Can qual research benefit from data-analysis software?

Lisa Pakenham, QSR International, describes how a new program can close some gaps between researchers and their clients

MOST MARKET RESEARCHERS would agree that qualitative research is synonymous with tight time-frames.

Often the most critical aspect in the research process – analysis and interpretation – has the smallest allocation of time. Yet, this is where clients most often measure their return on investment and the quality of their research supplier.

The dilemma is: how do we create more room for strategic thinking and deliver to the client on time?

The technology dilemma

There is a possible solution to this, but it is one that has traditionally been resisted by qualitative market researchers. That is, the use of data-analysis software.

Overall, qualitative market researchers have been gradually warming to the idea of using technology in their research.

Online group moderation and virtual viewing are good examples of this, but the use of software to facilitate the data-analysis process has yet to be fully embraced.

Jackie Duke, commercial qualitative researcher of 20 years and software consultant to QSR International, says, 'Most qualitative market researchers view their ability to add insight and value to the interpretation of data as their competitive edge.

'Computers by their very nature are perceived to work against this creativity. The rigidity imposed by the systematic constraints of computer software is believed to undermine and devalue this process.'

Computers can't think

Gill Ereaut, renowned author on qualitative research methods and director of Linguistic Landscapes in the UK, agrees: 'Computers are very useful for administrative functions and at arranging and sorting data. What computers can't do is think like a qualitative researcher.

'But the fact that computers don't think is not a limitation at all; in fact, it leaves the qualitative researcher doing what they most want to do – the thinking. So computers can play a positive part in the analysis process.'

While there are already a number of qualitative data-analysis programs on the market, Duke says they largely cater to academic researchers who extract patterns and meaning by using software to mine data or explore complex rich-text data in a code-retrieve manner: 'This method had proven impractical or unrelated to the research issues and time constraints that qualitative market researchers need to address.'

It was these constraints that Duke and other qualitative market researchers sought to overcome in the design of a customised qualitative data-analysis program called XSight in 2002.

'A software tool that addresses the unique nature and needs of qualitative market research is long overdue,' she says.

Systematic analysis

'From the outset, it was evident that software could add value to the research process by facilitating the systematic analysis of data in such a way that interpretive thinking could be simultaneously captured and indeed enhanced,' explains Duke.

'By expediting the manual processes, the researcher could dedicate more time to analysis and interpretation, squeezing out every last bit of value from the data. It is this area the clients generally view as the most valuable – where interpretive findings are transformed into actionable recommendations on business direction or strategy.'

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London market research agency Turnstone Research has used this qualitative data-analysis software recently. Turnstone founder Philly Desai says, 'It has saved us around three or four days at the content analysis stage, giving us more time to dedicate to interpreting the data for our clients.'

Although clients rarely want to inspect original transcripts, researchers still have the arduous task of strategically linking the raw outputs of data to their creative inspiration.

Desai explains, 'The software allows you to return to the data and test ideas much more easily, check things and pull out illustrative quotations. It has helped us to be more accurate and confident in what we are saying.'

Duke says, 'Software facilitates improved rigour in analysis which, in turn, results in improved accountability and traceability of findings. Visibility of the analysis, at appropriate times, can enhance trust and hence the relationship with clients.'

She also believes the introduction of suitable software will provide the framework that will further raise the quality and standard of qualitative research.

'The increased rigour of data analysis and interpretation will boost local and global knowledge-sharing and culminate in better corporate governance,' she says.

A training tool?

Gail MacKenzie of Research International, who is not currently using analysis software, has expressed the idea that 'Appropriate software could be particularly useful to entry-level researchers who are required to learn the benefits of rigorous analysis as part of their training in qualitative research.'

Software can also work as a knowledge-management facility, to formally

Lisa Pakenham is marketing communications manager for QSR International, a leading supplier in qualitative software solutions. With a passion for international marketing, Lisa has worked exclusively in the IT industry in Japan, New Zealand and Australia.

capture and organise collective intelligence. Duke says research indicates that global companies require ease of knowledge-sharing when undertaking broad studies.

