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Quirk's Marketing Research Review

JULY/AUGUST 2026
VOLUME XL NUMBER 4
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Face to face research is an essential piece of the insights puzzle. By conducting research in person, you gain added context from body language, a more fluid group dynamic and added security and privacy measures. The right research environment for brands to uncover and explore insights that result in important business impact.

Aryn O'Donnell, Vice President of Fieldwork

As an industry, insights deserves a respected place at the table at any brand or inside any organization. But coming to that table with confidence requires total belief in the quality of the insights being shared. Face-to-face research delivers on that issue of trust. When you talk with a human, face to face, see their body language and understand the nuances of that personal interaction, you can deliver high fidelity findings.

Priscilla McKinney, CEO of Little Bird Marketing

Moderators are thrilled; End Users are thrilled; Respondents are thrilled – the excitement of doing in person research is all the rave right now. To hear our clients comment how much more insightful their research results have been has been so rewarding. Body language and group discussion delivers those deep insights that they have all been craving the past few years. Market Research is so important for all companies and each method has its own purpose based on each projects objectives. In-person is a vital part of those methods and has proven it will never be replaced.

Angela Lorinchak, President of Jackson Adept Research

#facetofacemrx

In-person remains an essential tool in any expert researcher's insights toolbox. There is no substitute for being with a consumer face-to-face and seeing and hearing the nuances and subtleties that you just can't get any other way. The richness from these interactions makes them in demand with successful brand marketers who want to truly understand consumers and how they see the world around them.

Jude Olinger, CEO of The Olinger Group

While online qualitative can work well for some shopper research issues – when you start exploring sustainability, structure, materials, or you just need a large shelf context, nothing is better than in-person qualitative!

Cliff Kane, Sr. VP of Behaviorally



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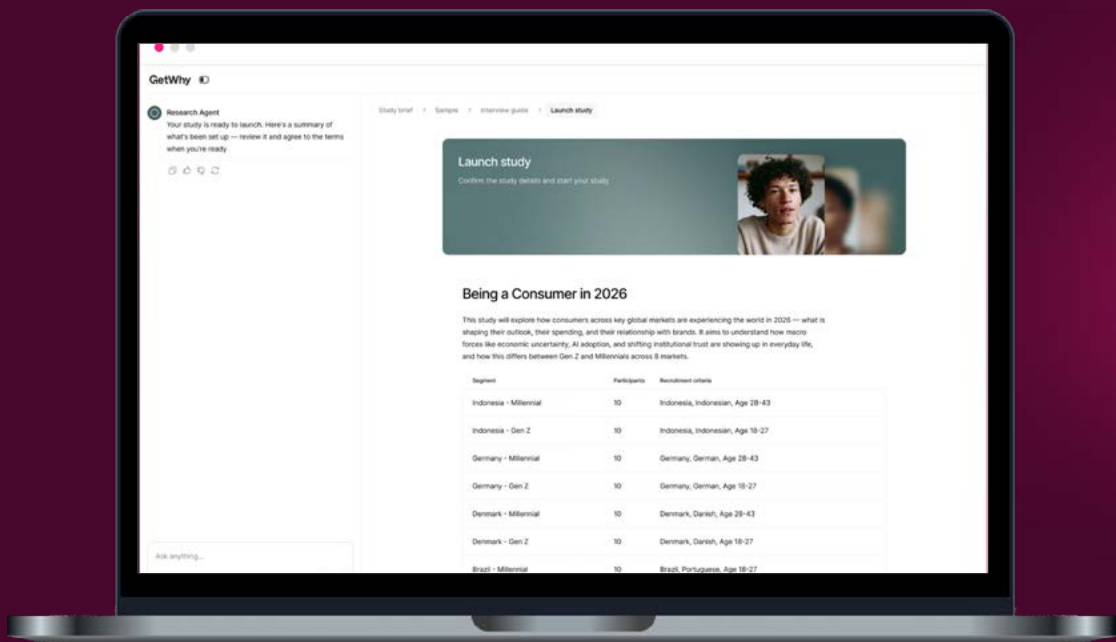
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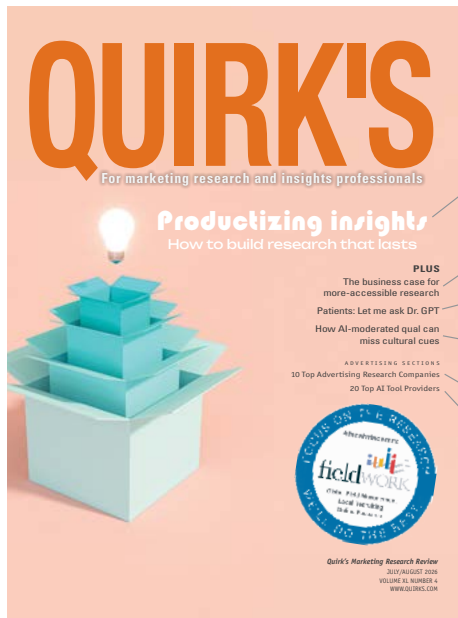


