Module 2 – Traditional Recruitment Methods for Qualitative Research

This module explains the established methods of qualitative recruitment which have been widely used in the UK for many years. The module covers the different types of research you may be asked to recruit for in your market and social research career. It also covers the types of participants that are frequently recruited and highlights points that you must take into consideration when recruiting them.

Where applicable there are references to the MRS Code of Conduct to show important points and ethical considerations that you should be fully aware of and which are seen as best practice within the research sector. The UK Data Protection Act 1998 will also be quoted where you have to be aware of legal requirements governing the processing of personal data on identifiable living people. There is a further module which takes you through the Data Protection Act in more detail.

You need to register with the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) before you start to collect participant information (personal data). Registration can be completed online via: https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/register . It is very straightforward and costs small organisations £35 per year (correct at June 2016).

Direct quotations from the MRS Code of Conduct or the Data Protection Act are in italics.

Research Formats

Research can be conducted in various ways. The popular idea of market and social research is the traditional focus group but this is only one of many research formats. Participants need to be informed of and prepared for the format of the research for which they are being recruited.

Below are the types of formats you may be asked to recruit for.

Accompanied Visits/Shops

These interviews are usually one to one but sometimes you might be asked to recruit two or three participants , who may be friendship pairs, triads or individual participants unknown to each other. These sessions are qualitative interviews where participants are partly or wholly engaged in an activity of interest to a client. They often involve a degree of passive observation by the moderator as well as more direct interviewing during the session. The activity in question is often shopping, and such a trip may include a range of related activities within one interview. Moderators may visit participants at home, or meet them at a store, then go shopping with participants and lastly return to the participant's home for further discussion and observation. Participants may be required to do an actual shop, asked to do a particular task, or they could just be walking around a store being observed. The approach may also be applied to other retail or leisure activities, involving accompanied visits to places such as pubs, clubs or sports centres. This type of interview can also be conducted online with the moderator observing how a participant shops online or browses the web.

Central Location Test

These are often referred to as “hall” tests. They will often involve participants testing products. Participants are sometimes pre-recruited or they could be recruited outside or close to venues and asked to take part immediately.

Clinic

These are similar in concept to a Central Location Test. The research activities at a Clinic are normally much more in depth and often require doing several tasks over an extended period of time e.g. an individual depth interview, a focus group and an observation. An example would be a car clinic where vehicles and equipment could be displayed, or participants could take their own cars along.

Depth or Individual Depth Interview (IDI)

This is a one to one interview with a single participant. These interviews can vary greatly in length from a few minutes to several hours. The location could be the participant’s own home, another location such as their workplace, by telephone, in a viewing facility or via the internet using an application such as Skype.

Paired Depths/ Trio or Triad Interviews

These are similar to an individual depth interview but two or three participants can be involved. Clients may require a pair to be couples, friends or participants unknown to each other. Friendship pairs are often interviewed in a paired depth where the subject is sensitive or where the participants are likely to be more open and articulate in the presence of a friend (often recommended for interviewing children and teens).

Ethnographic Studies or Observational Studies

This term has been adopted within qualitative market and social research to describe occasions where researchers spend time – hours, days or even weeks – observing and/or interacting with participants in areas of their everyday lives. This could range from having a camera in one room of their homes for several days or it could involve a researcher observing participants doing certain tasks e.g. cooking a meal. When recruiting participants for these studies take the time to explain exactly what is involved so that the participants are completely onboard from the outset.

Focus Group/Group Discussion

In market and social research group discussions, usually called “focus groups”, participants are brought together for the specific purpose of discussing an issue, or responding to ideas or materials of interest to clients. The participants should be unknown to each other unless you are told otherwise. A focus group can take place in a hostess home, a meeting room, a hotel or a viewing facility. A group may be any number of participants from 4-10. 4-6 participants are typically known as a mini group. 6-10 are known as a full group. Often a client will ask for extra participants (often called over recruitment)to be recruited in case of dropouts on the day.

Online

Online research can be conducted in various ways:

- Online real-time discussion groups using web-based chat-room technology, sometimes known as E-groups.
- Online communities or panels which are groups of participants are recruited to take part in a number of market and social research sessions or projects over an agreed period of time. These may be about one subject, or about a different subject each time, or they could take part remotely in a series of tasks via apps on their smartphones.

User Test/Usability Test

These are usually one to one sessions where participants are observed using prototypes such as a new website or a new digital game.

