

25 Reasons to Use a Professional Qualitative Researcher

The Qualitative Research Consultants Association developed the following list of reasons to use a professional qualitative researcher. QRCA is a non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring the highest professional and ethical standards in qualitative research.

1. There Are No Plain Vanilla Groups
2. Pros Do More Than Moderate
3. Pros Create a Safe Climate
4. Pros Interpret
5. Pro's Skills Are Up-to-Date
6. Pros Dig For Hidden Meanings
7. Pros Are Better Trained
8. Pros Understand the Process
9. Pros Are Experienced
10. Pros Ask "Dumb Questions"
11. Pros Get to Real Meaning
12. Pros Get Around Defensive Behavior
13. Pros Effectively Handle Talkers And Non-Talkers
14. Pros Are Trained To Be Objective
15. Pros Can Sort Out Psychological Issues
16. Pros Know How to Probe
17. Pros Are Sensitive to Atypical Groups
18. Pros Notice Anomalies
19. Pros Regulate Pace And Direction
20. Pros Take Advantage of Diversity
21. Pros Can Handle Sensitive Topics
22. Pros Can Unearth The Big Idea
23. Pros Can Stand Up To The Client
24. Pros Adhere to Ethical Standards
25. Pros Consistently Excel

While this list might appear somewhat self-serving for professional qualitative researchers, if examined objectively, it offers some interesting and thought provoking reasons for organizations to consider as they decide whether to conduct the research in-house or retain an outside research firm.

1. There Are No Plain Vanilla Groups

For plain vanilla, run-of-the-mill, mundane focus groups, any moderator will do. The problem is that there are no plain vanilla, run-of-the-mill, mundane focus groups. There are always - even in the "simplest" of groups - complex issues of getting people in touch with their real thoughts and feelings, creating the atmosphere to allow people to express themselves, sorting out the relative importance of the overwhelming amount of information that arises, and dealing with the multi-million-dollar ideas that weren't on the discussion guide. If a simple, straightforward, consistent answer emerges in a focus group study, that answer is often incomplete, or it is the response to the wrong questions.

2. Pros Do More Than Moderate

Professionals prefer to be called "consultants" because we do much more than moderate groups. As qualitative research consultants, we recognize the implications of our findings. We are better able to turn data into information, information into knowledge, and sometimes knowledge into wisdom. We know how to develop and test strategies and executions, how to design a study to meet the client's needs. We also help clients identify and prioritize needs, and provide direction for critical marketing decisions. So, long before we enter the focus room, we can increase the likelihood of success. Pros have marketing savvy and context. We can report on trends in other categories and industries, giving broad perspectives without revealing proprietary information.

3. Pros Create a Safe Climate

Pros create an atmosphere of psychological safety, encouraging respondents to express divergent or embarrassing thoughts and feelings. This is perhaps the most important thing that we do, yet it is often completely invisible to participant and client alike. It is probably our most under-appreciated skill. Since respondents can feel vulnerable or at risk during a discussion, they are much more comfortable and therefore more productive when they sense that they are in the hands of a Pro.

4. Pros Interpret

Pros are better able to interpret what we hear, report it coherently to the client, and make practical recommendations. We are better able to read people, identify their real meanings, hear the themes and subtext - the texture as well as the substance, the counterpoint, beat, and mood as well as the melody.

5. Pro's Skills Are Up-to-Date

The Pro is much more likely to be up on the latest techniques, interventions and methods. We train each other and have a deep commitment to improving and honing our skills through self-examination and skill development that outsiders usually don't see or appreciate. QRCA and other venues provide us with an awareness of current trends, the body of qualitative research knowledge, training, ethical considerations, and standards. We are involved in our profession full time. Our vast repertoire of techniques allows for greater spontaneity, and an instant change in direction if one method is not working. It also makes possible validation and corroboration, since the consultant is not confined to only one approach. Pros are better able to come up with creative ideas during the group to bounce off participants, rather than having to wait for subsequent sessions. Most importantly, our skills allow for productive, deep and complete probing of critical areas.

6. Pros Dig For Hidden Meanings

Professional consultants do not take verbalizations at face value, but dig out hidden meanings. Example: Physicians in a focus group said that they didn't prescribe a particular drug because of its side effects. However, when further probing revealed that they were also against an identical drug "under development" with no side effects, it became evident that the real obstacle was physicians' discomfort with changing their accepted procedures. Therefore, the consultant suggested focusing the sales campaign on changing the physicians' behavior. A less skilled moderator might have mistakenly recommended overcoming objections to the drug's side effects.

7. Pros Are Better Trained

The Pro is simply better trained, drawing on a breadth of experience and education (formal or informal) in psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, linguistics, group dynamics, marketing, finance, manufacturing, management and many other fields. Most of us have studied several different and specific disciplines and techniques in training programs, workshops, practica, apprenticeships, and the like.

8. Pros Understand the Process

Professional consultants understand and have respect for the process. We know how to handle fluid situations without losing sight of the objectives, even if we have to take an approach completely different from what was planned. We expect the unexpected and know how to take advantage of it. The main reason that airline pilots are paid so much (there are many more waiting in the wings to take the place of those who have jobs: the pay could be less), is that we want to have the people with the highest level of skill to get us out of difficulty. The routine is not the issue, it's the unexpected. We have more than our share of the unexpected. It's our job, and we thrive on it. In fact our clients tell us that the emergence of unexpected ideas is the main benefit and *raison d'être* for the focus group methodology. We also know how to keep difficult respondents from ruining the group, or unanticipated issues from sabotaging the objectives.

