

Technique Tip 10: Using the power of argument

No, I am not suggesting you unleash the kind of mayhem shown in the picture which I hope grabbed your attention. Before you dismiss me as a loony jumbo, read on.

In qualitative research, when you have a set of alternatives to evaluate its likely there are two main question you'll want to answer: which is strongest and why?

There are any number of ways in which one thing may be stronger than others, but we know that *liking* is a key attribute of preferences that lead to purchase. In many years of market testing Unilever have established this attribute's importance. They have also shown that '*likelihood to purchase*' is strongly correlated with buying in the real world – so at some point ask your respondents: 'which do you like best?' and 'which would most prompt you to buy?' Of course you'll do this in the words that work best for you but my advice is to keep it simple!

Next we come to the question of 'why?' If yours is a qualitative project, some degree of diagnostics will be expected of you. Here the science and the state of our knowledge suggests that our respondents are much less likely to know why they chose one thing over another than they think!

<http://www.spring.org.uk/2007/11/10-piercing-insights-into-human-nature.php>

Of the ten seminal papers on this site no less than five (1, 2, 6, 7 & 10) are relevant to the issue of awareness of our own 'reasons'. *You'll see that relying on self-reports of our reasons is highly unreliable!*

So, what can you do?

The answer to this kind of methodological problem is often to be found by questioning your own daily practices. How are decisions about preferences reached in your daily life? It is almost always by discussion and, most importantly argument, in which one side (even if only one side of your own mind!) presents its arguments against the other and they battle it out.

In my experience modern focus groups might do a bit of discussing - if there's time, - *but almost never any argument.* This is for two main reasons:

1. There is a fear of argument and dissent in groups – that this activity would make the respondents uncomfortable – and more importantly, might make the moderator and the clients uncomfortable too.
2. Rhetoric, or the skill of argument is unfashionable in this empirical age. We are not taught how to argue in a civilised manner – and thus argument often appears uncivilised!

This is where Breakthrough Psychology comes in handy. One of the key techniques of *abnorming* (the core principle of Breakthrough psychology), is called *the Flip*. To do it you just flip what is normally done on its head and do the opposite. So, if most groups don't argue, we must find a way to use argument – and everyday life is actually packed full of it – in our groups or interviews.

How do you do that? My experience suggests that *making it into a game* is the best way. To do this you divide your group up into 3 teams, two trios and a pair (for a standard 8 member group – vary numbers if you have different size groups). Each trio chooses a different route from the two most liked and has five minutes to come up with a 'pitch' to the other group members on why this route works best for the brand or service. The pitch must be no longer than a couple of minutes. Then, once the first trio has done its pitch, the second trio goes on, pitching the other preferred route using their arguments.

The point of this is that in order to 'pitch' something, people have to grapple with the original, turn it into their own words, extract what is of value from it and also what it means to them. It is these two elements *meaning and value* that will give you the best diagnostics.

The remaining pair + the moderator form an audience and create a score out of ten for each pitch. That score can be linked to some attribute if you wish, like true to the brand, creating appeal, whatever your client is trying to understand about the value of the routes. Or they can just comment on their experience of the pitches without scoring if you prefer. I recommend getting the scores!

Whether you end up focusing on one preferred route or more in your report/analysis is up to you and shaped by your brief.

Try this out in your next focus groups. If you hold it lightly and emphasise the 'play' aspect, you'll be amazed by how much groups enjoy this. I sometimes give them a short practice by asking them to create a 2 minute 'liking' pitch for Sainsburys, versus Tesco, versus Asda etc.