Types of participants

Mainstream

These are the participants who are "average consumers", they could be homemakers, supermarket shoppers, someone with a bank account, cinema goers etc. This target audience are what you would expect to find relatively easily within the general population.

Children

For the purposes of research children are defined as aged under 16 and young people are 16-17 years of age.

If children are needed to take part in research, permission to interview them must be obtained from responsible adults. This is usually a parent or guardian, or other person whom parents or guardians have conferred the responsibility. Such permission must be given before any child is interviewed. Consent is not required for young people, although this might be appropriate for certain topics and/or social groups. A child under the age of 16 must be accompanied by an adult to the research. Adults must be over the age of 18 and are referred to as chaperones.

If recruiting in schools, where the consent of teaching staff as the responsible adult is obtained, parental or guardian permission should also be sought.

Once permission to interview children has been obtained, children must still be given the opportunity to agree or decline to take part in research.

Consent from responsible adults must be verifiable; emails are not adequate proof of consent and should be backed up by a signed responsible adult consent form.

For younger children it may be appropriate to screen the responsible adult and not the child. For older children you may need to screen both the adult and the child, or just the child. If you only need to screen the child you must speak to the responsible adult first to get permission and fully explain what you are going to ask the child.

Responsible adults must be made aware of any incentives, and any recording, monitoring or observation of children.

At the recruitment stage special care is needed when screening children and young people about:

• issues which could upset or worry the child, e.g. his or her relationships with other children, his or her experiences at school (if unfavourable)

• issues which risk creating tension between the child and their parents and /or carers

• issues relating to potentially sensitive family situations (e.g. parental relationships, income, use of alcohol or drugs within the household, family illness)

• issues relating to racial, religious and similar socially or politically sensitive matters

• issues concerned with sexual activities

• issues relating to their own experiences or worries about alcohol or drugs

• issues relating to illegal or otherwise socially unacceptable activities

Again careful screening must be used when the research is testing products in case of allergies / religious or cultural barriers or products which are illegal for children or young people to try due to their age.

If research takes place in the homes of children or young people, a responsible adult should stay on the premises at all times but not necessarily in the same room where the research is taking place. A consent form signed by the responsible adult is still required.

Equally if research takes place in a central location, clients' offices or viewing studios children must have a chaperone to bring them to the venue and stay with them, usually in reception or a waiting area.

Interviewers who are left alone with children should have been checked by the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) to ensure that they have no convictions which would bar them from working with children.

For further information, refer to the MRS Guidelines for Research with Children and Young People – Updated September 2014 **https://www.mrs.org.uk/standards/guidance**

Business (B2B)

This is where business or service providers want to speak to users or potential users of their products and/or services. For instance you may be asked to recruit Facilities Managers, Human Resource Managers, Heads of IT departments or Heads of Finance of different size companies.

Healthcare Users

Usually recruited by organisations which specialise in this area. Participants are recruited with a range of conditions of varying degrees of severity. These types of research sessions are not medical trials but involve participants giving feedback for example on treatments or medical devices. Some healthcare projects may be on topics which participants find difficult to talk about and recruiters should be sensitive to this.

Professionals

These participants are people who have a professional background and are required because of their knowledge of their specialist subject e.g. medicine, education or law. For instance you might be asked to recruit Heads of Departments in schools to discuss proposed changes to examinations.

Special considerations when recruiting

These may apply to anyone that you could recruit across all types of participant groups.

Vulnerable Participants

Participant vulnerability is a complex, dynamic state that can affect anyone at any time for many different reasons. All participants are different, with a wide range of needs, abilities and personal circumstances. These differences can place some in a position of vulnerability or greater risk of harm. Some people's ability to participate effectively in the research may be affected by certain individual characteristics. These can be short-term or long-term, might fluctuate over time, and may not be obvious. Participants may be vulnerable because their competence to give informed consent is uncertain, because socially they are in a position where it is difficult for them to give informed consent or their circumstances may affect their decision to consent. Additionally being involved in the research project can also increase participants' potential vulnerability.

Permanent vulnerabilities

Permanent or long-term characteristics could include, for example: people who have learning disabilities or other permanent or long-term disabilities, those on a low income, people with low literacy levels, or communities which have cultural barriers to participation. These characteristics can affect large numbers of people.

Fluctuating vulnerabilities

People can be made vulnerable by transitory situations which are not necessarily obvious at first glance. Fluctuating characteristics might include mental health issues, where English is not a first language, health problems, location, lack of internet access, etc.

