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IDEAS & TOOLS
FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

VIEWS

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COMMUNICATING in the “COMFORT ZONE”

ICONIC
MODERATORS
LEAVE A LEGACY FOR ALL

THE POWER OF
PARTICIPANT PREP

RIGHT PLACE,
RIGHT TIME...
*USING VOICE MESSAGING
TO BE “IN THE MOMENT”*





ICONIC *MODERATORS* LEAVE A LEGACY FOR ALL



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The idea was a small one, but a cool one. As the Philadelphia Chapter Chair, I am always thinking about who we can invite to speak at our next meeting, and as an independent qualitative research consultant, I recognize that I really do not have the opportunity to observe other moderators moderate very often.

Med students watch and observe physicians routinely. Surgeons ask, “Mind if I scrub in?” to observe and learn the standard of care as well as new techniques, furthering their expertise. Pilots do the same, watching other pilots from the jump seat. Even student teachers spend months in another teacher’s classroom to transfer learning and skills in the spirit of best practices.

So, if observation was beneficial in creating skilled doctors, pilots and teachers, then I felt that we as moderators should do the same! After all, isn’t sharing ideas what QRCA is all about? Doesn’t a rising tide lift all boats? Yes and yes!

So, if observation was beneficial in creating skilled doctors, pilots, and teachers, then I felt that we as moderators should do the same!

For our May chapter meeting, I envisioned inviting three different moderators to conduct an interview

with three different groups of respondents, using a similar guide. In thinking about who we could ask to moderate, three names immediately came to mind as icons of our industry who helped to shape and make what the qualitative research profession is today: Bob Harris, Judy Langer and Pat Sabena. With more than 100 years of collective qualitative experience and having conducted thousands of groups and IDIs, these experts have all been QRCA president and remain highly active in the organization today. In fact, Bob and Judy were founding members. I also recognized that these leaders may not always be available for us to seek guidance, and it would be a terrible oversight if their approach and style were to remain a mystery to most of us.

The Idea Takes Shape

Fortunately, all three quickly responded with their availability and interest in participating in my experiment. Everyone agreed to conduct a 30-minute mini-group format, in which each moderator would discuss the same topic, using a guide he or she prepared based on a common research brief: “Exploring the Relevance and Value of Print Magazines in the Digital Age,” a topic we thought would be relatively easy to recruit and was interesting, and one with which each moderator had some familiarity and experience. In this way, not only would observers see “how” each moderator moderates, but they would also understand the “why” behind the approach to interpreting the research brief to ensure that business issues are addressed and study objectives are met.

The Idea Becomes Reality

On Friday, May 14, 2010, forty-two QRCA members and prospective members arrived at the chosen focus group facility to observe Bob, Judy and Pat in action and then discuss their individual moderating approach and style, in live mini-focus group sessions (four to five respondents each), featuring real, paid participants. In order to participate, respondents had to be between the ages of 25–54 and purchase or subscribe to at least two general-interest magazines, reading at least some issues and at least some of the articles and columns. In addition, participants were required to have access to the internet, using it to some degree to search for information, entertainment and the latest news. From behind the mirror or via closed-circuit TV, attendees viewed the sessions, and then we gathered in one suite to debrief.

It is important to note that there were a lot of similarities exhibited by the moderators in terms of the basic tenets of good moderating, such as including participant introductions, drawing out more quiet respondents and tactfully redirecting other respondents when they strayed off subject. The most notable similarity was that each moderator worked to create an inviting, friendly and relaxed atmosphere for respondents to participate.

The execution of creating this environment, however, varied

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considerably from moderator to moderator. These efforts often began prior to the start of the session.

For example, each moderator requested that the standard large conference table be reduced to a much smaller size to facilitate a more intimate and personal experience. Other examples include Pat's request to use the same type of chair as respondents, in order to be more readily seen and accepted by respondents as a member of the group, as opposed to someone different from them. Judy made sure that beverages and snacks were available in the room itself, and she felt more comfortable going into the room with respondents at the same time, to again be viewed as one of the group vs. someone who was different from them.

As mentioned, there are some unique aspects to each moderator's approach and style, but even more interesting is that each moderator, despite differences in approach and style, seemed to arrive at the same place in terms of research

findings. The following is a brief recount of what QRCs observed and learned from each moderator's session.

Bob Harris

Bob emphasizes putting participants at ease. As Bob puts it, "My style happens to be conversational, based on sitting around as we used to do back in the day, talking in somebody's living room or around a dining room table." As he walks into the room to say, "Hi," only a couple of focus group participants mumble in response. "Now, I'm going to have to fix that. No, I'm just kidding," he jokes with a smile, helping to further a friendly atmosphere.

Before starting the discussion, he thoroughly covers ground rules so that participants know what to expect, not assuming that everyone has previously participated in a group discussion. In this way, not only do participants understand their role, but they also understand that their opinions will be respected. Thus, interest is more

"How you start a focus group sets the tone, so that people can give of themselves."
– Bob Harris

"I think of it as they're coming over to my house."
– Judy Langer

"I feel very strongly that the way to have people tell you everything about them is to give a sincere portion of yourself."
– Pat Sabena

likely to be sustained, and respondents feel more comfortable sharing, especially when a sensitive topic or issue comes up. As Bob says, "How you start a focus group sets the tone, so that people can give of themselves."

