

# Business Decision Makers – A Different Animal? Advanced Qualitative Methods for Researching the Business Consumer

Martin Stoll – Kay-Volker Koschel – Thomas Kühn

## ABSTRACT

The authors are looking at some of the ways in which common practice in consumer qualitative research can be usefully and effectively applied in the business to business setting. The paper starts by looking at what makes b2b different from consumer research and the ways in which this has influenced the choice and style of research methods. Then it will briefly review some of the trends in consumer qualitative research before giving some examples of how qualitative methods can be used in national and international b2b settings. Finally it will finish by suggesting some of the qualitative methods we may start using in the near future.

### 1. Introduction

As qualitative researchers we take pride in the fact that we are able to dig below the surface of consumer attitudes to identify the emotional roots of their views and values. Quant is about numbers, qual is about ‘feelings’ we say. And we have a range of tools and techniques that we use to explore consumer feelings towards products, concepts, brands and communications. But as soon as the consumer is a business person, we mostly throw the toolkit overboard and stick to a discussion guide that elicits rational responses with barely a nod towards the emotional. A managing director or a purchasing manager, we argue, makes his or her decisions on a rational basis – so we engage them at that level. And anyway, business respondents are the kind of people who would feel uncomfortable with all those touchy/feely techniques that quallies use.

In this paper, we would like to question this attitude towards b2b qualitative research and to argue, from our own experiences, that many of the qualitative techniques we use can be employed effectively and successfully with business respondents. And further to demonstrate that a creative input generates a creative output that genuinely adds value for the client.

### 2. What Makes B2B Different?

There are obviously lots of differences between business and consumer research but it is certainly the case that consumer research uses a lot more varied techniques

than does most business research. There are good reasons for this, in particular that most b2b respondents have a deep involvement with their subject and have a lot to say about it. By contrast many consumers don’t have very much to say about their purchase decisions or an everyday brand and we have to find ways of encouraging them to explore their feelings or attitudes.

That’s one of the reasons most consumer research prefer groups while most business research involves depths. Most consumers could not sustain an hour’s depth interview about their use or attitudes to most fast moving consumer goods. Many consumer decisions are quite simple. The choice may be hard, but the decision to buy breakfast cereal or washing powder is fairly straightforward and most people don’t have very much to say about why they buy one brand rather than another. It is an important decision for the client, but a fairly minor one for the consumer. By contrast, most of the business decisions that we research involve very high levels of expenditure and are often concerned with complex products or services and protracted decision-making processes. So each respondent has a high involvement with the subject matter and will easily have enough to say in an hour’s one to one interview without the need for any extra stimulus to get them talking.

There is also an assumption that most business decision makers are too

important to be asked to “play games” which may be how they construe many of the techniques qualitative researchers use. But though there is some evidence that business decisions are more rational than those of consumers, it is also the case that b2b decisions are very complex and not driven by rational considerations alone. From a theoretical point of view (cf. Kühn 2005), *all* human actions are based on rational, but also on emotional and contextual components. Leaving aside “rational choice theory“, all current human action theories include parts beyond rational behaviour, e.g. Anthony Giddens who differentiates between “discursive“ and “practical“ knowledge or Pierre Bourdieu who points out the importance of “habitualized“ perceptions and actions. There is no indication that b2b decisions are detached from a wider context. Therefore, from a theoretical viewpoint, it is important that in b2b studies too, we make use of qualitative techniques which explore the contextual background of decisions, stimulate the expression, verbalization and self-reflection of the b2b decision-making processes and which reveal hidden aspects of actions, such as emotional, habitual or “unconscious“ components.

There are ways in which we can expand our understanding of business markets by using techniques that are currently being used in the consumer context, which is what we want to consider in this paper.

### 3. Trends in Consumer Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is changing all the time and researchers are always looking for new ways of helping us to tease out and clarify how consumers feel about brands and products. The major shift over the last few years has been towards trying to understand consumer behaviour directly, either by observing it or by participating with respondents to understand it. The emphasis has been on looking at actual behaviour, watching what consumers do, rather than what they say they do or what we measure them doing. There are two particular approaches that have received quite a lot of attention, these are observation and ethnography. To some extent the one is an extension of the other in that ethnographic studies often use observation as a tool, but the area of observation is a lot wider than ethnographics. The other area of development, though it has for long been part of the consumer qualitative research tool kit, has been the use of non-verbal techniques. When we talk about observation in a wider meaning, we also need to mention the latest research trend, so called "Neuromarketing" as a new way "to open the window into the brain" with neuro-imaging techniques.

### 4. Observation

There is a long tradition of observation among academics and consultants studying organisations' production and organisational behaviour and development, and it is a classic component in certain kinds of quantitative research, but observation has not featured very prominently in qualitative research until fairly recently.

