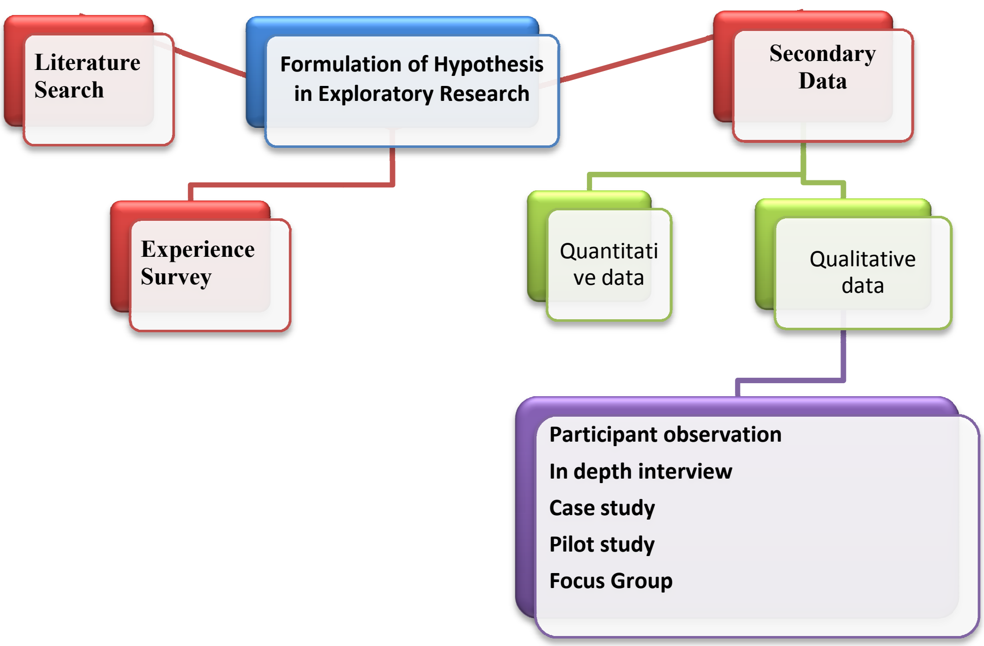
Module 2 Part 2A, B and C

Exploratory Research Design

Part 2 A	Part 2B	Part 2C
Introduction of Exploratory Research	Secondary Data	Focus Group Discussion



Before moving to the discussion on the different types of Research Design I wish to discuss some examples that leads you to take decision on which research design is suitable for your study. Ok

First Example: "Causes for decline in sales of a specific company's product under a specific salesman". This is the topic in this situation the *researcher will seek all possible reasons why sales in falling?* Sometimes *at the very beginning when the problem is not clear or is vague and thereby directing the research to proceed further with limited options may explore all* ***possibilities why sales in falling?***

(a) Faulty product planning

(b) Higher price

(c) Less discount

(d) Less availability

(e) Inefficient advertising/salesmanship

(f) Poor quality of salesmanship

(g) less awareness

Sales decline in a company may be due to:

1. Inefficient service

2. Improper price

3. Inefficient sales force

4. Ineffective promotion

5. Improper quality

The researcher must examine such questions to identify the most useful avenues for further research. Preliminary investigation of this type is called exploratory research. Expert surveys, focus groups, case studies and observation methods are used to conduct research this type of research study is known as exploratory Research.

The major emphasis in exploratory research is on converting broad, vague problem statements into small, precise sub-problem statements, which is done in order to formulate specific hypothesis. The hypothesis is a statement that specifies, "how two or more variables are related?" In the early stages of research, we usually lack from sufficient understanding of the problem to formulate a specific hypothesis. Further, there are often several tentative explanations.

Example: "Sales are down because our prices are too high",

"our dealers or sales representatives are not doing a good job",

"our advertisement is weak" and so on.

In this scenario, very little information is available to point out, what is the actual cause of the problem. We can say that the major purpose of exploratory research is to identify the problem more specifically. Therefore, exploratory study is used in the initial stages of research.

Under what circumstances is exploratory study ideal?

The following are the circumstances in which exploratory study would be ideally suited:

1. To gain an insight into the problem

2. To generate new product ideas

3. To list all possibilities. Among the several possibilities, we need to prioritize the possibilities which seem likely

4. To develop hypothesis occasionally

Did u know?

Exploratory study is also used to increase the analyst's familiarity with the problem. This is particularly true, when the analyst is new to the problem area.

Example: A market researcher working for (new entrant) a company for the first time.

5. To establish priorities so that further research can be conducted.

6. Exploratory studies may be used to clarify concepts and help in formulating precise problems.

Example: The management is considering a change in the contract policy, which it hopes, will result in improved satisfaction for channel members. In this situation an exploratory study can be used to clarify the present state of channel members' satisfaction and to develop a method by which satisfaction level of channel members is measured.

How to do?

7. To pre-test a draft questionnaire

8. In general, exploratory research is appropriate to any problem about which very little is

Known. This research is the foundation for any future study.

