

Please...

Let the Moderator Write the Guide

Over the last few years, I have had a lot of conversations like this:

Me:

Great! I'm glad the project is approved. I'll get started on a discussion guide right away.

Client:

Oh, don't worry about that. We'll write the guide. We know what we're looking for.

Me:

Really? Why don't I just take a crack at the first draft? Just to give you a starting point.

Client:

Thanks, but that's not necessary. We'll take care of the guide. All you have to do is moderate the groups.

Me:


You're sure about this?

Client:

Absolutely.

QRC A





This seems to be a growing trend; at least it is in my corner of the world. To somebody who is not a qualitative researcher or who has limited experience with qualitative research, it might seem like a good idea to write the guide for the moderator. After all, you know your business and your research needs better than anybody, so who better than you to write the guide? And you will be doing the moderator a favor by saving him some work.

So, allow me, if you will, to make the case for letting the moderator write the guide. Here are two key reasons:

1. Moderators are professional qualitative research consultants (QRCs). This is what they do. The QRC you have hired has probably written hundreds of discussion guides, and can draw on his or her experience exploring similar issues. You might know your business better than anybody but the moderator knows qualitative research in the way that only a professional can.

There are many different approaches to conversation structure that a moderator can employ and plethora of exercises and questioning techniques upon which a moderator can draw. A QRC can offer the experience of moderating thousands of focus groups to navigate a conversation and draw the deepest insight.

What is more, the QRC understands that the guide is more than simply a list of questions. It is a map — a diagram showing how the issues at hand will be addressed.

2. As much of the value in a discussion guide lies in its creation as in its use.

The guide is more than just something to which a QRC refers when moderating. It is a tool to facilitate a dialogue between moderator and client on the underlying business questions that are driving the research as well as the decisions that will be made upon completion of the research.

The creation of a guide is often an iterative process in which the moderator gains understanding while clients are able to focus and refine their thinking. Sometimes clients go into research with a pretty good idea of what they want to do, but it's not fully fleshed out. There's nothing wrong with that, but the process of collaborating with the moderator to write the guide is the perfect opportunity to work all that out.

The irony here is that, if this process is sufficiently collaborative, by the time the research arrives everybody knows the guide so well that nobody, client or moderator, needs to look at it very much.

Bottom line: As a client, you are paying QRCs for their professional expertise. Make sure you are getting the most out of your money.

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