

Let Customer's Imagination Flow for Effective Research

If you want to boost sales, increase membership, enhance volunteer participation, increase market share or find new profit niches, the best methods start with knowing your target audience. One of the most effective ways to do that is to listen to them. How you listen, and how you organize and collate the results of that listening is the determining factor in the usefulness of the data, and the accuracy and actionability of your analysis. Clearly, much depends on the goal, but the type of research you select will drive the type of information you receive, and dictate how reliable it is.

For sales-, membership-, and interest-based organizations, a method termed “Right-Brain” research could hold the key to cost effective, actionable information you can use quickly and effectively to increase your knowledge of prospective customers.

The human brain consists of two “hemispheres” left and right. Based on Nobel award-winning research by Roger Sperry in the late 1960s, it was determined that each has different functions and characteristics associated with it. Sperry’s research showed that the Left side of the brain is responsible for the more linear functions and thoughts – math, computation, organization, languages (not speech directly), rational analysis, value prioritization and decision-making. The Right side is responsible for the more interpretive and sensory aspects, like art, music, philosophy, creativity, visualization, and imagination. Left is rational, Right is more intuitive and emotional, while neither is exclusively that way. In fact, the aspect of “handedness” is reversed; with the right side controlling motor and other functions on the left side of our bodies and vice versa.

Often in decision-making, especially regarding purchasing behavior, the Left side is informed by the Right. The Left rationalizes the emotional inputs from the Right to drive a purchasing decision. To drive sales, it is fundamental to appeal to that tricky Right side. When divining the needs of the customer or prospect pool you’d like to reach, it is important to gather and record output directly from the Right side. One way to accomplish that is through verbal communication. A long-form, personal, one-on-one discussion with customers, but on a large, organized scale, will elicit results you can put to use in crafting a strategy to approach the entire pool of prospects. In short, the resulting data from such small group research is projectable.

Right-brain research has been used to test new products in the prototype stage, test new concepts for advertising, movies, even gauge the effectiveness of customer service or test brand attributes for entire companies. It can be very effective, but it requires a high level of organization, some time and patience in listening and interpreting the results, and some resources to create the components and arrange for the interviews.

The components of this method are fairly straightforward:

- A set of goals for the research should be established and communicated to all involved – what do you hope to find out or accomplish when you are done?
- Describe the target audience for this goal. Discover what attributes they have in common, what characteristics can be used to select them from the general population, and how they differ from the rest of the audience.
- A profile of the ideal participant is developed. That profile is used to select a representative sample of respondents to participate in the interviews. This profile can include age, gender, marital status, purchasing behavior, geographic proximity, socio-

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- economic status, professional standing or experience, education, membership in organizations and many other properties.
- A Discussion Guide or Study Guide is created. This is the blueprint for the interviews, the guide for the interviewer to weave into their questions and discussions with the participants. It starts with the goals from the first step, to be sure that the questions drive responses that allow the researcher to answer the goals. It sounds simple, but if the goals are not realistic or the scope of the study is too broad, it will show up at this stage. This study guide is the key to effective implementation of this type of research. The questions have to be formulated in such a way as to elicit a response that is accurate, honest, direct, and emotionally unguarded. Often questions are asked multiple times in different ways to check for consistency of the answers.
 - Create the list of possible participants. In some cases, especially for consumer research of this type, the facility can offer some assistance in this area, as they often have pools of potential respondents and a good database of names and demographic data from which to select a pool of candidates. Selections are made based on how closely they fit the selected set of attributes from the profile.
 - Candidates are recruited by phone, either by your staff or by the facility, and the offer is made. Most participants are compensated for their time, either with cash or an incentive gift of some sort that will appeal to the intended audience. Professionals like doctors and attorneys are usually compensated at a higher level as their time already has a given "value" in monetary terms, an hourly rate.
 - Respondents are scheduled for their interviews, which are usually 60-90 minutes in length. More than 10 interview sets per day per interviewer are not recommended as fatigue for the interviewers tends to taint the results. More than one interview can be conducted at one time, depending upon the availability of interviewers and the size of the facility. Over book initially on each day to account for no-shows when you confirm the schedule the day before the interviews by phone.
 - The interviews are conducted by skilled interviewers, professionals who are personable, knowledgeable, aware of the goals to be achieved, perceptive and skilled in interpreting human emotions and the associated verbal and physical cues that telegraph them. They are terrific listeners, and skillful at guiding the conversation to keep it on track and on time. The facilities can often recommend or have interviewers on staff.
 - Each interview is recorded to capture both audio and video, and tapes are labeled and packaged with the release form for each subject for later reference.