Feature of Exploratory Research

Following are the important characteristics of exploratory research:

1. Exploratory research is flexible and highly versatile.
2. Structured forms are not used for data collected.
3. Experimentation is not a requirement
4. The cost incurred to conduct the study is low.
5. This type of research allows very wide exploration of views
6. Research is interactive in nature and also it is open ended.
7. It is intended to provide a theoretical base to a hypothesis,

Objectives of Exploratory Research

Generally, exploratory studies are undertaken with the following objectives.

1. To discover insight into new areas and problems
2. To evaluate the feasibility of a research project To formulate a problem statement.
3. To formulate a problem statement
4. To provide a theoretical basis to a hypothesis.
5. To provide alternative options/approaches to a problem.
6. To establish priorities or possibilities for further research.

Exploratory research is of great use when a researcher has on a vague idea of the problems he would encounter during a study. It may also help in saving time and money because if a problem is not as significant as it was first considered to be, the project can be cancelled.

Importance of Exploratory research

Exploratory research is carried out when a topic needs to be understood in depth, especially if it hasn't been done before. The goal of such a research is to explore the problem and around it and not actually derive a conclusion from it. Such kind of research will enable a researcher to set a strong foundation for exploring his ideas, choosing the right research design and finding variables that actually are important for the analysis. Most importantly, such a research can help organisations or researchers save up a lot of time and resources, as it will enable the researcher to know if it worth pursuing.

Hypothesis Development at Exploratory Research Stage

1. Sometimes, it may not be possible to develop any hypothesis at all, if the situation is being investigated for the first time. This is because no previous data is available.

2. Sometimes, some information may be available and it may be possible to formulate a tentative hypothesis.

3. In other cases, most of the data is available and it may be possible to provide answers to the problem.

Research Purpose	Research Question	Hypothesis
1. What product feature, if stated, will be most effective in the advertisement?	What benefit do people derive from this Ad appeal?	No hypothesis formulation is possible.
2. What new packaging is to be developed by the company (with respect to a soft drink)?	What alternatives exist to provide a container for soft drink?	Paper cup is better than any other forms, such as a bottle.
3. How can our insurance service be improved?	What is the nature of customer satisfaction?	Impersonalization is the problem.

Example 1: The research question is posed to determine "What benefit do people seek from the Ad?" Since no previous research is done on consumer benefit for this product, it is not possible to form any hypothesis.

Example 2: Some information is currently available about packaging for a soft drink. Here it is possible to formulate a hypothesis which is purely tentative. The hypothesis

Example 3: The root cause of customer dissatisfaction is known, i.e. lack of personalized service. In this case, it is possible to verify whether this is a cause or not.

Formulation of Hypothesis in Exploratory Research

The quickest and the cheapest way to formulate a hypothesis in exploratory research is by using any of the **four methods**:

1. Literature Search: This refers to "referring to a literature to develop a new hypothesis". The literature referred are – trade journals, professional journals, market research finding publications, statistical publications etc. For example, suppose a problem is "Why are sales down?" This can quickly be analysed with the help of published data which should indicate, "whether the problem" is an "industry problem" or a "firm problem". Three possibilities exist to formulate the hypothesis.

(a) The company's market share has declined but industry's figures are normal.

(b) The industry is declining and hence the company's market share is also declining.

(c) The industry's share is going up but the company's share is declining.

If we accept the situation that our company's sales are down despite the market showing an upward trend, then we need to analyse the marketing mix variables.

Example:

- A TV manufacturing company feels that its market share is declining whereas the overall television industry is doing very well. The above information may be used to pinpoint the reason for declining sales.
- A company has low sales. It can be easily explored from available statistics and market literature if the problem is market related or organisation related or if the topic being studied is regarding financial situation of the country, then research data can be accessed through government documents or commercial sources.

Therefore the survey of concerning literature happens to be the most simple and fruitful method of formulating precisely the research problem or developing hypothesis. **Hypotheses stated by earlier workers may be reviewed and their usefulness be evaluated as a basis for further research. It may also be considered whether the already stated hypotheses suggest new hypothesis. In this way the researcher should review and build upon the work already done by others, but in cases where hypotheses have not yet been formulated, his task is to review the available material for deriving the relevant hypotheses from it.**

Besides, the bibliographical survey of studies, already made in one's area of interest may as well as made by the researcher for precisely formulating the problem. He should also make an attempt to apply concepts and theories developed in different research contexts to the area in which he is himself working. Sometimes the works of creative writers also provide a fertile ground for hypothesis formulation and as such may be looked into by the researcher.

2. Experience Survey: Experience survey means the survey of people who have had practical experience with the problem to be studied. The object of such a survey is to obtain insight into the relationships between variables and new ideas relating to the research problem. For such a survey people who are competent and can contribute new ideas may be carefully selected as respondents to ensure a representation of different types of experience. The respondents so selected may then be interviewed by the investigator.

