



GLG

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DIVING DEEPER

GLG's Guide to *Effective Qualitative Research*

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INTRODUCTION

What's the first thing you think of when it comes to market research? Is it a quantitative survey? Is it a qualitative focus group? Is it an in-depth interview (IDI) with an expert or a group of experts?

When clients come to GLG, they usually think they know what they want. But often, a survey isn't the best methodology to uncover what they want to know, and a series of expert interviews would generate better insights.

Conversely, clients come to us ready to jump right into a series of IDIs. But after some discussion, we realize that they need to establish a foundation of knowledge to fuel expert conversations that can get to the insight they need.

In other cases, our clients come to us with a business need but are uncertain about how to move forward. That's where GLG can help.

In broad strokes, quantitative research methods are appropriate for confirmatory purposes. They're best when you want to reach a larger target audience to measure the purchase likelihood for a new product offering or capture attitudinal sentiments from a robust target group, for example.

Qualitative tends to be more exploratory, often used more for innovation of new product concepts or messages or deeply understanding the motivations, thoughts, and tendencies of the target population.

In this guide, we will focus on qualitative research and open the door to various types of qualitative methods and the six key steps that you need to take to get the most out of your market research.

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DEFINE YOUR BUSINESS GOALS

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It's important to define your business goals before diving into research design to ensure you know what you want from your research. Only after you've established those business goals can you start thinking about the type of research you need. There are four questions to ask yourself here:

- **What are you looking to accomplish?** This is a question that benefits from some thought. You might think you need a huge amount of information, but it's often better to focus. Ask yourself what GLG asks our clients: "What are the one or two things you will want to know at the completion of this project so that you can move forward?"
- **Who are your stakeholders?** Consider the person to whom you will ultimately present this material. Is it your immediate boss? Are they peers across different regions? External clients? Understanding this will inform not only what you need to know but the best strategies for obtaining it.
- **How will you use this insight?** Defining how you will use the insight you gather will help you determine the hypotheses that will underlie the research so you can create an approach that will either confirm or refute them, which should be the goal of your research.
- **What is your timeline?** Whether you need your insight in two to three weeks versus two to three months makes a big difference. To get the inputs you need, the scale and scope of your research will differ depending on when you need the completed research results.

Even though this seems like the beginning, you should look toward the outputs you will need at the end. Ask yourself what type of synthesis you need when you start to analyze the insights you gather. How in-depth should the findings be? What style and structure should the report take? Do you need to integrate other data sources? How will you deliver your findings?

The more clearly you can articulate your business needs, the better you can design the right research to answer your questions.

SELECTING THE RIGHT QUALITATIVE APPROACH

Three main qualitative methodologies: focus groups, online discussion boards, and IDIs.

For the scope of this guide, we want to focus on three main qualitative methodologies that we use at GLG: **focus groups**, **online discussion boards**, and **IDIs**. Each of these methodologies is better suited to a distinct type of business need. Let's break it down:

- **Focus Groups** — Focus groups are a good solution when the research needs to capture the reactions and uncover deeper insights by observing the interaction of a small group of highly specialized experts. These can be virtual or conducted in person and are usually four or five experts of the same target persona. When

considering a focus group, ask yourself: Do I have a homogeneous target population? Can they all be in the room at the same time, sharing similar ideas? Is it important to see the experts' reaction to a topic or to a certain stimulus? If you can answer yes to any of these questions, a focus group is probably the best option for your research objective.

- **Online Discussion Boards** — Online discussion boards are the best option when it is important to reach a large sample size, a broad geographic region, or a hard-to-reach population or to get data from various target segments. This methodology is asynchronous, so participants can log in at any time during the appointed time frame. Online discussion boards provide a large variety of question formats, such as multiple choice, ranking, sharing stimuli, and heat maps, making the information gathered rich and diverse. However, because they're preprogrammed, discussion boards do not always allow for profound probing. As such, they might not be the best solution for things such as a complicated purchase journey or unmet needs testing, research objectives where you need deep information to solve your business needs.
- **In-Depth Interviews** — These are a good solution for research needs where deep individual thoughts and experiences are essential. In-depth interviews can reveal the “why” behind obscure questions, diverse behaviors, and market needs. They are also a great source for understanding buying journeys and UX testing.