Another way Bob does this is by suggesting that those who tend to talk a lot hang back a bit to allow other respondents to voice their opinions completely, and by also requesting that those who are more quiet speak up and make sure that their opinions are heard. He also lets respondents know that they are not obligated to answer a question that makes them uncomfortable and that the session will be easy because they are answering questions about how they think and feel about the topics to be discussed.

At the end of the discussion, he asks participants to provide feedback on his moderating. Participants reply by complimenting Bob's easygoing and conversational style, which comes as no surprise to the QRCs observing. During the debrief that follows, Bob explains that he makes a point of periodically checking in with respondents as to how they find the experience, helping him to ensure that his approach and style are as effective as possible. Respondents appreciated how Bob handled the session, especially in not fostering a teacher/student environment. Respondents also like smaller vs. larger groups to make it easier to share their thoughts, and they do not like continually being pressed beyond reason about their views on any one topic.

Judy Langer

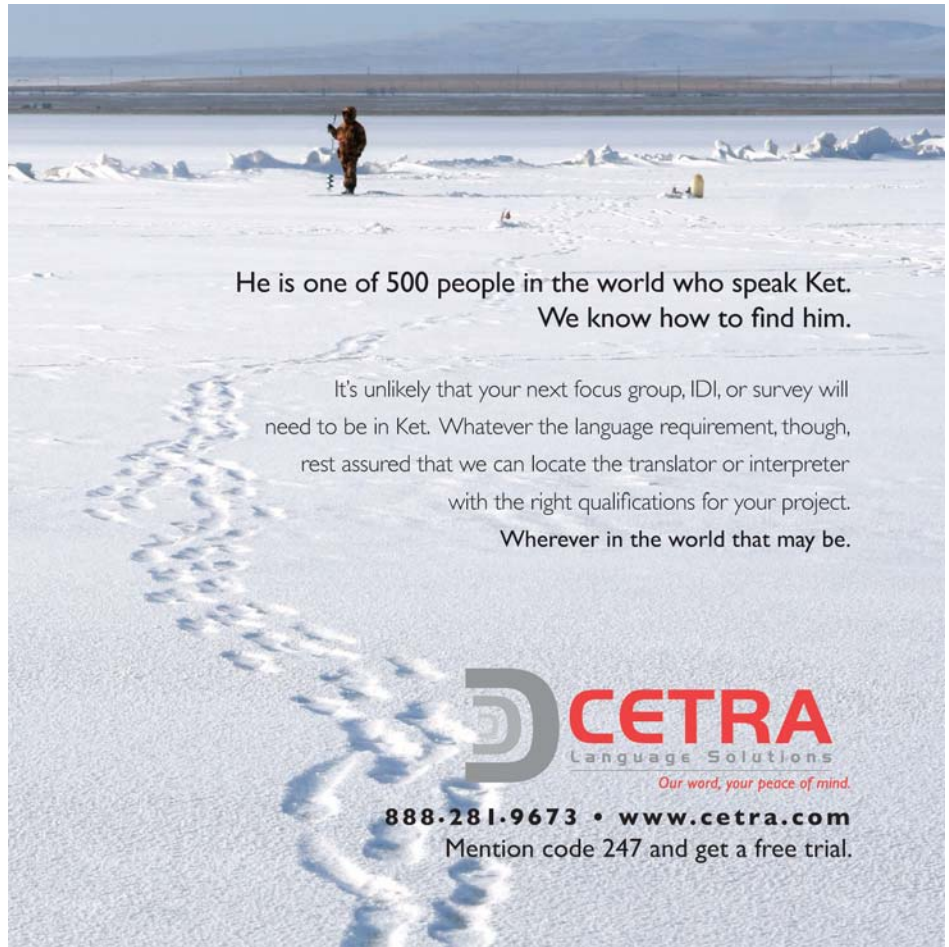
Judy's style exudes a sense of warm, emotional comfort. After introducing herself to participants in the waiting room, she leads them into the conference room herself. As Judy puts it, "I think of it as they're coming over to my house." Judy also invites respondents to "come on in," her way of inviting respondents into the conversation. She often calls on respondents based on their body language, which she feels is a good way to involve respondents who are quieter. For example, if someone is nodding in agreement, he or she likely has something to share.



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Above (left to right), Judy Langer, Bob Harris and Pat Sabena.

To increase participants' comfort on an emotional level, Judy opens the discussion with a free-association exercise by asking how they feel about magazines, contrary to the often-standard practice of beginning with more general questions before getting into the topic itself. According to Judy, the exercise immediately engages respondents and creates a sense of community and bonding that sets the stage for the rest of the discussion. She is quick to champion and show support to respondents who preface a response with phrases like "You'll think I'm crazy..." in order to demonstrate that it is OK for respondents to "feel what they feel" and to encourage others to speak from the heart.