The researcher must prepare an interview schedule for the systematic questioning of informants.

But the interview must ensure flexibility in the sense that the respondents should be allowed to raise issues and questions which the investigator has not previously considered.

Generally, the experience collecting interview is likely to be long and may last for few hours. Hence, it is often considered desirable to send a copy of the questions to be discussed to the respondents well in advance. This will also give an opportunity to the respondents for doing some advance thinking over the various issues involved so that, at the time of interview, they may be able to contribute effectively. Thus, an experience survey may enable the researcher to define the problem more concisely and help in the formulation of the research hypothesis. This survey may as well provide information about the practical possibilities for doing different types of research.

In experience surveys, it is desirable to talk to persons who are well informed in the area being investigated. These people may be company executives or persons outside the organisation. Here, no questionnaire is required. The approach adopted in an experience survey should be highly unstructured, so that the respondent can give divergent views.

Caution!

Since the idea of using experience survey is to undertake problem formulation, and not conclusion, probability sample need not be used. Those who cannot speak freely should be excluded from the sample.

(a) A group of housewives may be approached for their choice for a "ready to cook product".

(b) A publisher might want to find out the reason for poor circulation of newspaper introduced recently. He might meet (i) Newspaper sellers (ii) Public reading room (iii) General public (iv) Business community, etc.

These are **experienced persons** whose knowledge researcher can use.

3. Secondary Data

Secondary data is information gathered for purposes other than the completion of a research project. A variety of secondary information sources is available to the researcher gathering data on an industry, potential product applications and the market place. Secondary data is also used to gain initial insight into the research problem.

Secondary data analysis saves time that would otherwise be spent collecting data and, particularly in the case of quantitative data, provides larger and higher-quality databases than would be unfeasible for any individual researcher to collect on their own. In addition to that, analysts of social and economic change consider secondary data essential, since it is impossible to conduct a new survey that can adequately capture past change and/or developments.

Secondary data can be obtained from two different research strands:

1. Quantitative: Census, housing, social security as well as electoral statistics and other related databases**.**

2. Qualitative: Semi-structured and structured interviews, focus groups transcripts, field notes, observation records and other personal, research-related documents.

Secondary data can also be helpful in the research design of subsequent primary research and can provide a baseline with which the collected primary data results can be compared to.

Therefore, it is always wise to begin any research activity with a review of the secondary data. Secondary data is classified in terms of its source - either internal or external. internal, or in house data, is secondary information acquired within the organization where research is being carried out. External secondary data is obtained from outside sources.

Internal Data Sources

Internal secondary data is usually an inexpensive information source for the company conducting research, and is the place to start for existing operations. Internally generated sales and pricing data can be used as a research source. The use of this data is to define the competitive position of the firm, an evaluation of a marketing strategy the firm has used in the past, or gaining a better understanding of the company's best customers.

There are three main sources of internal data. These are:

1. Sales and marketing reports: These can include such things as:

(a) Type of product/service purchased

(b) Type of end-user/industry segment

(c) Method of payment

(d) Product or product line

(e) Sales territory

(f) Salesperson

(g) Date of purchase

(h) Amount of purchase

(i) Price

(j) Application by product

(k) Location of end-user

2. Accounting and financial records: These are often an overlooked source of internal secondary information and can be invaluable in the identification, clarification and prediction of certain problems. Accounting records can be used to evaluate the success of various marketing strategies such as revenues from a direct marketing campaign. There are several problems in using accounting and financial data. One is the timeliness factor – it is often several months before accounting statements are available. Another is the structure of the records themselves. Most firms do not adequately setup their accounts to provide the types of answers to research questions that they need. For example, the account systems should capture project/product costs in order to identify the company's most profitable (and least profitable) activities. Companies should also consider establishing performance indicators based on financial data. These can be industry standards or unique ones designed to measure key performance factors that will enable the firm to monitor its performance over a period of time and compare it to its competitors. Some example may be sales per employee, expenses per employee (salesperson, etc.).

3. Miscellaneous reports: These can include such things as inventory reports, service calls, number (qualifications and compensation) of staff, production and R&D reports. Also the company's business plan and customer calls (complaints) log can be useful sources of information.

External Data Sources

There is a wealth of statistical and research data available today. Some sources are:

1. Federal government

2. Provincial/state governments

3. Statistics agencies

4. Trade associations

5. General business publications

6. Magazine and newspaper articles

7. Annual reports

8. Academic publications

9. Library sources

10. Computerized bibliographies

11. Syndicated services.

The two major advantages of using secondary data in market research are time and cost savings.

1. The secondary research process can be completed rapidly - generally in 2 to 3 week. Substantial useful secondary data can be collected in a matter of days by a skillful analyst.

2. When secondary data is available, the researcher need only locate the source of the data and extract the required information.

3. Secondary research is generally less expensive than primary research. The bulk of secondary research data gathering does not require the use of expensive, specialized, highly trained personnel.