Focus Groups	Online Discussion Boards	In-Depth Interviews
<p>Capture real-time reactions in a dynamic group setting where participants can interact with one another, which can uncover deeper insights.</p> <p>Gather many perspectives at once, which allows for rich discussions and consensus.</p>	<p>Asynchronous, with engagement over the course of days or weeks.</p> <p>Greater geographic reach and large samples.</p> <p>Flexibility in early insight discovery with the possibility of tweaking stimuli throughout project.</p> <p>Variety of question types (open-ended, quantitative, scales) provides diversity in findings.</p>	<p>Provides the possibility of comparing information from diverse target segments.</p> <p>Respondents are engaged in the conversation, able to express deep personal thoughts and opinions about the subject matter.</p>
<p>Ask Yourself:</p> <p>Will the group discussion add value and get us closer to the research objectives?</p>	<p>Ask Yourself:</p> <p>How much depth do I need from the responses to answer my needs?</p>	<p>Ask Yourself:</p> <p>Is the question or the process I need to understand very complicated and/or personal?</p>

FINDING THE RIGHT EXPERTS

The best research methodology will fall short without the right experts to fuel the insights.

The best research methodology will fall short without the right experts to fuel the insights. Due to the complexity and often technical nature of the research questions, it's crucial to identify and select the right professionals to participate in your research endeavor. To find these people, you must develop screening criteria based on a well-defined persona.

This could include titles and roles, industry type and size, or more specific characteristics, such as using a rare device or employment at a target company. You need to focus on what the experts know versus simply their title or role. Often, multiple perspectives outside of defined roles are beneficial for a research study — purchasing and decision-making responsibilities for smaller versus larger businesses may reside with different roles and levels.

At GLG, once the persona and criteria are developed, we source and recruit the right experts, drawing from our global network of professionals that includes a wide range of individuals, including C-suite executives, surgeons, small business owners, procurement experts, and marketers. The selection of these experts is a joint effort between our client and GLG to handpick the individual or individuals who will be best suited to answer the research questions.

BUILDING A DISCUSSION GUIDE

What is a discussion guide? A discussion guide is the road map for the conversation we will hold with experts. It contains the questions that will extract the most appropriate, relevant, and actionable insight from your expert engagement. This road map ensures you address your key questions and go deep enough into the important focus areas.

What is a good discussion guide? A good discussion guide is unique to each qualitative method. So even though a discussion guide is intended to function as a pathway from the research objective to the insights, there is difference and variety between the discussion guide that we write for a focus group, the one that we write for an IDI, and the one that we write for an online discussion board.

The questions should always be written from broad to specific and have varied and creative probes. These probes deepen our understanding of an answer and help us retrieve information beyond the expert's top of mind. This means, for example, asking fewer clarifying questions and adopting other ways of asking (e.g., "Explain that to me a little more," or "What brought you to this point?"). Be mindful of the length of your discussion guide, ensuring that you have enough time for probing questions.

Probing Questions

Why do you think that is?

What brought you to this point?

What impact do you think this will have?

What does this remind you of?

A good discussion guide is unique to each qualitative method.

What's more, within B2B, compliance is important. You will want to ensure that both you and the expert can collaborate and share expertise with an awareness of limitations. You need to craft discussion guide questions that eliminate any chance that the expert might share confidential information, or that they speak directly about their current employer.

RUNNING AN EFFECTIVE INTERVIEW/FOCUS GROUP

The moderator must never allow personal bias to influence the expert's answers.

Even if all these steps have been correctly completed, you will still need effective moderation to obtain the best insights. But what does that mean? You need a moderator who stays connected, interested, and eager to learn. The expert teaches the moderator about how they see a topic and how they feel about it. The moderator must maintain objectivity, keeping the research goals in mind, and never allow personal bias to influence the expert's answers.

From a purely operational level, the moderator must ensure an effective session. This means that the moderator should not speak for more than 20% of the time to allow space for the expert to answer. The moderator drives the conversations and ensures that the expert doesn't diverge from the topic, keeping track of time to get through the entire discussion guide. An effective moderator should possess both research and subject-matter expertise so that conversations about technical scenarios will be successful.

ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Analysis is predicated on your early planning and the goals you established at the outset, so when it comes to analysis, don't wait until the end of your efforts. Often it is better to consider the information you're gathering during the research process itself.

Your discussion guide is helpful here. It is an anchor that helps you keep your overall objectives and hypotheses in mind for both the interviews you conduct and their analysis. As you move through your interviews or focus groups, it's important to have interim check-ins after a few sessions. Are you getting the right amount of information about your key questions? Could you have missed a question, or is there new information that needs a deeper dive?

This is an iterative process. Essentially, you're asking yourself, "What else do I need to know to be able to answer my questions?" If you realize you need more information, you can then put more focus on specific areas of the discussion guide in upcoming sessions to ensure you're getting more color out of those areas.