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Research Careers Blog

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Looking back after retiring

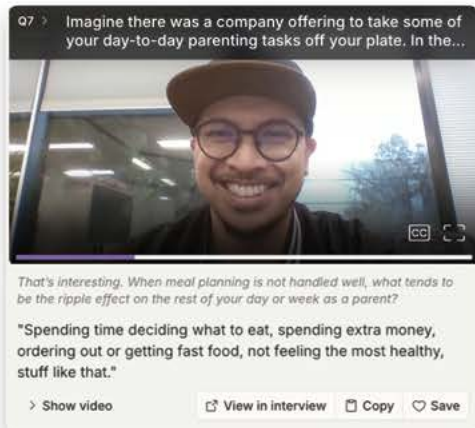
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Let's talk
insights





... packaging research Consider pack updates carefully, study says

Modernization is one of the most common objectives when companies redesign packaging but updating for the sake of it is fraught with danger, according to a study by William Caruso of Adelaide University's Ehrenberg-Bass Institute. A redesign that removes distinctive visual elements such as colors, logos or layout that consumers associate with the brand can cause lasting damage.

"The study shows that successful redesign depends on increasing consumers' perceived modernity without undermining recognizable brand cues. If a redesign removes distinctive visual elements such as colors, logos or layout that consumers associate with the brand, familiarity can decline, weakening purchase intent," Caruso says.

The study "The packaging redesign modernisation dilemma: The relationship with familiarity, likeability, and its effect on purchase intent," surveyed primary household shoppers in the U.S. and U.K. and was published in the *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*.

Because consumers often rely on visual cues to identify products quickly in busy retail environments, maintaining recognizable elements is critical to helping shoppers locate and recognize products on the shelf.

Caruso says businesses should not redesign packaging simply because modernization is fashionable. "Instead, firms should modernize when pack likeability has measurably declined, while protecting distinctive brand assets that help consumers recognize and find the brand. The findings suggest companies should use research to track likeability, test brand identification via distinctive asset testing and rebuild familiarity through communication if major redesigns are introduced."

... employment research

Perceptions of foreignness can taint job application process

Asian, Arab and Latino Americans may face more discrimination when seeking jobs that emphasize stereotypically American characteristics because they are deemed to be culturally foreign, according to research published in the article "Applicants of color encounter discrimination based on cultural foreignness stereotypes in the labor market" in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*.

