson, Project Director for the All Kids Count program, a QualiData client.

When researching ethnic group members, the respondents' - rather than the researchers' - convenience counts. If marketing decisions are made only on the basis of respondents who are willing to come to a focus group facility, those findings may offer a biased picture of the ethnic community at large.

Furthermore, community-based methods are essential when neighborhood characteristics are under exploration - for example, in situations of rapid ethnic change. In a recent project conducted for a major bank, understanding the banking attitudes and preferences of recent Caribbean and South American immigrants were among the study's objectives. A community-based strategy was essential in organizing focus groups among a broad spectrum of respondents in these categories.

Benefits of community-based studies

Some of the principal benefits associated with community-based methods:

- Interviewing subjects in their communities provides richer data and a deeper understanding of cultural issues relevant to research findings.
- Recruiting virgin respondents. The majority of respondents in QualiData's recent ethnic marketing studies have been first-time focus group participants. Often, facilities' databases of ethnics are overused; additionally, recruitment databases tend to list individuals more assimilated into mainstream culture than people you can recruit by going into ethnic neighborhoods.
- Interviewing local consumers. Banks, clothing retailers and hospitals, for instance, often need to listen to customers at the neighborhood level - the people who frequent local branches and stores. Children, the elderly, teens and many small-business owners rarely leave their neighborhoods and often are not interested in traveling to a research facility.
- Community-based studies give you a more representative cross section of ethnic communities. Ethnic markets are multi-dimensional - there is great diversity within any single community. This approach gives you a better way to understand the range of cultural similarities and differences.

Keys to planning a successful community-based study

Extra lead time. Allow extra lead time for the recruitment process. Since you are often starting from scratch - from building contacts within a community to locating a site to conduct interviews - you may need three to four weeks per community to set up an ethnic study. Clients need to be advised at the outset that the recruitment of ethnics does not proceed as quickly as conventional recruitment.

Understand community organization. The structure and leadership of ethnic subcommunities are highly variable.

Engage the support of community leaders. The support of community liaisons is critical to any neighborhood study. As part of their roles, community leaders such as ministers and social service agency directors have a good deal of experience building bridges between their communities and the larger society. However, they are often besieged with requests and maintain hectic schedules. Do not be put off by unreturned phone calls; keep trying until you make contact.

Communicate the objectives of a research project in the most concise way possible. Use a letter of introduction to get your foot in the door but avoid sending detailed project outlines to community leaders. The most efficient approach is to arrange face-to-face meetings with community leaders and discuss the goals and objectives of a project in simple, concise terms. Also be clear about what they can do to help you. Once community leaders understand the objectives of your study, they are typically willing to provide a core set of contact names. Their endorsement of your study also helps gain the cooperation of community members; being able to say, for example, that "Reverend Adams suggested I contact you. . ." opens doors during recruitment.

A word of caution: If community leaders are to be study participants, they should be interviewed separately from rank-and-file because the presence of a community leader in a group can sway and/or inhibit participants from expressing their own opinions.

Snowball sampling: Creating a chain of personal referrals is essential in recruiting community members.

Ethnic match of recruiters and subjects can help but is no panacea. An ethnic match between researcher and subjects can make the process more efficient because it can facilitate subjects' trust and comfort levels. However, simplistic matching on the basis of race or language often complicates matters since intra-group differences may outweigh similarities. For example, an assimilated American-Jewish person does not necessarily have the advantage of ethnic similarity in interviewing Hasidic Jews or recent Russian-Jewish immigrants. Building trust and rapport are still necessary to gain the cooperation of potential recruits.

Choose an accessible meeting space. Your location should be neutral in terms of the topic under study and where respondents will feel most comfortable, a community center, school or church meeting room. During a recent multiethnic study for a bank, we could not use the well-equipped conference rooms at our client's neighborhood bank branches because they were not neutral territory.

Site interviews with the convenience of the respondent, not the researchers, in mind. The room itself should be large enough to comfortably seat respondents and observers. Additionally, providing child care is often necessary in conducting community-based studies.

Be prepared for contingencies. There will be no two-way mirrors or hidden microphones. This means that you must arrange for note taking or bring your own audio taping equipment and that client observers must sit within view of respondents. Be sure to introduce observers in a way that makes respondents feel comfortable.

Confirm, confirm and reconfirm. Carefully explain the purpose of the study to participants and emphasize the importance of their participation. Friendly and frequent reminder calls guarantee a high show rate.

Leave extra time for data analysis. A report that is based on comparisons and contrasts between different ethnic groups cannot be written in haste. For each of the study's research objectives, extra attention and time are required in the data analysis phase to uncover subtle cultural cues and attitudinal similarities and differences by ethnicity.

Community-based methods are an essential tool for clients investigating immigrants, low-income and other hard-to-reach groups. They require careful supervision by sociologically and anthropologically-trained researchers experienced in community studies. Given the changing demographics of the United States, research managers studying America during the '90s and beyond cannot neglect this

approach. The primary benefit is to discover a world otherwise unreachable.