In the end,
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An experienced moderator can often do this on the fly. Effective moderation is an art that is crafted over years and years of practice. During a session, a good moderator spends a lot of time taking notes that document key moments or flagging moments in time so they can go back and pull verbatims (word-for-word quotations culled directly from a person's responses) that will add character to the analysis. The prime tools of an effective moderator are their notes, session recordings, and transcripts.

In the end, analysis is about connecting the dots. You'll see key themes emerging after three or four interviews, and it's important to keep those in mind. You'll be able to develop thematic lines that connect different individuals, insights that will inform key recommendations to better drive you and your business.

What are the characteristics of great analysis? Great analysis is succinct and answers questions directly. You use the information you've gathered to draw broader insights and recommendations. Verbatims add richness to your report and a human touch to your analysis. And while it's okay to say there are unanswered questions that need to be explored further, a great analysis will have solid takeaways and key next steps for your audience.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, when approaching qualitative research, take time at the start to ensure your goals are well-defined so that you select the right research approach and identify the right experts to answer those questions. You want to build a thoughtful discussion guide that is not too long and has the right mix of probing and follow-up questions to help you run an effective qualitative interview. Remember that a keen focus on your goal at the outset will allow you to support (or refute) your hypothesis as you move through your research sessions. If you follow these rules, you should have solid insight to make the best decisions for your business.

APPENDIX I: FAQ

What is the optimal number of IDIs for a study, and does it differ by B2B or B2C?

Usually, we need fewer interviews in B2B than in B2C because our audience is a smaller population. Nonetheless, in B2B, sometimes more interviews are necessary because of the complexity of, for example, a purchase journey. For a SaaS purchase journey, maybe five people play a role in that decision-making process. So to fully understand that process, we need to talk to those five targets, and there is a minimum required per target persona to get information that we consider valid and extractable. So it depends a lot on your business need, and it depends a lot on your industry.

How much time would you say we should allocate to building a solid discussion guide and writing the analysis from the interviews after IDIs?

There's no set time frame for building a discussion guide because it depends on what you want your outputs to be. That said, it's good to allocate at least a week because the best discussion guide goes through a couple of iterations among the stakeholders involved in the project. As for the analysis, we've already mentioned that analysis should ideally start while you're conducting the interviews. And again, you need at least seven days to bring all the qualitative data together to identify trends and insights and make it all presentable.

What are the benefits of using a professional moderator versus someone internal who perhaps better understands the nuances of the product or service?

It's a balancing act. Some moderators simply know too much about the topic, the product, and what they want to know. This kind of knowledge can sometimes obscure the broader picture and make it hard to see the full context of a topic. On the other hand, some topics, especially in B2B, are nuanced and technical; in these scenarios, it is beneficial for the moderator to understand the product or service.

What is most beneficial is to choose a trained moderator who will ask the right questions in the right way, regardless of the level of understanding they might have. They can pick up and follow hints an untrained moderator might miss. In GLG's experience, we might be interviewing an expert who says something that departs from the discussion guide but aligns with something we've discussed previously with the client. To pursue that thread, you must adapt quickly, considering the expert's neurodiversity and framing the question to not allow personal bias or opinions to creep in. It sounds easy to do, but it's not.

APPENDIX II: BUSINESS SCENARIOS AND THEIR RESEARCH SOLUTIONS

Business Goal	Research Methodology	Reason
Explore market dynamics for a new space before making the decision to develop a new product for that space.	In-Depth Interviews (IDIs)	Exploring a market that is not well known might entail speaking to different target populations to comprehend their unique points of view and the role that they play within the market. This is best captured through one-on-one conversations where the moderator can tease out details and probe areas that arise that might not have been considered in the original discussion guide.
Understand customer experience and customers' pain points to inform the development of a new solution and then gauge an audience's interest in that new solution.	Online Discussion Board	There are various objectives here. An online discussion board allows for each day of the board to address a different topic and for the moderator to build upon the learnings of each stage to continue to the next topic.
Need to observe how experts react to specific products and trade ideas on how to enhance the product and message that product effectively in the marketplace.	Focus Group	A focus group entails showing the group of individuals stimuli. It allows them to comment, discuss among themselves, and reach consensus, as well as suggest improvements for the product or idea.

Reach out to GLG if you have questions regarding what type of research methodology might be right for your business need.

GLG teams will help you effectively design your project and research tools to ensure you obtain the best possible data.

For more information and to contact us, [click here](#).



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