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THE VALUE OF “STORY LISTENING”
in Understanding Consumers

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Connecting on a Deeper Level

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE
CROSS-INDUSTRY RESEARCH REPORT:
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Moderating with Spirit and Connecting on a Deeper Level

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What makes a good qualitative research consultant good? I have asked this question on numerous occasions to fellow qualitative researchers, and their responses almost always center around an intangible ability to connect with respondents and a feeling of deep satisfaction derived from the engagement. The knowledge surrounding research design, discussion-guide development, field management, moderating techniques and the interpretation/analysis of the findings is very important; it is not, however, what makes us good at what we do. In fact, most successful and seasoned qualitative researchers will agree that a rookie with little experience can be an excellent moderator if he or she possesses this intangible ability to connect and interact with people. Where does that ability come from? Can it be taught?

A number of years ago, I decided to do some research on this subject for a proposal I was preparing to present at the 2002 QRCA conference. My goal was to find a way to teach or convey the essence of what makes us good at what we do. The problem I faced was that I did not know what to call this intangible inwardness of a moderator. In seeking an answer, I searched for the qualities that make people great at what they do, regardless of their profession. I came across words like passion, dedication and inspiration.

If we are all connected to a spiritual source, then we must also be connected to each other "in spirit."

That last word — inspiration — hit a chord with me because I always feel that, when I am at my best moderating a focus group, I am inspiring the participants to share their thoughts at a deeper and more significant level. To inspire, I also learned, means to affect, guide or arouse by "divine influence." Then it hit me; what if this intangible ability to be good at what we do is more connected to our spiritual side than to our cognitive nature? I named my presentation "Moderating with Spirit" and proceeded to find a way to teach what many have regarded as an innate ability that cannot be taught.

Why spirit? Most people believe that, at a spiritual level, we are connected to some greater power. Some will say it is a connection with God; others may think of it as a connection with the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ, their Buddha Nature, pure consciousness or a universal energy. Regardless of what one calls this greater power, it stands to reason that, if we are all connected to a spiritual source, then we must also be connected to each other "in spirit."

The belief in a spiritual connection also has strong roots in the Native American heritage and is beautifully

depicted in the Disney rendition of the story of Pocahontas. A line from one of my favorite songs from Pocahontas, "Colors of the Wind," states that "we are all connected to each other in a circle, in a hoop that never ends." My contention is that good qualitative research is often the result of a spiritual connection.

This article covers what I believe are ways to promote a spiritual connection and gain that intangible ability that makes us good, not only at moderating focus groups, but also in all other aspects of our work. How do we get connected? As you may surmise, it has more to do with your attitude and values than with procedure and technique. I have identified several areas that you can address to promote this spiritual connectivity.

Good Karma and Positive Energy

Following the belief that there is a universal spiritual connection that affects our business and personal interactions, it makes sense to pay close attention to how we address everything surrounding our work. Wikipedia defines Karma as "the concept of action or deed in Indian





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religions, and it is understood as that which causes the entire cycle of cause and effect." In order to promote good Karma or positive energy, we must believe and think positively in all aspects of our work.

Believing in Yourself

Start by believing in yourself. If you do not believe in yourself, it is impossible to get others to believe in you. It is extremely difficult to pretend that you are good at something when you are not convinced of it yourself. Even good actors say that, in order to be good at playing a role, they need to become the character they are playing and be in tune with that mindset. Do you want to be superb at what you do? I want to hear you say, "I already am!"

The Client, The Brand and The Team

An extension of believing in yourself is believing in everything you do. My father was a huge believer in this concept; as an ad-agency creative, his job was to communicate and sell product benefits. My mother was not allowed to buy anything that competed with the products that my father's agency advertised, and my sisters and I were not allowed to even drink Sprite because the agency's client was 7-Up. I thought he was insane, but I now find myself doing the same thing.

When I was in 6th or 7th grade, I remember that my father brought home a toy that the agency was advertising. It was one of those little wooden contraptions with a string, a cup and a ball; the purpose was to get the ball in the cup by using a lever. I told him that it was crap, and he knew it. I remember hearing him mutter under his breath, "I will never be able to sell this!" He knew all too well the importance of believing in his client's product.

As a qualitative research consultant, I also find myself striving to "believe" in my client's products and/or services. Perhaps my rationale

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is not as straightforward as that of an ad-agency creative; yet, I do feel that if I am to succeed in conducting research and interpreting findings, I need to feel connected to the company, its products/brand and the client team. In my experience, clients treat you as a true consultant only if you are perceived to be a part of their team.

Part of my introductory speech in conducting focus groups includes telling participants that I want to see everyone having fun. In my experience, the more fun we are having, the better the group discussion.

Enjoyment

It is a well-documented fact that people are likely to excel at any endeavor that lies within the realm of their passion. It is easy to be good at something when you are having fun. I am also convinced that when people are enjoying each other's company, the communication is greatly enhanced. I love conducting interviews, and I always look to have fun. In fact, part of my introductory speech in conducting focus groups includes telling participants that I want to see everyone having fun. In my experience, the more fun we are having, the better the group discussion.

Part of having fun is also knowing how to use humor to your advantage. If you are too uptight and overly serious, it is difficult for respondents to understand that it is okay for them to share and open up to their true feelings because nobody is there to judge them. I promote this by poking fun at myself whenever the opportunity to do so ties with the research conversation.

Prejudices

Want it or not, we are all prejudiced in many ways. It is human nature to make judgments and assumptions based on the person's weight, race, appearance, gender and other physical characteristics. I work very hard to suspend all judgments before I enter the focus group room. Every moderator has an example of a participant who ended up offering the most lucid and insightful advice after being close to being dismissed based on appearances.