4. Secondary research expenses are incurred by the originator of the information.

There are also a number of disadvantages of using secondary data. These include:

1. Secondary information pertinent to the research topic is either not available, or is only available in insufficient quantities.

2. Some secondary data may be of questionable accuracy and reliability. Even government publications and trade magazines statistics can be misleading.

3. Data may be in a different format or units than is required by the researcher.

4. Much secondary data is several years old and may not reflect the current market conditions.

Trade journals and other publications often accept articles six months before appear in print. The research may have been done months or even years earlier.

Did u know?

Many trade magazines survey their members to derive estimates of market size, market growth rate and purchasing patterns, then average out these results. Often these statistics are merely average opinions based on less than 10% of their members.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research seeks out the 'why', not the 'how' of its topic through the analysis of unstructured information – things like interview transcripts, e-mails, notes, feedback forms, photos and videos. It doesn't just rely on statistics or numbers, which are the domain of quantitative researchers.

Qualitative research is used to gain insight into people's attitudes, behaviours, value systems, concerns, motivations, aspirations, culture or life-styles. It's used to inform business decisions, policy formation, communication and research. Focus groups, in-depth interviews, content analysis etc, are among the many formal approaches that are used, but qualitative research also involves the analysis of any unstructured material, including customer feedback forms, reports or media clips. Qualitative research is used to help us understand how people feel and why they feel as they do. It is concerned with collecting in-depth information asking questions such as why do you say that?. Samples tend to be smaller compared with quantitative projects that include much larger samples. Depth interviews or group discussions are two common methods used for collecting qualitative information.

Thus we can say that Qualitative research is a type of scientific research. In general terms, scientific research consists of an investigation that:

1. seeks answers to a question
2. systematically uses a predefined set of procedures to answer the question
3. collects evidence
4. produces findings that were not determined in advance
5. produces findings that are applicable beyond the immediate boundaries of the study
6. Qualitative research shares these characteristics. Additionally, it seeks to understand a given research problem or topic from the perspectives of the local population it involves. Qualitative research is especially effective in obtaining culturally specific information about the values, opinions, behaviors, and social contexts of particular populations.
7. The strength of qualitative research is its ability to provide complex textual descriptions of how people experience a given research issue. It provides information about the "human" side of an issue - that is, the often contradictory behaviors, beliefs, opinions, emotions, and relationships of individuals. Qualitative methods are also effective in identifying intangible factors, such as social norms, socioeconomic status, gender roles, ethnicity, and religion, whose role in the research issue may not be readily apparent. When used along with quantitative methods,
8. Qualitative research can help us to interpret and better understand the complex reality of a given situation and the implications of quantitative data. Although findings from qualitative data can often be extended to people with characteristics similar to those in the study population, gaining a rich and complex understanding of a specific social

context or phenomenon typically takes precedence over eliciting data that can be generalized to other geographical areas or populations.

In this sense, qualitative research differs slightly from scientific research in general. The three most common qualitative methods, are participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus groups. Each method is particularly suited for obtaining a specific type of data.

1. **Participant observation** is appropriate for collecting data on naturally occurring behaviors in their usual contexts.

2. **In-depth interviews** are optimal for collecting data on individuals' personal histories, perspectives, and experiences, particularly when sensitive topics are being explored.

3. Case Study method: -obtains information from one or a few situations that are similar to the problem situation. Primary advantage is that an entire organisation or entity can be investigated in depth and with meticulous attention to detail.

4. Pilot Studies are used in different types of designs. - Within the context of exploratory research it covers some part of the research on a small scale. Major categories of pilot study include focus group interviews, projective techniques, and depth interviews.

5. **Focus groups** are effective in eliciting data on the cultural norms of a group and in generating broad overviews of issues of concern to the cultural groups or subgroups represented.

3. Case study

In case study method, the researcher tries to find out how experiences at different stages of life have influenced the individual's life. Therefore data are collected in chronological order. Several types of data techniques can be used for collecting data. Depth interview is one such technique. The respondent is asked to review his life from the past to the present or from the present to the past. The collection of information starts from the childhood of the respondent.

Following factors come up for study (i) respondent's relationship with the members of his family (ii) the opinion, attitude, behavior and adjustment with the members of his society and their influence (ii) respondent's experience in schools, religious group, friend's circle and their influence. Using these important experiences and events of an individual's past life the researcher can reconstruct the developments of the present behavioral pattern. Besides the individual, his social friends, school teachers, family members etc can also be interviewed. Observation method can be used for the case study. Documents like letters and diaries are the other sources from which information can be collected.

It is impossible for a researcher to record the complete case study of a person. So he selects, from the mass of facts available, only these which are pertinent and essentially to be included. These collected information are then organized and summarized in order to explain the present state of affairs.

Sources of Case Study

The sources from which information are collected in a case study are

1) **Personal documents**: Many people keep diaries and write their autobiographies or memories. Many are used to write letters. These personal documents contain the

description of the remarkable events of the life of the narrator as well as his reactions towards them, Therefore from these personal documents, one can study the writer's personality social relations and philosophy of life. So they are helpful in studying the personality of the writer. A personal diary may contain even hidden secrets concerning the life of an individual.