Once the interviews are conducted, the tapes are reviewed, and transcripts are made, to remove any "image bias" generated by the subject's appearance. Those tapes and those transcripts are used to analyze and codify the results, to distill them into some sort of organized format that can be used to make recommendations for action.

How do you make the jump from transcripts to action?

Analyzing the results of such research is a skill unto itself, as the interviews generate a huge amount of data, buried deep in the responses. It takes time and patience, (and a very left-brain-oriented person) to organize, sift, and distill all those conversations, picking out commonalities and similarities among them, and highlighting stark differences and inconsistencies that can signal false results, or emotionally guarded responses. Once that glut of data is distilled and interpreted, those interpretations are put together in an organized fashion, ranked, rated and codified, much as you would survey data or focus group data. Those ratings and rankings are put into a report, along with recommendations for action.

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Uses for the final analysis vary widely. Some distill the video recordings, editing them down to some representative responses for each major question, some pro and some con, and present them in video form along with the written analysis. Sometimes, just the transcript is enough to get a sense of the trend of the responses, and can show glaring problems or highlight positive areas simply and quickly. Sometimes the two are combined in a multi-media presentation for added impact.

This type of research can highlight any number of aspects of the prospect pool, depending on how the research guide is structured. The more aspects of the prospective audience that are included in the study, the less depth you get in any one area. For an accurate study that is statistically projectable, and has a high degree of confidence, 30-40 interviews will usually suffice. Depending on how small the area of interest or niche you want to study, the toughest part might be finding enough respondents to interview.

How does The Right Brain Approach complement other research methods?

The Right Brain Approach measures emotions, not people. Quantitative data is valuable, but the information it provides can be even more valuable when used in conjunction with Right Brain Research. For example, if you conduct Right Brain Research before a quantitative survey, you will know what the key issues are and will be able to ask the right questions and ask them in the right way based on the actual language that consumers use. Once Right Brain Research results are known, future surveys can target the factors that affect buying decisions with more accuracy.

How can we use what we learn from Right Brain Research in conjunction with the results of our quantitative research?

What you gain in understanding from Right Brain Research will illuminate the information garnered in quantitative assessments. Now you have a chance to know the rest of the story! Actually, the Paul Harvey analogy is an excellent one. He tells you all the facts with no interpretive framework. Your mind goes off in all different directions trying to make sense of what he is saying. Then he hits you with a surprising ending or twist and all the facts make sense in a startling way. This is what Right Brain Research can do for your company/brand/packaging.*

No matter how you approach it, speaking directly with a population closely representative of your target audience is extremely empowering in its ability to accurately inform your creative, sales, membership recruitment or product development activities. You can't know too much about customers, and this method allows you to gain insights that can't be accessed any other way quickly, efficiently and cost effectively.

*Excerpted from FAQ section of Kenney & Associates, The Right Brain People's website.

About the Author: David Poulos, Chief Consultant at Granite Partners, has been providing marketing guidance and expertise to clients firms large and small for over 25 years. Specialties include non-profit membership marketing, tradeshow marketing, direct mail, and full-scale strategic marketing campaigns. He can be reached via the web at www.granite-part.com, or by phone at 410-472-4570. Granite Partners is based in Sparks, Maryland and services clients nationwide.

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