May 2002

Qualitative Embracing More Remote Groups, Psych Modes

Heightened economic and business concerns over accountability have MR under the gun to improve its performance. Whether by cutting costs or by yielding more direct, actionable insights, or both, clients expect and demand more. Especially pressed on both of these fronts, qualitative practitioners are turning to new technologies and non-traditional, often proprietary methodologies to squeeze more than the usual out of traditional focus groups.

Consumer psychologists Drs. Glenn and Sharon Livingston, principals of the qualitative MR consultancy Executive Solutions, Inc. (Syosset, NY) for nearly 25 years, have been training moderators in a specialized psychological focus group variation since the mid-1980s. They also operate an 18-month-old focus group facility, branded The Looking Glass. The duo report growing demand for their novel psychology-based research methods and claim a noticeable spike in interest over the last year in telephone focus groups and remote video, both from their clients and numerous moderators who desire training)

Sharon Livingston

"The recession and September 11th hit us like everyone else, but now, business is booming," disclosed Sharon. "We were especially surprised by the tremendous demand for our CD-ROM moderator training sessions. The interest from international groups, in particular, has been astonishing. That has become a very robust business."

"When we opened The Looking Glass facility," explained Glenn, "the fundamental strategic focus of the company changed. We decided we could productize ourselves by concentrating on the training." In addition to offering its comprehensive independent moderator training, The Looking Glass now boasts 15 in-house moderators trained and certified to teach Executive Solutions' methods. "The emphasis is on psychological insights, using projective techniques that get under the surface in order to understand purchase motivations," Glenn revealed.

"We do a lot of emotional insight mining," volunteered Sharon. "We're kind of a strategic client partner. Most of the time, we get to do the difficult stuff, not the easy stuff," she continued. "Clients are looking for help in structuring their marketing communications to create a call to action that is not just intellectually based and not merely the result of a cognitive process. It's what comes from the heart and mind, combined. We find that emotional hook."

The pair acknowledges that using psychology to uncover unconscious motivations behind behavior can initially be disconcerting to marketers. "Critics tend to look at it as being very 'black box.' It's sometimes difficult to accept the notion of the subconscious," Glenn reasoned. "It's not very comforting to believe that there are things we do for reasons we don't consciously understand. When you're talking about buying behavior, that's not something a consumer wants to admit. And it's equally troubling for marketers, because it means they have to rethink the way they construct their appeals.

"For example, some people say there are categories that are completely price driven. These are commodities and the reason the consumer would select one versus the next is based purely on the logical pursuit of saving money," he outlined. "Even then, I would argue there is a psychological reason behind why consumers want to save money. Having money means different things to different people. For some, it is freedom. For others, it's security or stability. And for others, it's vitality. Depending upon your market, understanding why they want to save money should affect the advertising communication to be sent."

Glenn Livingston

To get at these hidden psycho-dynamics, the Livingstons employ a variety of projective techniques, including a process called 'guided imagery,' in which a subject is lulled into a semi-hypnotic state. Unlike putting someone in a deep hypnotic trance (something the Livingstons will not do, citing ethical concerns), the process does not aim to break down subconscious barriers, but to induce a level of relaxation conducive to creativity where subjects are distracted from having to rationalize answers and thereby remove themselves, ostensibly, from the equation. "It's like playing make-believe as a child. You can elicit very rich, potent imagery that the respondent might not really understand, believing it's part of a game and could not possibly reflect his/her personality," described Sharon.

"The goal is to really explore peoples' deep feelings to understand the emotional end benefits associated with product features," Glenn summarized. Sharon pointed out that people buy because they unconsciously want to identify with a persona they create around a brand or product. The perceived persona is not static, but subjective to a type of individual or audience. "It's a badge where you borrow the image of the brand to project who you are as an individual," she stated.

Executive Solutions' impressive roster of clients, including Fortune 100s, suggests the user marketplace is receptive to these psychological MR approaches. Their high percentage of repeat business

is complemented by a healthy stream of referrals. Their widely circulated e-mail newsletter addressing "research on research" issues has been a hit since its inception in 2001.The majority of their projects are for pharmaceuticals, which has "seen a disconnect between conclusions of past research and what actually happened in the marketplace. The idea that there is more than meets the eye makes sense to them," Glenn remarked. Recent Executive Solutions research successes include a *Totino's® Pizza* campaign, developing the brand name *Nextel*™, naming and marketing for *Teddy Grahams®* and the current *Lipitor®* campaign.