2) **Life history:** Life history of a person is a source for case study .Through interviews with a respondent, his life history can be known. This is an objective study in which various event of respondent's life are studied with an attempt to find their significance for the society.

Apart from these two sources there are other sources also that help in case study method. They are books, magazines, literature, government documents, communication etc. These contain information about the case under study.

Characteristics (or features) of a case study method

The important characteristics of the case study method are:

i. A particular individual or a family or any other social unit is studied.
ii. The study of the units selected is made intensively and in minute details.
iii. The study under this method extends over a long period of time to ascertain he natural history of the unit. All complexities of facts connected with the social factors are brought under study. Therefore study gives us a clear insight into the social unit studied.
iv. The Study is made qualitatively. Therefore qualitative information is collected.
v. Case study makes an effort to know the mutual interrelationship of causal factors.
vi. The behaviour pattern of the social unit is studied directly.
vii. Case study results in fruitful hypothesis and necessary data for testing this hypothesis is also obtained.

Phases of Case Study (steps)

Following stages are followed in a case study

1) Statement of the problem: The researcher has to select the problem and to study the problem. He has to determine the number of cases to be selected and the scope of analysis.
2) Description of the course of events: The researcher has to describe the course of events.
3) Collection of Materials: Materials about each of the units or aspects are collected.
4) Study of factors: There are certain factors which are responsible for every event. They must be indentified and studied.
5) Analysis of factors: The role of the factors responsible for the events are analysed and conclusions are drawn about the effect of the factors.
6) Reporting the conclusions.

Assumptions in case study

A case study is made under the following assumptions (or beliefs) only.

1. The single unit selected for study is a representative of the total.
2. The total phenomenon is much complex. So few cases are considered adequate and useful for study. A comprehensive study of the selected unit is made.
3. A social phenomenon is influenced by the time factor. So natural history of the unit is studied for any case study.
4. All human beings are fundamentally active. They share a common nature.
5. Social conditions and circumstances tend to recur from time to time with marginal changes.

Scope of Case Study (Applications of Case study)

Case study method is used now a days in several disciplines. Its use is increasing day by day.

Case study method is widely used in sociology. It is considered to be a systematic technique in sociology. This method is used for comparative study of different clusters. Anthropologists use the case study method to study the problems relating to their areas of interest. Management experts also use this method for solution to their management problems. It can be seen that physicians, social workers, anthropologists, psychologists and many other persons make use of case study method for extending their knowledge. Case study method can be used not only for collection of data but also to supplement other research methods.

Advantages of Case Study method (Importance of Case Study method)

1. Case study adds to our knowledge. It produces ideas, suggestions and hypothesis about behavior.
2. Case study preserves integrity of the units under study. T offers insight to guide further research.
3. Case studies are flexible. They can be conducted in any kind of social setting.
4. Case study method is useful for formulating and testing hypothesis.
5. It is a good technique for exploring completely new fields when we have no idea about categories of variables which play an important part in a situation.
6. Case study method is of intensive nature. It studies a unite exhaustively .
7. It is an aid to study complex problems.
8. Case study is comprehensive.
9. A case study describes a real event or situation.
10. Case study method is a best method for the study of subjective aspects.

Disadvantages (or limitations) of case study method

1. In a case study, researcher becomes overconfident. He studies each unit in its complete dimensions. So he feels that he knows everything and needs no further enlightenment. But he does not know that many things that are hidden and they are not studied.
2. It is difficult for the researcher to decide as to when to stop collecting data for a case study since many things may appear to be pertinent.
3. In a case study, there is the assumption that all past experiences have contributed to the final result. Therefore we try to collect many data. Much of these collected information may later turn out to be impertinent.
4. There are high chances of making errors in the selection of case, observation, nothing and interview.
5. Since case study method depends on other experiences regarding past events, this method limits the effectiveness of the method.
6. Often case studies involve problem cases. As a result of this, many undesirable traits are over emphasised and many desirable common characteristics are under emphasised.

Case study method is time consuming and expensive.

- When a historical data are to be collected the respondents may not reveal the actual facts.
- Quantitative data is not obtainable in a case study.
- There is lack of objectivity in a case study.
- Case studies are generally unorganized and controlling of respondents is not feasible.

4. Pilot Studies

A pilot study is a small scale replica of the main study. It is a mini study before the main study. When a problem is selected for research, a plain of action is to be designed to proceed further. But if we do not have adequate knowledge about the subject matter, the nature of the population, the various issues involved, the tools and techniques to be used for operationalizing the research problem, we have to first familiarize ourselves with it and acquire a good deal of knowledge about the subject matter of the study and its dimensions. For the purpose, a small study provides a better knowledge of the problem and its dimensions. It facilitates the researcher to understand the nature of the population to be surveyed and the field problems to be encountered. IT also helps in developing better approaches and better instruments. It covers the entire process of research, but on a small scale. This is also useful for preparing the research design clear and specifically.