The main strengths of observation-based methods are that they are more accurate, that by definition they are unobtrusive and, of interest from a cost point of view, these days some forms of observation can be automated. A recent example of the use and value of observational research is the work that Mark Ritson at London Business School has done on television advertising watching. By videoing the audience watching advertising breaks, he was able to show that equating numbers watching television with the numbers watching your advertisements is unreliable. For example, he found that earlier in the evening, programmes tend to be watched by larger numbers of viewers in a household and that the advertisements are watched less as a result (people chat, make tea etc.). Later in the evening, there are many more solitary viewers and they tend to watch the advertisements more (they have nothing else to do). But early

evening viewing is sold to advertisers at a premium and late evening at a discount. So observation can show quite dramatically how behaviour differs from expectations. If it works for consumers, there is no reason why it should not work for business people.

There are weaknesses to observation though. Obviously not everything is open to observation (though the advent of the weblog and Big Brother suggest there are few barriers to the use of webcams) but watching or recording in 'real time' can be very slow and most research happens under pressure of short deadlines. One drawback with observation is that you often end up with a very large amount of data and this means that analysis of the output can be very complicated and arduous, even using computer assisted analysis software. So although the fieldwork side can be automated, which saves money, the cost of analysis may be higher, so that the whole process may end up more expensive. There can also be some issues of confidentiality arising from observation. Respondents may not be happy to have your cameras or your researcher watching their every move and even if they are happy for you to watch their shopping habits, what happens when you realise you are also watching their shoplifting habits?

If business decisions are often more complex than consumer decisions, then it is worth spending more time trying to understand them. And here observation is a powerful tool. A good example is the case of trying to help pharmaceutical reps improve their performance when visiting GPs. We were asked by a pharmaceutical company to help them gain a better understanding of the context in which their reps were working and if possible to monitor the performance of the reps. The client also asked whether this could be extended to a comparison with the performance of competitor reps. The research solution we proposed was for a researcher to spend the day in a doctor's surgery, monitoring the pattern of work – number of patients seen, the phone calls, the letters written, the interruptions, the coffee breaks and the emergencies. Ideally the day researched would be the day when the rep was scheduled to call, so we would get a very clear understanding of the context of the call. Then we would sit in on the rep's visit and be able to identify more clearly what they were doing right and what they were doing wrong. But we felt that it would have been unethical to sit in on

competitor reps, so declined to consider this part of the brief.

### 5. Ethnography

Because one of the major aims of qualitative research is to get our clients closer to the consumer and to gain real consumer insights, interest in an ethnographic approach has grown dramatically over the last years and there are now researchers who do little else. In the tradition of the anthropologist (eg. Bronislaw Malinowski, Margaret Mead, Claude Lévi-Strauss), the modern consumer researcher may spend days or weeks living with consumers, spending the day, the evening and weekends with them. Accepted as part of the tribe or part of the furniture, the ethnologist can watch and experience the full complexity of household life – its drivers and dramas.

Another very common form of ethnography is home visits. So when watching a target group in a viewing studio does not seem to be enough, we invite our clients on a visit to the consumers' home, work or office. A recent example of this was when we took some Asian clients into consumers' homes so that could observe and get a feel for how we arrange home theatre equipment in our living rooms in Hamburg, London or Paris.

In the business context, again, it is common for business academics to do something very similar, but much rarer for market researchers. If we extend the example of the pharmaceutical reps, then the ethnographic approach would be to spend more time getting to understand the world of the GP by spending several days in the surgery, sitting in with different doctors, nurses and other staff and/or visiting several surgeries. The researcher may prefer to study the other tribe involved – the reps. The researcher might want to spend time with the rep in and out of working hours, accompanying them on their rounds both visiting GPs or on the golf course.

This too may take time and be expensive to conduct, but it can produce valuable insights in a way that a conventional one hour depth may not. To enhance the value of the method, there are a lot of ways in which the ethnographer can record their findings. One of the most effective ways of communicating what is actually happening is by the use of video or photography. Telling a client what respondents do is never as effective as showing them the picture, or better still the video, of someone actually doing it. As well as the researcher taking photos or videos, there is also the possibility of getting the respondent to take photos or videos.

In the pharmaceutical example, we could ask the doctor and/or rep to make their own video diaries or just to take snapshots with a throwaway camera. The pictures and the videos can then be put together or edited down to form a little video case study to show clients. The final example that we would like to consider is the “life book”, which we have used very successfully with consumers and which we think should work well with business customers. It is a creative diary that respondents are asked to fill in with words, collage or drawing. When analyzing decision making processes in companies wouldn't it be very helpful to see a “life book” of a CEO?