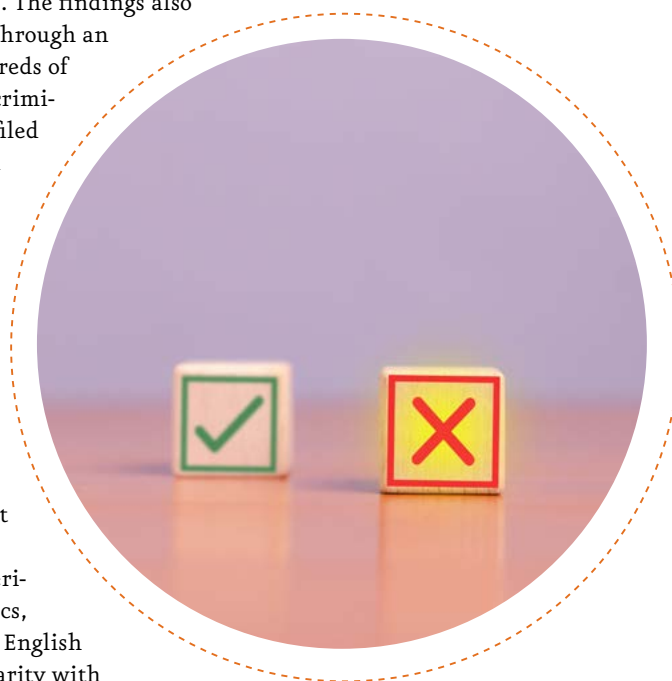
Researchers found this pattern across several experiments, regardless of whether the proposed job applicants had foreign-language first names or Anglicized first names. The findings also were supported through an analysis of hundreds of employment discrimination lawsuits filed by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

In an online experiment, more than 1,000 white American participants were presented with a job ad that emphasized stereotypically American characteristics, including strong English skills and familiarity with American customs and traditions.

The participants then viewed similar résumés with candidates who had common Asian American, Latino American or Black American last names and Anglicized first names.

The participants rated the Asian and Latino American applicants as less hireable and more culturally foreign than the Black American applicants. The participants selected the Asian American applicants (21%) or the Latino American applicants (23%) at lower rates compared with the Black American applicants (57%).

"Programs and policies that intend to reduce discrimination should avoid adopting one-size-fits-all solutions because racial and ethnic groups may experience discrimination in different ways and in different contexts," says lead researcher Terrance Pope.





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What researchers want from their vendors

Ask a gathering of corporate researchers about their vendor relationships and you'll get something between a therapy session and a performance review. During a recent conversation with members of the Professional Insights Collaborative (PIC) – a free organization for client-side insights pros underwritten by Quirk's – I did exactly that. The discussion covered everything from what makes a vendor relationship click to where the industry is still leaving researchers frustrated. (I recapped an earlier PIC gathering on the topic of synthetic data in this space in our January/February issue – <https://bit.ly/49NdFnW>.)

The group was quick to identify what separates good vendor relationships from great ones. Industry expertise came up repeatedly as a differentiator. PIC member J, who works in automotive, prizes vendors who already understand his category – ones who know the right questions to ask without needing a primer on the industry. PIC member S, a one-person team in health care, echoed that sentiment, describing a qualitative partner who has become so immersed in the category that she jokes he'll become a doctor in his next career. PIC member T, working in the notoriously complex streaming space, has learned through experience to be wary of vendors who assume a category is easy to pick up because they're consumers themselves.

The storytelling gap

If there was one frustration that animated the group most, it was the failure of vendors to tell a story with data. PIC member T described a widespread and persistent problem: vendors delivering charts and visuals that simply restate what's in the table, rather than synthesizing findings into meaningful narrative.

"I can take a set of tabs and do that," she said. "That's not what I'm asking for."

The problem, she suggested, isn't necessarily automation or AI. It may be a combination of vendors taking on too much work and researchers acquiescing on scope when deadlines tighten, creating a dynamic where "checking the box" becomes the de facto standard. The consequence is that researchers end up redoing deliverables themselves, which raises an obvious question about the value being provided.

AI: promising but not yet a magic fix

The group had a nuanced read on AI adoption among their vendor partners. PIC member T described a spectrum – some vendors have meaningfully integrated AI in ways that accelerate open-end coding, identify trends earlier and enable tools like real-time campaign effectiveness dashboards that previously required waiting weeks for results. She's also using an approach where a subset of survey completers opt into a brief AI-moderated follow-up conversation that adds qualitative color to quant work – something her executive stakeholders have found valuable.

PIC member S said her partners are using AI internally for coding and report-building, though it's largely invisible on her end. PIC member B was more skeptical: he's found that when vendors point to proprietary or opaque AI capabilities, the reality behind the curtain often doesn't hold up. His preference is for vendors who stay in their lane rather than overselling AI as a cure-all. PIC member Jo described a pilot-first approach – requiring vendors to prove out AI applications before committing – driven partly by internal uncertainty about how AI should be used and partly by the absence of dedi-



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Joe Rydholm can be reached at joe@quirks.com

cated budget for experimentation.