Thus, pilot study is a preliminary study of the universe with the object of getting an idea about it. It is undertaken without formulating any hypothesis. Through pilot study, the nature of the problem, different variables involved in the problem, possible difficulties in the procedure of interview, the kind of response that is likely to be available etc. are gathered.

For example, a researcher is developing a set of questions designed to measure the ethical decision-making processes used by managers. It is highly desirable to pilot such a research instrument before using it in an investigation. The researcher can administer it to a group who were not a part of the main study, It helps to carry out some preliminary analysis of the problem. It can also provide a springboard for further research or allow links to be forged with existing findings in an area.

Merits of Pilot Studies

Pilot studies have the following merits.

1. They help generate fixed-choice answers to open questions.
2. Piloting an interview schedule can provide interviewers with some experience of using it and can infuse them with a greater sense of confidence.
3. If a particular question is answered by the respondents in the same way, the resulting data are unlikely to be of interest because they do not form a variable. A pilot study allows such a question to be indentified.
4. It is possible to identify questions that make respondents feel uncomfortable.
5. There may be certain questions that remain unanswered. This may be due to confusing or threatening phrasing or poorly worded instructions. A pilot study may locate the exact problem that causes that causes the missing data.
6. Pilot studies allow the researcher to determine the adequacy of instructions to interviewers, or to respondents completing a self-completion questionnaire.
7. It may be possible to consider how well the questions flow and whether it is necessary to move some of them around to improve this feature.

It is to be noted that a pilot study should not be carried out on people who might have been members of the sample that would be employed in the full study, If possible, it would be better to find a small set of respondents who are comparable to members of the population from which the sample for the full study will be taken.

Categories of Pilot Studies

1. Focus Group interviews: - Unstructured, free flowing, group dynamic sessions that allow individuals the opportunity to initiate the topics of discussion. There is synergistic and spontaneous interaction among the respondents. Found to be highly advantageous.

2. Projective techniques; - An indirect means of questioning the respondents. Uses word association tests, sentence completion test, third person test, role playing technique and Thematic Apperception Test.

3. Depth interviews:- unstructured, extensive interviews that encourage an individual to talk freely and in depth about a topic.

What is Focus Group Interview?

The focus group interview is so widely used that many advertising and research agencies do nothing but focus group interviews. In that sense, it is wrongly synonymous with qualitative research. Nonetheless, focus groups are a very important qualitative research technique and deserve considerable discussion. A focus group interview is an unstructured, free-flowing interview with a small group of people, usually between six and ten. Focus groups are led by a trained moderator who follows a flexible format encouraging dialogue among respondents. Common focus group topics include employee programs, employee satisfaction, brand meanings, problems with products, advertising themes, or new-product concepts. The group meets at a central location at a designated time. Participants may range from consumers talking about hair coloring, petroleum engineers talking about problems in the "oil patch," children talking about toys, or employees talking about their jobs. A moderator begins by providing some opening statement to broadly steer discussion in the intended direction. Ideally, discussion topics emerge at the group's initiative, not the moderator's. Consistent with phenomenological approaches, moderators should avoid direct questioning unless absolutely necessary.

Advantages of focus group interviews

Focus groups allow people to discuss their true feelings, anxieties, and frustrations, as well as the depth of their convictions, in their own words. While other approaches may also do much the same, focus groups offer several advantages:

1. Relatively fast

2. Easy to execute

3. Allow respondents to piggyback off each other's ideas

4. Provide multiple perspectives

5. Flexibility to allow more detailed descriptions

6. High degree of scrutiny

Speed and Ease

In an emergency situation, three or four group sessions can be conducted, analyzed, and reported in a week or so. The large number of research firms that conduct focus group interviews makes it easy to find someone to host and conduct the research. Practically every state in the United States contains multiple research firms that have their own focus group facilities. Companies with large research departments likely have at least one qualified focus group moderator so that they need not outsource the focus group.

Piggybacking and Multiple Perspectives

Furthermore, the group approach may produce thoughts that would not be produced otherwise. The interplay between respondents allows them to piggyback off of each other's ideas. In other words, one respondent stimulates thought among the others and, as this process continues, increasingly creative insights are possible.

A comment by one individual often triggers a chain of responses from the other participants. The social nature of the focus group also helps bring out multiple views as each person shares a particular perspective.