#### 6. Non-verbal Techniques

B2b-research is nearly always based on very verbal, rational interviews. But we know that some people are better able to communicate non-verbally and some feelings and thoughts are best expressed visually. We often ask consumer respondents to draw pictures or to make collages, but we very rarely do this with business respondents. But some of the respondents we interview may be accustomed to thinking and expressing themselves visually – architects and engineers for example. And even if they are not, we can all of us draw diagrams or doodles. In a recent study, for example, we asked business people to draw their ideal phone and we had some very creative executions. We were not asking them to design us a phone, but the very fact of drawing engages different parts of the brain and stimulates a different kind of creativity. What we found was that far from protesting, the respondents obviously enjoyed the freedom that drawing gave them.

One problem with visual exercises is that some people feel very self-conscious of their poor artistic skills. There are lots of ways of getting round this – photography is one we have mentioned already, but a very simple method is to use collage. With consumers, we hand out magazines and scissors and invite them to select their own images, but we also have a library of interesting images that we often also include. Giving out pre-selected images has the advantage that it makes the task of assembling a collage less arduous, but it has the danger that we are prompting and introducing a bias by the choice of images we hand out.

One of the ways in which we use these visual exercises with consumers is to ask them to complete a task in advance of their interview or participation in a group. Sometimes we ask them to extend the single task into a diary of some sort or we

ask them to record an event (night out) or a set of events (planning the night out, getting ready, night out, home, next day). As we have discussed above with the GPs and reps, there is no reason why this cannot be done with business respondents equally successfully.

Part of the appeal of this approach is that it helps people to express vividly what they are feeling and sometimes they are expressing it in a way that mere words don't allow them to. This is obviously very useful in itself, but the value of the visual approach extends further. In particular, it is a useful way of helping clients with their creative tasks – we can show them the images, shapes and colours that seem to have particular meaning and resonance for consumers. And we can use semiotic analysis to clarify and explore the vocabulary and grammar of these visual images. This in turn means that the client or their design or advertising agencies can then address their audience in a visual language which the audience will respond to because it has come out of the consumers' own creative thinking.

#### 7. Projective Techniques

The projective is so widely used as a research tool that we find that consumers these days often volunteer them. Although they have their origins in psychoanalytic practice (e.g. Sigmund Freud, Carl-Gustav Jung) most market researchers use projective techniques with less ambitious aims. They are often simply a metaphor – a way of expressing something differently, but one which can expand the researcher's understanding of the consumer viewpoint.

With groups of business decision makers, we have found that projective techniques work as well as they do with groups of consumers. The business person is as ready to take part wearing their business hat as the same person is when wearing their consumer hat. The constraints are the same ones (age, gender, social class) that apply for consumer groups – a group of middle-aged upper class men may not feel comfortable with some of the more outré projective techniques, but they are likely to be happy with the simpler ones. We have found that we can also use projectives quite successfully in depth interviews with business people and found them very useful for getting beyond the rational responses that tend to emerge from business interviews. And interestingly we have found that we can use some of the simpler techniques

around the world. Recently, we used personalisation in interviews with senior editors on national newspapers in Turkey and Poland almost as easily as we did in the UK, France and Germany.

Projectives are particularly useful in helping elaborate or tease out differences between brands, especially where the brands are seen functionally as being very similar. Ask a small businessman who is dissatisfied with his bank why he doesn't change to another and the answer is usually “They're all the same...” Ask about purchase decisions relating to basics, from stationery to PCs and you are told that they are simply bought on price and the branding doesn't matter at all. Interview businessmen about their choice of airline, as we did recently, and you often get a similar response. For short-haul they are looking for a plane to get them from A to B at a particular time and are not bothered about who the carrier is. But when we asked the same business customer to think about the personality of different airlines, it was very apparent that the airlines all had very distinct personalities. At first these could be construed as stereotypes. Asked to describe British Airways, nearly everyone described a middle-aged, male Englishman, probably a businessman and rather formal in their manner and possibly a bit aloof. Contrast this with the relaxed Virgin Airways or the scruff Easy Jet.

And when we asked them to imagine the brands at a party, the stereotypes continued – EasyJet boozing, Virgin dominating the dance floor and the party and BA a bit disengaged, on the side lines, not really a party animal, watching it all. At this point, the BA image might seem like a handicap, but extending the story, we asked how each of the partygoers would respond if there was an accident – someone slips and breaks a leg. What is striking is that at this point, very often, it was BA that was seen as taking command calmly and efficiently organising things, helping the injured person, calling for an ambulance, clearing up any mess etc.

What is interesting about personification and other projective techniques is that they enable us to identify differences in perceptions that consumers do not recognize when asked the question outright. But by extending the projections we can often identify hidden emotional feelings about the brand – the strength of a relationship the respondent has with the brand, the nature of that relationship and all this can help the brand owner to communicate and service their customers' needs better.