One area where the group agreed AI has conspicuously not delivered is social listening. PIC member T described social tools as "antiquated" – still reliant on manually constructed keyword queries, weak sentiment analysis and labor-intensive data cleaning that falls on her team. PIC member A added that the walled gardens of platforms compound the problem and that the analysis tools available simply don't handle the ambiguity and sarcasm of internet language. Both found it puzzling that a category seemingly built for AI-driven analysis has been so slow to evolve.

Know your audience

Budget pressure is pushing most researchers toward smaller, more trusted vendor rosters, with several doing more work in-house than they once did – not by choice, but necessity. When the group was asked what they'd want the next generation of vendor-side researchers to prioritize, the answer was unanimous: storytelling. Know your audience, understand what your client's stakeholders actually need to hear and learn to communicate findings accordingly. PIC member J put it simply: If a vendor has worked with a client for years, that institutional knowledge about what makes the client tick should be part of how new team members are onboarded.

The soft skills, as PIC member S noted, are often the hardest ones to teach. 🗣️

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LIANA MORGADO
FOUNDER AND CEO, TALKSHOPPE

As the founder and CEO of Talk Shoppe, Liana has built one of the industry's most innovative, insight-driven research agencies. Since launching the company in 2010, she has positioned Talk Shoppe as a bespoke strategic partner known for blending cultural intelligence, emotional insight and data-driven storytelling to help brands better understand the people they serve.

As a Cuban American woman, Liana recognized firsthand how often

Hispanic consumers were misunderstood or oversimplified in mainstream research. That realization inspired the creation of La Tienda, a groundbreaking insights and strategy group within Talk Shoppe focused on elevating Hispanic voices.

By building a dedicated team focused on Hispanic research, Liana created a practice rooted in cultural fluency, authenticity and inclusive listening. La Tienda helps brands move beyond performative outreach toward meaningful, culturally relevant engagement while challenging outdated narratives around Hispanic consumers. Through this work, Liana continues to reshape the research industry by proving that deeper representation leads to stronger, more impactful insights.

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FERNANDO CASTRO

FOUNDER, CULTURE WISE INSIGHTS

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Alain Briancon brings more than 30 years of experience in artificial intel-



ligence, data science and enterprise technology to his role as vice president of research and data science at Dynata. A senior leader who has held VP, CTO and CEO positions across startups and Fortune 500 companies, Alain leads data science and research-powered innovation across market research operations, survey methodologies and client

solutions. Prior to Dynata, he held senior roles at Kantar Profiles, Amida Technology Solutions and Cerebri AI. He is the inventor of 90 U.S.-granted patents, including 29 in AI, and holds a Ph.D. in electrical engineering from MIT.

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Founder and CEO Terence McCarron, a generational expert of online sample, the research workflow and the market itself, cultivated a rare instinct for where the industry breaks before clients feel it.

Chief Trust Officer Rich Ratcliff has built his career on data quality, treating it as more than just a checkbox, but a commitment that protects an agency's credibility and, ultimately, its finances.

SVP of Applied Innovation Ken Berry turned survey programming into an engineering discipline. One of the first to fuse programmer and full-stack developer in one role, he converts one-off builds into repeatable systems that make every next project faster.

SVP of Client Development Scott Stein led client teams at major sample companies for 20 years.

Relationship-first by nature, he reads what a client needs and catches problems before they reach your client.

SVP of Client Experience Danielle Chinitz knows sample supply from the inside, and pairs that leverage with a service standard that makes the hard parts feel easy.

COO Kayla Cousineau has steered high-caliber delivery teams through wrenching change. She builds operations systems that absorb chaos, so projects stay calm, predictable and on time.