Flexibility

The flexibility of focus group interviews is advantageous, especially when compared with the more structured and rigid survey format. Numerous topics can be discussed and many insights can be gained, particularly with regard to the variations in consumer behavior in different situations. Responses that would be unlikely to emerge in a survey often come out in group interviews:

Scrutiny

A focus group interview allows closer scrutiny in several ways. First, the session can be observed by several people, as it is usually conducted in a room containing a two-way mirror. The respondents and moderator are on one side, and an invited audience that may include both researchers and decision makers is on the other. If the decision makers are located in another city or country, the session may be shown via a live video hookup. Either through live video or a two-way mirror, some check on the eventual interpretations is provided through the ability to actually watch the research being conducted. If the observers have questions that are not being asked or want the moderator to probe on an issue, they can send a quick text message with instructions to the moderator. Second, *focus group sessions are generally recorded on audio or videotape. Later, detailed examination of the recorded session can offer additional insight and help clear up disagreements about what happened.*

Group composition

The ideal size of the focus group is six to ten people. If the group is too small, one or two members may intimidate the others. Groups that are too large may not allow for adequate participation by each group member. Homogeneous groups seem to work best because they allow researchers to concentrate on consumers with similar lifestyles, experiences, and communication skills. The session does not become rife with too many arguments and different viewpoints stemming from diverse backgrounds. Also, from an ethnographic perspective, the respondents should all be members of a unique and identifiable culture.

***For example**, for focus groups regarding **employee satisfaction**, we might want to recruit homogeneous groups based on position in the organization. The researcher may find that entry-level employees have very different perspectives and concerns than those of middle or upper-level management. Also, it is fully understandable that employees might be hesitant to criticize their supervisors. Therefore, researchers may consider interviewing different levels of employees in separate groups.*

By conducting separate focus groups, the organization was able to gain important insights

about which creative strategies were most appropriate for targeted versus broad audiences.

Environmental conditions

A focus group session may typically take place at the research agency in a room specifically designed for this purpose. Research suppliers that specialize in conducting focus groups operate from commercial facilities that have videotape cameras in observation rooms behind two-way mirrors and microphone systems connected to tape recorders and speakers to allow greater scrutiny as discussed above. Refreshments are provided to help create a more relaxed atmosphere conducive to a free exchange of ideas. More open and intimate reports of personal experiences and sentiments can be obtained under these condition

The focus group moderator

The moderator essentially runs the focus group and plays a critical role in its success. There are several qualities that a good moderator must possess:

1. The moderator must be able to develop rapport with the group to promote interaction among all participants. The moderator should be someone who is really interested in people, who listens carefully to what others have to say, and who can readily establish rapport, gain people's confidence, and make them feel relaxed and eager to talk.

2. The moderator must be a good listener. Careful listening is especially important because the group interview's purpose is to stimulate spontaneous responses. Without good listening skills, the moderator may direct the group in an unproductive direction.

3. The moderator must try not to interject his or her own opinions. Good moderators usually say less rather than more. They can stimulate productive discussion with generalized follow-ups such as, "Tell us more about that incident," or "How are your experiences similar or different from the one you just heard?" The moderator must be particularly careful not to ask leading questions such as "You are happy to work at you organisation, aren't you?"

4. The moderator must be able to control discussion without being overbearing. The moderator's role is also to focus the discussion on the areas of concern. When a topic is no longer generating fresh ideas, the effective moderator changes the flow of discussion. The moderator does not give the group total control of the discussion, but he or she normally has prepared questions on topics that concern management. However, the timing of these questions in the discussion and the manner in which they are raised are left to the moderator's discretion. The term focus group thus stems from the moderator's task. He or she starts out by asking for a general discussion but usually focuses in on specific topics during the session.

Planning the focus group outline

Focus group researchers use a discussion guide to help control the interview and guide the discussion into product areas. A **discussion guide** includes written introductory comments informing the group about the focus group purpose and rules and then outlines topics or questions to be addressed in the group session. Thus, the discussion guide serves as the focus group outline. Some discussion guides will have only a few phrases in the entire document. Others may be more detailed. The amount of content depends on the nature and experience of the researcher and the complexity of the topic.

Researchers who planned the outline established certain objectives for each part of the focus group. The initial effort was to break the ice and establish rapport within the group. The logical flow of the group session then moved from general discussion about sunbathing to more focused discussion of types of warnings about danger from sun exposure. In general, the following steps should be used to conduct an effective focus group discussion guide:

1. Welcome and introductions should take place first.
2. Begin the interview with a broad icebreaker that does not reveal too many specifics about the interview. Sometimes, this may even involve respondents providing some written story or their reaction to some stimulus like a photograph, film, product, or advertisement.
3. Questions become increasingly more specific as the interview proceeds. However, the moderator will notice that a good interview will cover the specific question topics before they have to be asked. This is preferable as respondents are clearly not forced to react to the specific issue; it just emerges naturally.
4. If there is a very specific objective to be accomplished, such as explaining why a respondent would either buy or not buy a product, that question should probably be saved for last.
5. A debriefing statement should provide respondents with the actual focus group objectives and answering any questions they may have. This is also a final shot to gain some insight from the group.

Focus groups as diagnostic tools

Focus groups are perhaps the predominant means by which business researchers implement exploratory research designs. Focus groups also can be helpful in later stages of a research project, particularly when the findings from surveys or other quantitative techniques raise more questions than they answer. Managers who are puzzled about the meaning of survey research results may use focus groups to better understand what survey results indicate. In such a situation, the focus group supplies diagnostic help after quantitative research has been conducted.