'Very often the commissioning client has the onerous task of combining findings from different markets with different suppliers who might even use different methodologies,' she says.

She explains, 'What is needed in these situations are shared "white boards", templates that reflect the main themes and headings of the researchers' findings so they can then merge their projects and access all shared findings. Software offers the easiest facility to achieve this.'

So, is qualitative data-analysis software really the answer for time-poor researchers? Duke is very confident: 'There are benefits to be had in a number of areas – from time efficiencies and cost savings through to enhanced teamwork and quality of research outputs.

'The question is whether the research industry is ready to step into a new era where software and qualitative data analysis can be powerful partners in providing high-quality business solutions for clients.' ■

L.Pakenham@qsr.com.au

Case study: MORI

One national evaluation, nine moderators, 78 focus groups and 39 local reports later, Britain's largest independent research agency MORI is now an XSight convert. The company started using the data-analysis program in May 2004 on a large national evaluation of a government programme. MORI project manager Sara Butler says the software was a natural fit for the agency's 'Qualitative Hothouse', set up two years ago to create a centre of excellence and pursue innovative research practices. 'It is a significant step for MORI to be using XSight, and we are aware that we are amongst the first in the business to be doing so,' she says.

'It has given us an opportunity to run an amazingly big qualitative project with a more methodical approach to analysis. We hope it's an example of how researchers can embrace developments in analysis technology and use it in a way which can enhance and clarify their thinking.'

Virtual whiteboard

MORI used the program as a virtual whiteboard, where researchers working from multiple locations could share their findings with one another on a daily basis, allowing emerging trends to be teased out and frameworks refined as the project progressed.

'We could see right away that the program would enable us to set up the structure needed to deliver this complex research project,' says Butler.

Three researchers were trained and spent half a day setting up a template that could be customised for each of the nine moderators. A co-ordinator was appointed who was responsible for refining the template, following a short pilot.

The co-ordinator designed individual versions for each of the moderators, based on their feedback, and kept an eye on the project as a whole. Rather than having the focus group discussions transcribed, information was extracted directly from audio recordings and input straight into the framework designed by the core project team. 'The moderators were trained in the program at the same time as their focus group briefings. The sessions went smoothly and everyone found it easy to learn,' says Butler.

Following each focus group, the moderators had 48 hours to input the data and email it directly to the co-ordinator. This allowed for direct communication between the moderators and co-ordinator at each stage.

Feedback and control

The co-ordinator could immediately check the quality of the moderators' work and offer advice and guidance on any changes needed to the way information was being extracted.

Using a specially designed observation framework and their daily journals, the moderators also provided direct feedback to the co-ordinator on any changes to the frameworks they required.

Butler says that while the project is ongoing, the benefits of using the program are already becoming clear to MORI's project team.

'The software has offered us something quite unique,' she says. 'It has boosted our ability to manage unstructured data. Because the data are much easier to view, it has meant an increase in the quality of our analysis. 'The ability to input our analysis directly from the audio recordings is helping – we are kind of building the reports as we go. That and the fact that we have not been getting audio transcribed will lead to some time saving, I expect.'

MORI project director Jaime Rose puts the time saving at 'about an hour or so per group' when inputting the information.

'We expect to significantly reduce our reporting time when we reach that stage of the project,' he says.

Once the research and evaluation is completed, MORI will be able to use the software to produce 39 local reports and, later, merge them into one overall report. The team will be able use the software to quickly produce comparison tables of different participant responses to produce the overall report for its client.

'All this and it's allowing us to construct an archive to build on future work for our client. We're already wondering how we would have coped without it,' says Butler.

Once the project is finished, MORI plans to run information sessions about the software and its possible uses for other internal researchers.

MORI managing director Mike Everett says, 'We envisage a number of different applications across the company. XSight is likely to become a key analytical tool for other divisions within MORI too.'