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QUIRK'S IN FOCUS

A digest of survey findings and new insights for researchers

●●● education research

Coughing up college costs

Tightening budgets don't derail higher education plans

When asked about post-graduate plans as part of a recent survey, 95% of American high school students say they plan to continue their education. Ipsos and student loan company Sallie Mae surveyed over 2,000 respondents online and found that 90% of families believe higher education is an investment in their students' future. Over eight in 10 (82%) say it's worth the cost. A similar number of parents surveyed (83%) say they are willing to stretch financially for the best higher education opportunities.

A surprising 73% of families say they would rather borrow money than have their child forgo attending higher education. Most families (68%) agree there should be limits to how much debt federal student

loan borrowers can take on (only 10% disagree).

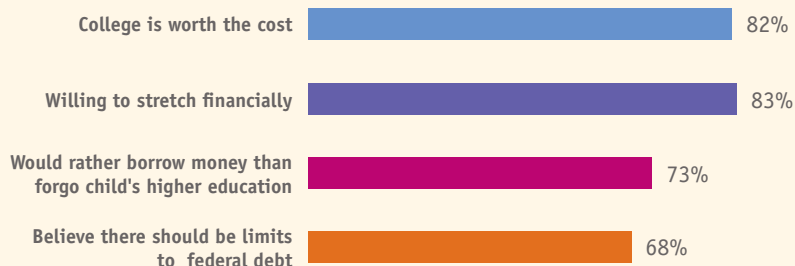
Sixty-four percent of families say they have a plan to pay for higher education, a 10% increase from 2020. On top of this, 44% of high school students who plan to pursue college are already planning for graduate school. The level of savings in these families has increased significantly, with 60% of families considering higher education indicating they have saved on average \$42,307 compared to \$26,266 in 2020, driven primarily by higher-income families. Most families saving for higher education continue to rely on general savings accounts (53%) over tax-advantaged 529 college savings accounts (39%).

Things have changed in the past few years in terms of college financial planning. While 77% of high school families considering higher education in 2020 said they were taking steps to prepare, in 2026, 85% say the same thing. More than half of students (55%) claim to have at least a general idea of the field they want to pursue, although only 38% of families say they have discussed key outcomes of higher education. Even fewer (28%) have conversed about the potential earnings compared with the cost of education and career placement rates.

Clarity about paying for college is still needed for families. Forty percent feel they are on their own when it comes to planning and paying for college. Nearly half (48%) believe scholarships are only available to students with exceptional grades and only 37% know that families often pay less than the advertised price of college. Only about one in five (22%) know when student loan interest typically begins to accrue.

How America Plans for College 2026 is based on 2,010 online interviews conducted by Ipsos from January 21-27, 2026, among 1,005 U.S. parents of high school students and 1,005 U.S. high school students ages 14-18.

Parents value higher education



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... parenting research Motherhood's mental challenges

Misunderstandings about postpartum lead to isolation

Postpartum recovery is, of course, physically challenging, but a recent survey also highlights the profound mental health impact of early motherhood. In a survey of over 1,000 mothers, therapy practice Octave found that 40% cited mental health impact as the most misunderstood part about early motherhood, compared to only 21% who cited physical recovery. Almost all (96%) mothers who reported struggling with their mental health reference emotional isolation as the primary factor in postpartum mental health concerns.

Mothers who report struggling with their mental health in the first year of motherhood cite a host of negative

feelings including emotional isolation (96%), overwhelm (82%), fear (59%), sadness (56%) and guilt (44%).

Despite expectations of a deeply connected experience in motherhood, many think the opposite. Living with a romantic partner and co-parent doesn't prevent feelings of isolation, as about 40% of partnered mothers still experience frequent isolation. This means that isolation is not about being physically alone but about feeling unsupported not just by their partner but also by friends, family and community during this time.

This exposes the paradox of early motherhood. Joy and overwhelm often coexist for mothers, creating a layered emotional experience that is rarely discussed openly. Only 5% of mothers described their mental health as "thriving" during the first year postpartum. Most reported existing in the gray space in between, with 31% "managing" and 44% experiencing some level of struggle.

Eighty percent of employed mothers experienced work-family trade-offs on

some level. Almost seven in 10 employed mothers (69%) minimized their parental identity at work at least sometimes. Over half of co-parenting mothers (56%) reported moderate-to-high resentment about division of responsibilities. A similar amount (55%) said body image negatively affected their mental health.