Her respondents brought their favorite magazines with them into the focus group study as initially requested by Judy, in order to help get at respondents' personal behavior

and perceptions surrounding the magazines that have meaning for them. Judy then explains, "I wanted people to bring in their favorite magazines because as you talk in generalities, it's very different than when you get into specifics. Ask me how I feel about shopping is one thing, but ask me about my favorite store, and I might get really excited."

Each of these aspects encourages respondents to get the feelings going and share things they truly care about, helping Judy go beyond surface answers to ensure that study objectives are met. It is all a part of creating a community, a bond of sorts that relaxes people and makes them feel comfortable to share their stories in a productive way.

Pat Sabena

Pat's moderating style combines intimacy with an emphasis on listening skills. As part of the introductions,

she begins asking respondents to describe their ideal dream job. Pat feels that market research has always been about storytelling, and getting respondents to a place where they can articulate their story is most important, kind of priming them for the discussion to come.

Similar to Judy's thoughts on turning to the main topic pretty quickly, Pat offers, "We used to say that qualitative research is an upside-down pyramid, starting with the most general and going to the most specific. I have turned to early projective techniques right in the beginning, something that used to be considered heretical, just to get to the issues a little faster, trusting that the comfort and the affection have already been established in the warm-up."

Pat continued to use projectives, such as mind-mapping, to draw out how respondents feel about print magazines. She uses a pre-printed form with "How I feel about print magazines" in a circle in the center of the page, and she says that she uses the technique about 50% of the time because so much can be captured in a relatively short amount of time in order to get the data to be discussed out on the table fast.

Displaying sharp listening skills enhances the intimacy Pat creates with respondents. For instance, in the session, she acknowledged one participant's repeated sentiment and used this not only as an opportunity to demonstrate she was listening, but also as a means of getting this individual and the other respondents to think and respond even more deeply. As Pat puts it, "I think listening is important. And I think that you confirm to respondents that they are important by telling them that you are listening. That means if you remember that Julie said something, and you can refer back to it later on, you acknowledge the importance of what she said."

Sharp listening skills also help Pat maintain a seamless flow of the discussion, by following up

responses with a quick “Meaning...?” or “Because...?” Other times, Pat encourages respondents to take their thoughts a step further by prodding them to “take that deeper.”

The Big Take-Aways

So, do print magazines continue to have a place in a world gone digital? The answer is a resounding yes. Although online magazines and the advent of the “Kindle,” “Sony Reader” and “Nook” offer alternative reading experiences, respondents are very satisfied with the “analog” vs. “digital” experience.

Many shared that reading a print magazine is relaxing and offers a portable escape from the rest of the world. One respondent indicated how much she liked the feel of the magazine in her hands and the turning of the pages, as well as the smell of the paper and ink. Others associated looking at a print magazine with the end of the day, sitting on their deck at home with a glass of wine in hand, and with a subscription, the magazine and all of its content come to you without having to do anything. Print was also practical in that pages could be marked or torn out to facilitate cooking from a recipe, completing a project described within or even as a reference when shopping for a particular item discussed or displayed.

This was contrasted against digital media, which seemed more like work to respondents. This was especially true of magazines read online, given that so many people spend much of their waking hours at a computer and monitor. Scrolling down and across the screen was seen as an annoyance vs. turning pages, and respondents were concerned about missing the full story if they clicked on another link or tab that took them out of an article into a sub topic from which they would be unable to navigate back. For many, digital versions of magazines were more useful when “on a mission,” such as researching a particular topic.

Thus, print seems here to stay, given it serves a different usage experience, one of relaxation and pleasure, as opposed to digital, which

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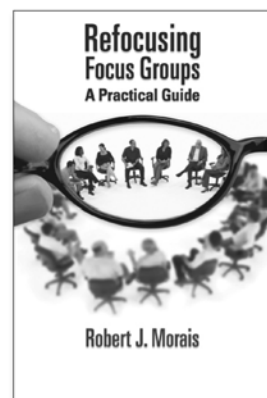
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Looking Back

Overall, what a wonderful experience it was to see how Bob, Judy and Pat, icons of our world, actually do what they do. It seemed that all QRCs observing, as well as our guest moderators, learned something that they could use to further enhance their moderating approach or style. In fact, each moderator recognizes that he or she continues to learn from clients and each other. But, perhaps the most important lesson learned was that in creating a comfortable environment for respondents, all three demonstrated the value of leveraging one's own moderating style by allowing their personality, passion and creativity to come through.

At the conclusion of the final debrief, moderators stressed the importance of developing one's own style of moderating that coincides with one's own identity and being. "I think your style, you're always you...", Judy offers. "I think you can get a lot of pointers, but your personality, your approach — you know I'm not going to be Bob or Pat. I'll be me, and I think that's what I'm going to do."

Pat states, "I feel very strongly that the way to have people tell you everything about them is to give a sincere portion of yourself." In other words, moderators need not attempt to imitate anyone else's style. Only by staying true to oneself can a moderator deliver the most meaningful results in qualitative research and in many other aspects of life. Pat concludes, "You are who you are. I don't believe that there's one best way to moderate. I don't believe that there's one best style, and I don't believe that there's one best approach. I believe that the best way to do it is the way that works best for you." 📧



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