Short-term vulnerabilities

Short-term characteristics causing vulnerability could be things related to sudden changes in circumstances like loss of employment or income, bereavement, relationship breakdown, or caring responsibilities

Interviewing vulnerable participants

One-to-one interviews

Many participants are understandably wary about inviting recruiters and researchers into their home, particularly the elderly and/or less mobile. If a pre-arranged appointment is made for a researcher or recruiter to visit someone's home the participant should be told in advance the name of the person coming and the name of the company. The researcher or recruiter should always have identification.

Recruiters need to be aware of potentially dangerous situations, especially when working alone. Advice on lone working can be found via http://www.hse.gov.uk/toolbox/workers/lone.htm or https://www.suzylamplugh.org/

Group interviews

Care must be taken that all participants are able to contribute to qualitative research discussions and are not bullied, intimidated or belittled. Participants must be told what will be expected of them when they agree to participate. This includes any physical exercise or anything unusual that may be required.

Vulnerable participants may need to have a chaperone and they may need either shorter or longer time for the research depending on their requirements. The moderator needs to be aware and be prepared to bring adapted materials and they may need to be more flexible in their approach to the participant.

It is important to check that the venue has suitable access arrangements. In some cases it might be appropriate that the client provides transport both to and from the venue.

Sex and Gender

You must act legally and ethically when collecting data and asking research participants' questions on biological sex, gender and gender identity. All research participants need to feel equally valued and satisfied that their personal preferences are being respected in terms of how they wish to describe and categorise themselves.

Under the MRS Code of Conduct 2014 it is important to allow participants to express their views in the way that they prefer. Breaching this requirement could leave your activities open to investigation under the MRS disciplinary process. There are two rules in the Code of Conduct which apply to this

Rule 6 of the MRS Code of Conduct:

Members must take all reasonable precautions to ensure that participants are not harmed or adversely affected by the member's professional activities.

Rule 33 (c) of the MRS Code of Conduct:

Members must take reasonable steps to ensure that participants are able to provide information in a way that reflects the view they want to express, including don't know/prefer not to say where appropriate.

Asking gender or sex questions when carrying out face-to-face or telephone interviewing requires greater skill and tact. When asking participants to fill in information on sex or gender via a website or form you may need to add extra options such as "other" or "prefer not to say". Standard current practice in the sector is for recruiters to complete the gender question based on tone of voice and name. Although this may be appropriate in the majority of situations, in some instances it may be incorrect.

The MRS have guidance on collecting data on sex and gender: https://www.mrs.org.uk/pdf/Guidance%20on%20Collecting%20Data%20on%20Sex%20and%20Gender.pdf

Sensitive subjects

Sensitive subjects need to be treated with tact and strict confidentiality by every person involved in the research project. For example if a person is being recruited for tax evasion they will not want to give their real name or sign for their incentive. If a subject is of a personal nature participants may only want to be interviewed in a one to one situation.

You must ensure that assurances of confidentiality and anonymity are upheld, especially concerning the collection of sensitive data. Participants must be given the opportunity to withdraw from the project at any point.

Within the provisions of the Data Protection Act, “sensitive personal data” means personal data consisting of information as to:

- Racial or ethnic origin
- Political opinions,
- Religious beliefs or other beliefs of a similar nature,
- Membership of a trade union (within the meaning of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992),
- Physical or mental health or condition,
- Sexual life,
- The commission or alleged commission of any offence,
- Any proceedings for any offence committed or alleged to have been committed, the disposal of such proceedings or the sentence of any court in such proceedings.

Other data or information however can be considered sensitive even if it is not defined as such within the Data Protection Act, most notably financial data, and so you need to always be considerate as to what you are collecting and why and ensuring that you take appropriate steps to reassure participants as and when required.

Finding participants

Recruiter databases

The term database refers to any collection of related data such as a spreadsheet or a card index file as well as digital databases.

As a professional recruiter you are doubtless constantly adding new people to your database even if you don't have a specific project in mind. You may build your databases through your own website where members of the public apply to join a panel, or through referrals from existing panel members or just general contacts made during your day to day lives. A good database is one which is replenished and added to, to keep it fresh and up-to-date. It is good practice to take basic demographic information, general product and services usage to refer to in the future. When a participant has taken part in a research project detailed information needs to be kept on what type of research it was, and subject matter, while also ensuring you monitor for repeat attendance.

All of you who collect, use and process participant data, whether it be on cards, in a note book, a list, excel spreadsheet or a digital database need to be aware of your responsibilities under the Data Protection Act 1998. Data protection is covered in detail in Module 4.