Among those surveyed who wanted mental health support, the primary barrier isn't cost or insurance coverage; instead, it's not knowing where to start. Thirty-six percent also cited "lack of time" and 30% cited "childcare challenges," with 13% of mothers citing both.

These are findings of an Octave Therapy survey, with data collection provided by a market research firm, conducted in April 2026. A sample of 1,007 U.S. female-identifying people between the ages of 20 and 45 who gave birth to their first child between 2021 and 2026 and refer to themselves as "Mother" or "Mom" were surveyed online. The sample was randomly drawn from online panel sources and does not rely on a population frame in the traditional sense.



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Expanding education to the trades

Alternative classes offer viable careers for an AI-focused future

As artificial intelligence raises new questions about the future of work, a new national survey finds strong demand for the expansion of skilled trades education in U.S. public high schools, giving students earlier access to hands-on learning that can lead to meaningful careers in fields such as construction, welding, electrical, automotive technology, manufacturing and other essential trades.

The survey of more than 6,000 U.S. voters, parents and public high school students shows strong bipartisan support for growing career-focused options as part of high school curriculum.

Nearly four in five voters say it's a major problem that public high schools have reduced or eliminated trades classes entirely, contradicting the urgency of expanding opportunities. Almost all voters (95%) on both sides of the political spectrum agree that more opportunities to study skilled trades in high school would better prepare students for careers. Eighty-four percent support increased government funding for skilled trades education.

Politically, 74% of Democrats, followed closely by 65% of both independents and Republicans, say they are more likely to support candidates who back increased funding. Voters even ranked skilled trades as the top elective funding priority for high schools – higher than STEM, business, healthcare, arts and physical education.

Only 30% of high school students report having taken a skilled trades class with 40% of those students having taken multiple. On top of this, about one-third of students who want to take a trades class have been unable to do so.

About half of parents surveyed (49%) are extremely or very concerned that AI will limit their child's job opportunities and eight in 10 say having more opportunities to study the trades in high school will make their child more prepared for a career.

Trades classes can increase confidence in and out of the classroom. Compared to students who have never taken a trades class, students who have done so are more likely to say they enjoy school, believe they are receiving a high-quality education and have developed the skills and knowledge necessary for college. Fifty-nine percent of students who have taken a skilled trades class say what they learn in school is "useful for life after high school," compared to only 38% of students not in these classes agreeing with this sentiment.

About seven in 10 (69%) of voters agree it is important for the government to fund career training in fields that are less likely to be impacted by AI.

NORC surveyed more than 2,000 U.S. voters, more than 2,000 parents of U.S. public high school students and more than 1,700 U.S. public high school students between Dec. 9, 2025 and Jan. 21, 2026.

... food research

What a friend we have in cheeses

Americans value the taste and convenience of cheese in all its forms

While most Americans are fond of cheese – seeing it as a tasty and convenient source of protein – in a survey conducted by Talker Research, 52% of those polled took it up a notch, self-identifying as "cheese-obsessed."

Sixteen percent of participants say they're "constantly" eating cheese as a part of their daily routine, with 61% consuming it often or sometimes. A mere 3% say they never eat cheese.

Cheese is also considered a highly versatile food: 82% of Americans say it's one of their overall favorite foods, 91% say it's a favorite to add as a topping or ingredient to a meal and 77% say it's a snack-time favorite. Respondents reported adding cheese to just about everything from ramen to apple pie and even oatmeal. Nearly three-quarters of Americans (73%) always or often buy cheese when grocery shopping.

Interestingly, Wyoming ranked highest for cheese enthusiasm (61%), followed by Illinois (59%), Alaska, Louisiana and Oregon (each at 58%).

There are also generational differences in cheese fandom. Younger generations like Gen Z and Millennials have higher rates (61% and 57%, respectively) than Gen X and Baby Boomers (54% and 44%, respectively).

In terms of favorite cheeses, cheddar tops the list at 77%, followed by mozzarella (74%) and Parmesan (64%). But taste isn't the only reason Americans love cheese. More than half of those who eat cheese (54%) seek it out as a source of protein.