## 8. Tools for the near Future

Looking to the future, there are trends in the consumer qualitative arena that may well come to be used in b2b. Certainly, we expect to use the internet more than we have been. Not the online groups that were much feted but are not much used, but the humbler email and the bulletin board. We already use email for interviews with consumer and business people as a follow-up to groups or depths and as a substitute – especially where the respondent is difficult to reach in person or where the topic is a sensitive one (we recently conducted a complete project about adult channel viewing via email!) And it is easy to see that these situations apply as much in a business context as they do in the consumer one. Furthermore they are lot of new research and communication possibilities in connection with the so called Web 2.0. Podcasting, Personal and Corporate Blogging will become a mass phenomenon in the near future. Even today a lot of companies like SAP, Microsoft, Google, Siemens und Daimler Chrysler etc. are using online-diaries as a new communication and information tool. Some of them also offer CEO-Chats and in Germany for example the Bundeskanzlerin "www.bundeskanzlerin.de" has its own Video-Podcast. It's just a question of time before qualitative research will offer different industry sectors b2b-weblogs and the possibility of exchanging ideas about technologies, trends and Innovation via Web 2.0.

There is also enormous potential in the emerging Convergence of Media especially the development of 3G tele-

phony and the accompanying hardware. With mobile phones and PDAs with voice recorders and in-built cameras and with systems that can track an individual's movements anywhere in the world, we have powerful tools for observation and for reporting.

Perhaps the most science fiction development in recent times has been the adaption of neuroscience for marketing. Harvard Business School Professor Geralt Zaltman was one of the pioneers who discovered the potential of neuro-imaging for marketing and market research. Instead of asking consumers for their judgments and preferences, neuromarketing researchers use neuroscientific methods like MRI, Magnetic Resonance Imaging; fMRI, functional Magnetic Resonance etc. to study brain activity. For example when Daimler-Chrysler wanted to learn more about the impact of car design on the male brain consumers were exposed to a set of different cars.

The result? While watching a sportscar the gratification systems of the brain were more strongly aroused than when viewing small compact cars. Another short example: Consumers have been exposed to different adverts or asked to choose brands off virtual shelves and interestingly it as shown that consumers' brains do react differently when shown familiar brands or brands they use compared to others. The key-finding of neuromarketing has been to show that popular brands are popular in our brains too. Which luckily confirms what classical marketing research has

assumed for a long time.

For the moment, neuroimaging is a very expensive tool to use, it is limited in its applications and there are also some methodological questions that have to be discussed (e.g. if it isn't dangerous to reduce the very complex system of our Brain to one image? etc.). Finally neuromarketing is more than just a bunch of neuro-imaging tools. What it makes powerful in consumer understanding in the near future is the integration of different disciplines like neuroscience, psychology, marketing and consumer research and cultural science (cf. Scheier/Held 2006). Though, we should not forget one important fact which is not always top-of-mind when we consider new developments in the computer sciences / informatics or neuroscience sector. Our actions are always social and that means that our social standing, e.g. social friendship and colleague networks, our society and related norms and value systems shape our way of thinking. Therefore, our research conclusions should never rely only on perspectives that characterize our actions as mono-causal by neglecting the circumstances and specific contexts. Neuromarket research may give us some very interesting insights into the minds of business consumers, but will not replace the various techniques that we have discussed. Also, in the future we will need qualitative interviewing techniques that help us to stimulate story-telling and understanding (cf. Witzel 2000) as a basic requisite to better understand complexity.

## THE AUTHORS



**Martin Stoll**, Director Ipsos-Insight, UK has worked as a b2b market researcher for over 25 years in his own agency and most recently as a Director of the Qualitative HotHouse in Ipsos MORI in London. He has written

and lectured widely on aspects of research, including running courses on b2b projects skills at London Business School. Martin has a degree in History from Cambridge University and a Masters in Business from London Business School.

Contact: martin.stoll@ipsos-mori.com



**Kay-Volker Koschel** has an academic background in Social Science and Communication & Marketing Sciences. Kay started his career 1990 at TEAM BBDO, Düsseldorf and since then has worked in several market research

institutes (eg. TNS-Emnid, AC Nielsen Werbeforschung). Kay joined Ipsos Hamburg in 1998. His work as Division Manager Ipsos Qualitative centres on the field of services, communication and b2b-research. He is a member of DWG (Deutsche Werbewissenschaftliche Gesellschaft).

Contact: kay.koschel@ipsos.de



**Dr. Thomas Kühn**, is currently working as a freelancer and free publisher in qualitative research. He holds a PhD. in Psychology and is author of several public-cations about qualitative research methodology and its strategic

potential in market and social research. He has worked for Ipsos and several other market research institutes and gained broad expertise in b2b studies. He also obtained expertise in qualitative research by working as a researcher at the University of Bremen and as fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Contact: mail@kuehn-thomas.de

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