As I write these lines, a woman from Scotland named Susan Boyle gave a jaw-dropping singing performance on the television show "Britain's Got Talent." What made her performance so unforgettable and internationally newsworthy was that, as I am sure you know by now, she did not look the part. Because of her looks, nobody expected her to sing well; but everyone was mistaken. How many times do we stifle communication because of our own prejudices?

Beauty and Love

A good practice that helps in achieving a spiritual connection in qualitative research is to find beauty in everything a respondent says and to wholeheartedly appreciate those contributions. This does not have to be far-fetched; you can make it real because everyone is fascinating in

one way or another. If you find the beauty in what a focus group participant is saying and love every bit of it, you will find that you hear things differently and learn at a different level.

Attention and Care

Paying attention to what respondents are saying goes further than listening. True paying attention also involves caring for what they have to say. I see my role as a moderator also as being the main advocate for the participants. I like to take care of them because, in my caring, they find a person they can trust and a person with whom they can share honestly.

I have many examples of situations when I have gone out of my way to address the needs of a participant, from the simple act of stepping out of the room to get a bottle of water to give someone who is coughing, to stopping the group to talk privately to a participant that I noticed had tears in her eyes. At a spiritual level, truly caring for the participants goes a long way to enhancing the level of communication.

Taking Down Walls and Sharing

I find that, in order to be open to a spiritual connection, you have to be open to the sharing of personal information about yourself. Communication is not a one-way street. In qualitative research, we often pretend



I talk about my family whenever I can inject a comment without affecting the conversation, and it does wonders in elevating the level of communication.

that we can establish a meaningful conversation by asking questions and waiting for responses, without ever sharing information in the opposite direction. In my experience, it works best if the moderator engages the participants by taking down the walls and sharing his own personal information when appropriate.

Here, I must caution the reader that I do not mean contributing opinions regarding the subject of discussion, as that would undoubtedly introduce biases. There are plenty of opportunities, however, when it is appropriate to relate a personal anecdote or tell a story to the group. You want a research interview to flow as if you were talking to a friend, and friends expect the information to flow

in both directions. I talk about my family whenever I can inject a comment without affecting the conversation, and it does wonders in elevating the level of communication.

Squelching Gossip

Gossiping is not productive because it interferes with the good Karma that we are trying to promote. I often find that, when I go to the back room during a focus group interview, my clients are engaged in gossiping. They make assumptions about the participants and infer behavior with very limited information. Sometimes the gossip is based on prejudices, while other times the client is just jumping to conclusions based on very little knowledge.

My advice is to resist being pulled into the gossip, especially if the group is still in progress. Participating in the gossip will invariably affect the group because the moderator will go back to the focus group with built-in prejudices that may be simply misplaced.

Addressing Conflict and Working Together

While my goal is always to avoid conflict within a group, there are times when conflict is unavoidable. A participant can

become belligerent and uncooperative, and there may not be much a moderator can do but to address the conflict.

In an effort to be humorous, I once joked about something that a participant had said, but the respondent became agitated and said that I had insulted him. I immediately stood up and approached him with the most heartfelt apology. He accepted my gesture and later apologized himself by saying that he was wrong and that what I had said was indeed funny.

What I also find is that if you have been honest and connected throughout the session, the other participants will be quick to come to the moderator's aid at the first sign of conflict. Another story that comes to mind was with a disturbed participant in New York who, for no apparent reason, stood up and wanted to have a physical confrontation. I also stood up and told him to please leave. As I did, all of the other participants stood up to back me up. He left, and the group turned out to be a fantastic session with an even tighter connection due to the small altercation.

Risk

Taking risks is important when the goal is maintaining a spiritual connection. Sometimes the way the discussion is flowing and how the participants are interacting inspire the moderator with ideas for techniques and approaches that deviate from the discussion guide and research plan. Take these spiritual cues or "gut feelings" seriously because they are usually on the mark. A moderator who follows his gut and takes a risk is likely to receive praise for thinking on his or her feet and being creative.

Ethics

The spiritual world is an open book. Making up stories and/or



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telling lies to the participants in a focus group does not work because it interferes with the spiritual connection. Recently, someone during a group introduction told me about her son breaking an arm from doing something stupid, and I shared a story from when I was in high school and jumped a whole set of stairs, breaking my own arm in the process. Later, the client asked me if I had made that up. Of course I didn’t! I also never tell lies to dismiss a participant or to hide from the group the fact that people who work for the company in question are watching behind the mirror.

Worries

I am not saying that achieving a spiritual connection is always possible. One sure way to break the connection is to walk into a group discussion bringing with you personal or outside worries. Sometimes, of course, this is unavoidable. For the most part, I am successful at leaving the worries behind by sitting quietly in the room before the group in meditation. In the cases when that does not work and I am able to share my worries, I do. Doing so drives people to immediately seek a connection with you.

Praying

Prayer or inner meditation represents a direct connection to the spiritual world and is always helpful to me. I meditate before every group on my desire to achieve a spiritual connection. I also say a silent prayer whenever

I feel that I am losing the connection or the control of the group.

When Nothing Works, See the Perfection of It All!

At times, nothing seems to work. Those are the times when the most important tenet in building a spiritual connection needs to be invoked. Everything is perfect! Everything must be

perfect because those are the cards you were dealt.

The truth is that if you look back at every instance when everything apparently went wrong, there is always a lesson that was learned, or the situation actually turned out to work to your advantage. The respondent who should not have been recruited provided the most insights; the person who had to be kicked out of the group for being drunk helped the other members form a very strong connection; and the person who stayed quiet most of the group ended up having radical ideas that would have been disruptive if shared earlier in the discussion. Everything is perfect the way it is — believe it, and you will be well on your way to moderating with spirit! ☺

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