Face to face recruitment

This is often referred to as "on street" recruitment. You may be asked to recruit participants at a specific location such as a supermarket or a music festival. You would need permission to recruit in these areas and gaining this permission is the responsibility of the client commissioning the research. The client is reponsible for providing you with the relevant documentation to recruit at the location and also to provide you with an identity badge or card. Recruiting face to face is very difficult without permission as you could be arrested for trespassing or loitering particularly at sensitive locations such as outside a school or a children's playground.

Snowballing

This method is used when the universe being recruited is very small or sensitive in nature. When one person is found who fits the recruitment criteria they are asked if they know anyone else who would also fit and then they are asked if they know anyone and so on until enough people are recruited. It is vital for you to get client permission to snowball as the likelihood that these participants know each other either through work, friends or family is high and so the dynamics of the group will be different. Users of such participants, such as moderators, must be aware when participants are recruited in this way.

Client databases/lists

Recruiting from client lists can be very time-consuming so always make sure that you have enough time and resource for recruitment. Check at the beginning of recruitment whether it would be possible to free-find if there is no success or limited success with list recruitment.

It is recommended that you check if client supplied lists include ex-directory telephone numbers and numbers that have been excluded by the Telephone Preference Service (TPS). TPS is the central opt out register where people can record that they don't want to receive unsolicited sales or marketing calls. TPS registration only prevents marketing calls; organisations are allowed to call numbers registered on the TPS for the purposes of genuine market, social or opinion research.

You will usually be asked to sign a data handling contract to confirm the security controls around your data storage and deletion procedures.

Clients should only provide personal customer information that is relevant to a research study.

Check lists you receive to make sure contact names and numbers are included and that contacts live near enough to venues being used for the qualitative research to enable participants to be able to attend. Make sure that you have sufficient contacts to contact to recruit the number needed. A rule of thumb is that you need at least twenty names with the correct data to recruit one participant.

Customers on client databases may be suspicious of market and social research calls often equating them with "sugging" – a research industry term, meaning 'selling under the guise of research'. There are several things you can do to make recruitment easier for yourself – and you will need good communication with the client. Steps you can take include, asking clients to send a warm-up letter (sometimes called a pre-engagement letter) on their own letterhead to all customers likely to be contacted before recruitment starts. This is particularly important when customer information could be regarded as sensitive or private. If email addresses are included ask if you can use email contact (never just email a list without getting client permission first). Clients usually will want to authorise any emails that you are going to send out or they may have their own email. Always try to obtain a client freephone number so that customers can verify with clients that the research is genuine. The MRS also have a freephone number for participants to check the validity of research companies.

Client lists should comprise contacts who qualify for the main quotas, e.g. if you were recruiting customers of a catalogue company who have made more than two orders the client should only supply this data along with any other qualifying data. However problems can occur because data on a list can be out of date or wrong data could have been supplied. This will soon become apparent when you start recruiting. Alert the client to this as soon as possible.

If participants ask they must be told the primary source of any list. This means telling them the name of a client/company if they supplied the list. This can be revealed at the end of the interview/group discussion rather than the beginning as long as the participants are informed that this is when the information will be revealed and are willing to consent on this basis. If clients wish to remain anonymous during recruitment participants should be told this and offered the opportunity to proceed on that basis.

There must be clear instructions from your client what to do with client supplied customer data when projects are finished.

Clients are not allowed to use social and market research as an opportunity to update their records. The client can be told if an individual on their list has died or if an address is incorrect. However corrected data such as new addresses cannot be passed back to clients. Other incorrect information you find such as a change in brand usage cannot be passed back to the client.

Further information on the data protection requirements when working on client supplied databases/lists can be found in the Data Protection Module.

Lists purchased from a database company

Recruiting from purchased lists is very similar to a client supplied list. It can be problematic as people often forget they have agreed to be added to a database. You must be informed about the source of any lists you use so you can be especially tactful and sensitive to the contacts on the lists. The rules and responsibilities are the same as when recruiting from a client supplied database as detailed above.

The MRS have guidelines for using purchased lists. Please refer to the MRS Checklist for Buying and Using Data Lists, August 2015.

https://www.mrs.org.uk/pdf/MRS%20Checklist%20for%20Buying%20and%20Using%20Data%20Lists%20August%202015.pdf

The recruitment process

In traditional qualitative recruitment you are required to speak to potential participants to ensure that they are recruited according to the specifications of your client. The following illustrates good recruitment practice and also where you need to be aware of data protection issues.