The Livingstons estimate the cost of their services are not significantly above comparable traditional qualitative project costs, but they nonetheless recognize the need to provide their clients with something quantifiable to justify the investment. In 1998, they introduced their proprietary Interface Research Methodology™, a quantitative, projectable alternative to laddering. "We identify relative feelings in a category that make people want to purchase and determine how those feelings tie back to a functional benefit," elaborated Glenn. "It's a very mathematical, statistical procedure in which we directly link functional and emotional benefits--with numbers as proof." Sharon observed that by incorporating "quantitative testing, you can show people that it makes sense and breaks down resistance."

Another important shift the Livingstons have noted is moderators and clients relaxing their insistence on in-person communication. This is reducing travel for one and all, with remote communications channels--once considered less than optimal for qualitative MR--the big winner. "We're swamped with requests for teleconference and telephone focus groups," Sharon happily announced. "In the last couple of weeks," she told *RBR* in April, "we've conducted six focus groups over the phone and there's been a real overall thrust toward video focus groups." The pair recently hosted a full-day training session for moderators at the behest of FocusVision (Stamford, CT), a frequent partner supplying video conferencing technology and capabilities to over 220 focus facilities worldwide.

"It can be initially frightening for moderators, so we arranged a continuous video stream event comparing and contrasting in-person, phone and video remote," related Sharon. (Online focus groups were deliberately left out of the mix, she explained, for lack of moderator interest. "We've only had three inquiries for online in the past year," she remarked.)

While video conferencing with a remote 'talking head' moderator most closely resembles the traditional setting, telephone is not without advantages. A popular choice for one-on-one qualitative interviews, the Livingston's concede it is a relatively unusual mode for focus groups. "Only a few moderators do it," revealed Sharon, "but it has several benefits compared to traditional and video. For instance, roughly 70% of our work is with pharmaceuticals, so we frequently deal with smaller, hard-to-find populations of patients who might not feel well enough to come to a facility."

"And there are some things that people will reveal on the phone that they won't reveal in person," added Glenn, attributing an often-credited Internet research benefit to phone work. These phone projects are about the same size as normal in-person focus groups. "I've done a lot of telephone sessions and learned that sensitive issues that people have been reluctant to speak about in person, they are willing to share on the phone. In addition, people have a greater respect for authority over the phone," he observed. "When they come together in person, there is a tendency to lapse into that familiar 'dinner table' dynamic where everyone competes for a piece of the conversation. But it's somewhat new to them when they get on the phone, so they give the moderator a little more control over the conversation."

Sharon submits that traditional telephone etiquette makes for a more orderly dialogue. "People are familiar with the phone. They know how to wait until someone responds, so they don't talk over one another," she said. In a typical telephone focus group, she detailed, each respondent also identifies him/herself before speaking. "I might say, 'Sharon. After using the product, I broke out in a rash,' to which Glenn might respond, 'Glenn. So did I. Where was yours?' 'Sharon. On my hand,' and so on. It seems awkward, but it becomes quite natural. In some ways," she asserts, "it's more comfortable to speak on the phone than on camera. You aren't preoccupied with your appearance, for one thing."

"There's a certain amount of energy that goes into social interaction," supported Glenn. "When I'm sitting face-to-face with you, the participant and moderator are aware of their posture, whether they're smiling, etc., whereas on the phone, those distractions are eliminated and they can put their energy into the task at hand."

Nonetheless, the absence of visual cues over the phone poses obvious problems. Sharon acknowledged this in citing statistics that suggest that only 7% of a communications message is verbal, while 38% comes from intonation and 55% is non-verbal. "I'm very visual," she admits, "so I had to train my ears to be my eyes. There are cues that you tune into when listening versus watching. You compensate by listening for pauses, breathing, sighs, laughter, the speed at which people talk, indicators of energy level, withdrawal," she described. "People tend to sit back in their seats when they lose interest. You can hear that if you know what to listen for."

Regardless of qualitative research mode, the Livingstons believe that respondents' comfort levels are more often dictated by the moderator's comfort level than the particularities of a communications channel. Not surprisingly, Glenn contends that personality variables and characteristics can make a moderator more effective in one medium versus another. "I'm probably better on the telephone because I need time to think after people respond," he admitted. "On the telephone, people tend to give you a longer time to think. In person, there is pressure to respond faster."

Sharon has a slightly different point of view, seeing herself as very adaptable to all moderator challenges. She enjoys the confrontations posed by each of method, but in the end feels "moderating skills are moderating skills. You adapt them to the medium." RBR

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