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THE SECRET'S IN THE LISTENING! 5 WAYS TO GET MUCH MORE OUT OF YOUR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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Increasing budgets for qualitative consumer research won't necessarily make one smarter about the consumer! To get extraordinary value from research dollars, develop a team of exceptionally good listeners in the back-room. This article offers proven tools and techniques.

Clients and suppliers assume that if objectives are clear, the right population has been recruited and the moderator's guide is on target, the research effort will yield useful results. The focus is on front room activities--not much attention is paid to the back-room team, which I find to be the audience of utmost importance to producing successful outcomes.

Listening is hard work especially when listening behind the scenes to group after group. It's tempting to go numb with munchies, criticize participant's every faux pas and dismiss whatever they say that doesn't agree with our agenda. Most of us tend to listen in two major

modes--for *reaction*. or for *enlistment*.. We pay attention to "the mistakes", to what we disagree with. Or we listen for agreement, noticing comments that support our ideas and beliefs. While this type of listening serves a purpose, it's not the best listening for research. Far more valuable is to adopt an open-minded, (non-biased) approach. To listen with "*a beginner's mind*" provides us an opportunity to hear something really new, to listen for knowledge and even discovery.

How do we get through the veils of our own perceptions that can cloud our listening?

5 Exercises to become great listeners:

1. Acknowledge that biased listening is likely. Begin by "downloading" expectations.

Before that first focus group, make a list of what each back-room member expects to hear--favorable and unfavorable--from the assembled consumers. Have them write their expectations on flipcharts and post

them. This helps to get prejudices out on the table, enabling us to be more receptive to what actually transpires.

2. Maximize the inputs from your internal voice and the external ones.

Mindmapping is one good way to actively listen to oneself as well as the outside world using a free-form, graphic note-taking process. Let's say we're doing exploratory focus groups with moms for directions on new products. We begin with a clean sheet of paper and a colored pen and write a word or phrase that captures a key idea or theme. For example: *Mom's time with daughter*. Draw a circle (or square) around the phrase. Now as we listen, we hear *Mom's frustrations, kid's busy schedules, bed-time stories*, whatever. Note these words or phrases in boxes or circles and draw connecting arrows or lines as we see the relationships. As we're listening we're forming our own associations, generating assumptions, considering possible ideas, and implications. These are captured on the paper as well.

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Another, more linear way to pay attention to the consumer and oneself is to keep a note-pad with columns headed as follows:

*Observations / Quotes /
Insights Possibilities /
Challenge / Ideas*

Keep a running commentary throughout the focus group in each of these columns, and there will be a wealth of useful material for debriefs and action.

3. Keep an eye and ear out for disconnects.

When we look and listen closely we may notice that consumers' words seem out of synch with what they present. Studies demonstrate that just a small portion of our understanding comes through the words; the larger message is transmitted through tone of voice, pitch, rhythm, gestures, facial expressions and body language.

A consumer may literally say "I like the idea" but everything else about *how* they say it makes us suspect they're not supporting it. Maybe they're saying what they think we want to hear because they know we're

invested in a project, rather than telling us what they're really thinking. That's why a live observer gleans much more than a tape listener. When we observe a lack of congruency it's good to ask ourselves why this might be happening from the subjects view.

4 Empathetic Listening

Before observing a focus group, have each member of the back-room pick a number of a seat corresponding to a group participant. The back-room listener should spend the first portion of the group focused on their one individual so that they can feel as if they're inside their shoes, inside their head. Engage in an active note-taking process. After a while broaden the listening and observing to encompass all panelists.

5. Capture the teams' observations, insights, connections, surprises, confirmations, implications while they are top of mind.

Immediately after each group, take time to share this information with the whole listening team. This way we don't lose important observations and it frees our minds to listen better to

subsequent groups.

In two recent studies with medical professionals we engaged participants in discussion about surgical practices and products, then showed the client's lead product concepts and prototypes for reactions. Based on initial exercises we thought the product ideas would fare well. We were quite surprised by their laundry lists of "yes, buts"...their questions, concerns and negative comments. At first I worried about the back-room listeners who had invested considerable time, energy and resources in the projects. But they listened well,-openly and imaginatively using several of the techniques noted above. In one project the client identified an innovative alternative use for a product which may result in a bigger business opportunity than the original idea. In the other project, the client was courageous enough to recognize there was no sufficient need for their product in the marketplace.

Good listening in the back-room is active, involved, open-minded, flexible, creative, courageous. When practiced it leads to more intimate understanding of the consumer and better quality products and services.

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