Before you start recruitment always check a client's policy on when a participant has done research previously and how many research sessions they can have taken part in. Some clients want participants new to research, others may accept participants who have done research before.

There are regulations governing incentives and prize draws. For example

- Participants must not be offered incentives that require them to spend any money.
- Client goods or services, or vouchers to purchase client goods or services are not to be used as incentives in a research project.

For further information, refer to the MRS Regulations for Administering Incentives and Prize Draws-Published July 2015 https://www.mrs.org.uk/standards/code_of_conduct/

The recruitment call

Under the MRS Code of Conduct 2014 it is important not to contact participants during what are commonly considered to be anti-social hours.

Rule 38 of the MRS Code of Conduct:

Members must take reasonable steps to ensure that the following activities do not take place before 9am Monday to Saturday, 10am Sunday or after 9pm any day, unless by prior agreement:

a. In person visits to private homes
b. Calls to household landline telephone numbers
c. Calls to mobile telephone numbers
d. Messages via SMS or other direct message facilities to mobile telephones

Comment: The only exception to this is where local rules and customs differ from UK practice.

Confirm the identity of participants – it is essential to identify participants as you must make sure that you are speaking to the correct participants to ensure that identifiable personal data is only discussed with the named participant.

Identify yourself and your company (if applicable).

Explain the purpose of the call and the subject of the research so participants understand why they have been contacted.

If a call is being recorded participants must be told at the outset before any personal identifiable data is collected, recorded or disclosed.

Read out all the questions in their entirety to ensure that participants are fully screened and understand what they are agreeing to.

You may need to ask additional questions or clarify answers if participants do not first understand fully why you are contacting them, but don't prompt the answers or assume what the participant is saying.

If there is a pre-task make sure you have understood the nature of the pre-task first so that you can explain the task to participants including how long it is likely to take. There may be conditions attached to completion of pre-tasks that need to be explained e.g. unless the pre-task is completed participants may not be able to attend a group. If pre-tasks are being sent out directly by clients find out where it is coming from, by whom and when so participants are more likely to recognise the task once it arrives. Ask participants to read pre-task materials as soon as they receive them. Participants often cancel when they look at a pre-task just before research sessions and realise that they don't have time to complete it!

If clients intend to re-contact participants post research you need to get participant's consent for this to occur, usually during the initial recruitment contact. Participants have the right to refuse to be re-contacted.

Concluding recruitment

Confirm the date, time, venue and the amount of incentive and how and when it will be paid.

Check the postal address and/or email address depending on whether the confirmation is being sent by post or email.

Participants must be informed about relevant privacy policies for keeping their data, who will have access to it, what it will be used for, and for how long it will be stored, etc.

Participants must be told if research sessions are to be recorded (audio, visual, digital) and they must agree to this.

If there are to be observers at the research session, either behind a one way mirror or present in the research session, participants must be informed as it could influence their decision to participate. This is particularly the case where there are small sample universes e.g. B2B research or where the subject is sensitive e.g. employee research or healthcare research.

Participants must be told if there are additional activities which might affect their willingness to participation e.g. signing a Non Disclosure Agreement (NDA) during research on product testing when confidential client material is discussed or shown during the research. Participants may need to sign to say that they will not disclose what they have heard or seen during a research session.

Advise participants that they must bring photo ID to research sessions.

Confirmation

A confirmation letter or email, which details the market research session, may be sent by clients or by you depending upon what has been agreed.

In the confirmation you need to include time, length of session, venue, pre-task, whether it is to be recorded, details of any observers, incentives, your contact details and who to contact if you will be unavailable.

Profiles

Clients usually require profiles of participants containing relevant personal details and the answers to key questions based around any quotas. Profiles need to be transferred securely to clients, and it must be made clear that the information is only for the purposes of the research session and must not be used for other purposes.

Pre-checking

It is common practice for clients to check recruited participants by re-asking some key questions to ensure that they have been recruited to the correct quotas. It is permissible to re-contact participants for quality control purposes.

Ensuring Attendance

Send confirmation of sessions to participants soon after recruitment, and it is recommended that you telephone or email participants the day before research sessions to confirm that they have all the details of the session. Clients will expect you to replace any drop outs. Don’t forget to advise the client of any changes when they arise!

Summary

We hope that this module was useful to you. New methods of recruitment are always evolving and module 3 gives advice on how to use less traditional methods and how to avoid some common pitfalls.

There will soon be a short test on the module with more details coming soon.