Focus groups are also excellent diagnostic tools for spotting problems with ideas. For instance, idea screening is often done with focus groups. An initial concept is presented to the group and then they are allowed to comment on it in detail. This usually leads to lengthy lists of potential product problems and some ideas for overcoming them. Mature products can also be "focus grouped" in this manner.

Videoconferencing and focus groups

With the widespread utilization of videoconferencing, the number of companies using these systems to conduct focus groups has increased. With videoconference focus groups, managers can stay home and watch on television rather than having to take a trip to a focus group facility.

Focus Vision (http://www.focusvision.com/) is a business research company that provides videoconferencing equipment and services. The Focus Vision system is modular, allowing for easy movement and an ability to capture each group member close up. The system operates via a remote keypad. That allows observers in a far-off location to pan the focus group room or zoom in on a particular participant. Managers viewing at remote locations can send the moderator messages during the interview.

Interactive media and online focus groups

Internet applications of qualitative exploratory research are growing rapidly and involve both formal and informal applications. Formally, the term online focus group refers to a qualitative research effort in which a group of individuals provides unstructured comments by entering their remarks into an electronic Internet display board of some type, such as a chat-room session or in the form of a blog. Because respondents enter their comments into the computer, transcripts of verbatim responses are available immediately after the group session. Online groups can be quick and cost efficient. However, because there is less personal interaction between participants, group synergy and snowballing of ideas may be diminished.

Several companies have established a form of informal, "continuous" focus group by establishing an Internet blog for that purpose. We might call this technique a focus blog when the intention is to mine the site for business research purposes. General Motors, American Express, and Lego all have used ideas harvested from their focus blogs. When operating, the Lego blog can be found at ***http://legoisfun*.blogspot.com.** While traditional focus group respondents are generally paid $100 or more to show up and participate for 90 minutes**, bloggers and online focus group respondents often participate for absolutely no fee at all! Thus, technology provides some cost advantages over traditional focus group approaches.**

Online versus face to face focus group techniques

A research company can facilitate a formal online focus group by setting up a private chat room for that purpose. Participants in formal and informal online focus groups feel that their anonymity is very secure. Often respondents will say things in this environment that they would never say **otherwise.**

A major drawback with online focus groups is that moderators cannot see body language and facial expressions (bewilderment, excitement, boredom, interest, and so forth). Thus, they cannot fully interpret how people are reacting. Also, moderators' ability to probe and ask additional questions on the spot is reduced in online focus groups. Research that requires focus group members to actually touch something (such as a new easy-opening packaging design) or taste something is not generally suitable for an online format.

Exploratory research: Steps to conduct a research

Identify the problem: A researcher identifies the subject of research and the problem is addressed by carrying out multiple methods to answer the questions.

Create the hypothesis: When the researcher has found out that there are no prior studies and the problem is not precisely resolved, the researcher will create a hypothesis based on the questions obtained while identifying the problem.

Further research: Once the data has been obtained, the researcher will continue his study through descriptive investigation. Qualitative methods are used to further study the subject in detail and find out if the information is true or not.

Summary

Exploratory research studies: Exploratory research studies are also termed as formulative research studies. The main purpose of such studies is that of formulating a problem for more precise investigation or of developing the working hypotheses from an operational point of view. The major emphasis in such studies is on the discovery of ideas and insights. As such the research design appropriate for such studies must be flexible enough to provide opportunity for considering different aspects of a problem under study. Inbuilt flexibility in research design is needed because the research problem, broadly defined initially, is transformed into one with more precise meaning in exploratory studies, which fact may necessitate changes in the research procedure for gathering relevant data. Generally, the following three methods in the context of research design for such studies are talked about: (a) the survey of concerning literature; (b) the experience survey and (c) the analysis of 'insight-stimulating' examples. 1. Experience Surveys: - Issues and ideas may be discussed with persons who have had personal experience in the field.

2. Secondary data analysis:- Another quick and economical source of background information is existing literature containing data that has been compiled for some purpose other than the purpose in hand

3. Case Study method: -obtains information from one or a few situations that are similar to the problem situation. Primary advantage is that an entire organization or entity can be investigated in depth and with meticulous attention to detail.

4. Pilot Studies are used in different types of designs. - Within the context of exploratory research it covers some part of the research on a small scale. Major categories of pilot study include focus group interviews, projective techniques, and depth interviews.

5. Focus groups are also excellent diagnostic tools for spotting problems with ideas. For instance, idea screening is often done with focus groups. An initial concept is presented to the group and then they are allowed to comment on it in detail. This usually leads to lengthy lists of potential product problems and some ideas for overcoming them. Mature products can also be "focus grouped" in this manner.

Thus, in an exploratory or formulative research study which merely leads to insights or hypotheses, whatever method or research design outlined above is adopted, the only thing essential is that it must continue to remain flexible so that many different facets of a problem may be considered as and when they arise and come to the notice of the researcher.

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