If you could do only one type of research, would it be qualitative or quantitative?

I was once asked this question in an interview for a corporate job. I paused at this question for two reasons. First, because it was a bit ludicrous. Second, it made me think about the role of each of these and how they’re applied.

**Human interaction counts**

Every few years we hear predictions that hard data (quantitative) is going to replace qualitative. In fact, we’ve heard those predictions for many, many years now. The 2014 ESOMAR Global Market Research Industry report, and prior waves of the GRIT Report, suggest that these predictions are a bit exaggerated. Focus groups, in-depth interviews, and online qualitative are all either flat or growing slightly, depending on which numbers you choose. It’s easy to understand why these predictions are made, but it’s more than a bit shortsighted because human interaction counts for more than it’s often credited for.

**Digging into the “why” of behavior**

Qualitative research provides the nuance to the “how” of consumer behaviors, and much more importantly, the power to the “why.” While things like Big Data, passive measurement, geo-location, and data synthesis are grabbing many of the headlines in our industry, qualitative research goes on doing what it has always done: getting to the deeper understanding of the consumer.

**Connects with people**

The interactive conversation about the “why” of behavior is the essential benefit of qualitative and has yet to be surpassed for its depth, sensitivity, and flexibility. Topics that are difficult to cover otherwise, such as finances, health, relationships, sex, etc., can all be handled with a certain connection that is made between people instead of a survey.

And these qualities of qualitative research go a long way to meet the basic needs of a business’s deep understanding of consumers. As one respondent in this publication of the GRIT Report said, the biggest challenge of marketing research is to “understand and deepen knowledge of consumer behavior. The consumer [should be] viewed in all mindsets, perspectives and through his or her side.” And much of this is the purview of qualitative research.

**The effect of mobile technology**

Today, one area of qualitative is growing substantially. This is the area facilitated by mobile technology. Currently, about 20-25% of corporate researchers and about 50% of research suppliers are using mobile for at least some of their qualitative/ethnography research. And another 35% of corporate researchers say it’s under consideration.

Mobile qualitative has several unique benefits. First, it is real-time “in the moment” and consequentially allows an even deeper understanding of consumers because of the timing of an event and the understanding. Second, it can be non-intrusive as the tool is both available and comfortable for consumers. Lastly, it can be pretty fast, which is always good. In many cases, the mobile component of qualitative is simply that: one component. The mobile tool is often integrated with more traditional tools, such as in-depth interviews, for an even more substantive outcome.

**There’s a human gap in Big data**

No commentary on research would be complete without at least mentioning Big Data. We all have our favorite statistics about the proliferation of information. “It doubles every two years” is mine. However, there is a long distance between the implication of data and the human understanding that brings that data to a level where most of us can understand, empathize, and act.

Respondents to the current GRIT Report talk about this as well. One respondent noted, “Market Research needs to remain relevant by providing consultative resources and also helping to answer ‘why’ when big data seems to be revealing hard to understand insights.” You simply can’t (and shouldn’t) get away from the importance of “why.”

By the way, my answer to the interviewer was “qualitative”. I didn’t get the job. The company went bankrupt. Just saying.