9. Pros Are Experienced

Experience gives the Pro breadth of understanding and a highly developed BS Detector. Often, people who don't like a product "damn it with faint praise," which excites the product manager because the words are positive. Professionals don't take opinions at face value. And Pros are not easily fooled by rationalizations. Often, consumers buy on the basis of emotion (desires, wishes, anticipated satisfactions, etc.), then justify their choice on the basis of logic. Pros get beyond the rationalizations to the motivations.

10. Pros Ask "Dumb Questions"

The Pro is not afraid to ask "dumb questions" that might be embarrassing to someone in the industry or the client company. There is no need to appear knowledgeable to respondents. The Pro knows that some of the best information comes from questioning the conventional wisdom of an industry, so pros will explore a whole gamut of issues, from the subtle to the obvious. Industries tend to be in-bred and wedded to particular ways of doing things. The Pro can challenge these situations.

11. Pros Get to Real Meaning

Pros can cut through industry terminology and jargon to get to the respondents' real meaning and understanding. Pros also have an uncanny ability to capture language, hot buttons, positions, compelling arguments, and perceptions that seem to elude the less experienced.

12. Pros Get Around Defensive Behavior

Pros know how to recognize defensive behavior and get around it. For instance, people often retreat into confusion, distraction, intellectualization, humor, seriousness, passivity, belligerency, and dozens of other behaviors which make them feel better about themselves and/or remove threats. Pros recognize these for what they are and have a well-developed repertoire for harnessing this energy and turning it into more constructive channels.

13. Pros Effectively Handle Talkers And Non-Talkers

Professionals recognize that talking is not necessarily openness, that talkativeness is not necessarily candor, that high energy participation is not necessarily more valid than dull droning, and that inarticulate people may have extraordinary insights and different ways of expressing themselves.

14. Pros Are Trained To Be Objective

Pros are trained to maintain objectivity. Pros recognize personal beliefs and biases, and scrupulously check them out and challenge them. We know how to steer discussions with a minimum of direction and bias. We know how to avoid tipping off what is important to us or what outcomes the client wants.

15. Pros Can Sort Out Psychological Issues

Most pros can distinguish attitudes, opinions, beliefs, convictions, values, needs, wants, wishes, coping mechanisms, defenses and the other myriad psychological issues that have to be sorted out to develop a coherent marketing plan.

16. Pros Know How to Probe

While unskilled questioning can get information, it won't attain as much of the necessary information as professional probing. We're more likely to get the full range of attitudes, beliefs and behavior because we know how to delve into the values, feelings and other subconscious drivers of decision making. Pros can get beyond dealing with challenging responses, such as, "Ads don't influence me."

17. Pros Are Sensitive to Atypical Groups

Experienced, professional consultants are very sensitive to what is missing or atypical of the groups. It takes consummate skill to notice what people aren't saying or doing. Examples: A Pro was listening to a whole string of positive statements about a particular line of blankets, but she observed that the participants weren't touching the blankets on the table before them. When she expressed her observation to the respondents, the negatives came pouring out. In another situation, participants were extremely negative about a particular store. However, when they were given a projective task to do, it was discovered that their image of the store was much higher than that of other stores.

18. Pros Notice Anomalies

Because of our large experience base, we notice anomalies, contradictions, inconsistencies and things that "just don't ring true." And we know how to investigate them without turning people off. Sometimes respondents have to be challenged. For instance, we can play devil's advocate in a good-natured way that doesn't come across as contentious and argumentative. In this way, we can test the strength of beliefs, how people will answer challenges, how secure and comfortable they are with their opinions.

19. Pros Regulate Pace And Direction

We know how and when to regulate the pace and direction of the discussion. We know the priorities and can make the difficult breadth versus depth decisions that are needed instantaneously during the session.

20. Pros Take Advantage of Diversity

Pros are better able to handle and take advantage of the ethnic, cultural, gender and other diversity within and between groups.

21. Pros Can Handle Sensitive Topics

Pros can handle sensitive topics with aplomb, dignity and straightforwardness.

22. Pros Can Unearth The Big Idea

The Big Idea, while not always apparent, is much more likely to be unearthed and developed by a Pro. Amateurs concentrate on getting through the guide. Pros focus on the client's critical success factors, objectives, and strategies. We are told that the idea of keeping baking soda in the refrigerator to absorb odors was discovered from a passing remark in a focus group.

23. Pros Can Stand Up To The Client

Pros are more likely to have the stature and the inclination to stand up to the client when we know that the client is making a mistake.

24. Pros Adhere to Ethical Standards

An essential component of professionalism is adherence to the highest possible ethical standards.

25. Pros Consistently Excel

One of the definitions of "professionalism" is "consistently excellent performance." Pros have a way of looking like pros, amateurs like amateurs. Our command of the situation actively engages both participants and observers, and makes the research director look good to top management. Pros understand the importance of building a relationship with the client and the client company, rather than just doing a project.