The top four reasons Americans turn to cheese are taste (74%), comfort (51%), convenience (49%) and the way it helps make meals feel more satisfying or filling (46%).

The survey 5,000 Americans (100 from each state) was commissioned by Dairy Management Inc. and administered and conducted online by Talker Research between Nov. 7 and Nov. 17, 2025.

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... sports research

You can bet on it

World Cup expected to juice online gambling

Sports betting is an increasingly popular form of entertainment. Online mobile payment and identity verification company Jumio conducted its 2026 Online Identity Study and found that online sports betting will take center stage during the World Cup.

Sixty-three percent of respondents say they worry about minors using sports betting apps to gamble during the World Cup. About three-fourths (74%) believe that preventing underage betting is the responsibility of online platforms and their technology providers and only 7% disagree that this should be a critical priority for the gaming industry.

About one in three adults globally plan on engaging in sports betting as part of their World Cup celebrations. By country, Mexico leads the charge with 43% saying they plan on betting, followed by the U.K. (33%), Singapore (29%) and the U.S. (26%).

Forty-seven percent of fans say betting is an important part of how they plan to enjoy the World Cup and 46% plan to socialize around the bets they place.

On a broader scale, global consumers love online sports betting. Over half (55%) would prefer to use an online platform to place their bets and 20% will interact with an online gaming platform for the first time during the World Cup. Forty-three percent of respondents already have a sports betting account that they plan to use during the World Cup, and 37% expect to juggle between multiple platforms to place bets during matches.

The Jumio 2026 Online Identity Study surveyed 8,003 adult consumers evenly distributed across the U.S., U.K., Singapore and Mexico. Censuswide fielded the survey between April 14 and April 27, 2026.

... healthcare research

Aging out of pediatrics

Young adults struggle to transition to adult medical care

Young people are shockingly under-prepared for the switch from pediatrics to the adult healthcare system. A survey conducted by biopharmaceutical company Ipsen suggests that extra attention is needed on this transition for young adults.

About seven in 10 (71%) of youth aged 14-26 find the adult healthcare system confusing, with two-thirds saying they would have benefited from more preparation for the transition. Healthcare providers tend to agree with this feeling. About nine in 10 primary care providers (89%) and pediatricians (93%) agree that the U.S. does not adequately prepare teens and young adults to navigate the adult healthcare system.

This gap in knowledge can have tangible consequences for a young person. Forty-three percent of youth who made the switch from pediatric to adult care experienced a time without a primary care provider after leaving pediatric care. Almost one-third (28%) had a health issue that went untreated and 26% increased their use of the emergency room. Three in 10 said their health was worse after switching.

There are serious gaps that may lead to this need for support in young people. Eighty-two percent of the surveyed youth say making appointments and meeting with healthcare providers can be intimidating. Forty-six percent say they often leave medical visits confused by the terminology used.

There are four main deficits identified by healthcare providers in young adults changing from pediatric to adult primary care: overreliance on parents, inability to accurately share their own medical history, uncertainty around how to ask providers questions and a lack of understanding of health insur-

ance basics. These gaps can limit their confidence to make the transition to adult healthcare.

Three in 10 youth surveyed have been diagnosed with a chronic condition, making a seamless transition out of pediatric care even more critical. Ninety-one percent of primary care providers and 94% of pediatricians agree handling the handoff from pediatrics to adult care is more important for youth with complex needs. The vast majority of parents (92%) agree that youth with chronic conditions need extra support during the switch as well.

Almost everyone surveyed agrees that more resources are needed for this critical transition. Eighty-one percent of youth and 84% of parents wish there were more resources to support young people who are navigating the change from pediatric to adult primary care. Eighty-eight percent of pediatricians and 79% of primary care providers agree there are not enough resources available to support teens/young adults during this shift. Eighty-four percent of youth and 92% of parents say healthcare providers should approach care for teen and young adult patients differently, recognizing they may need a different level of support. Nine in 10 parents and 83% of youth believe adult providers could make simple changes to better support young patients.

The Healthcare Shift Survey was conducted online in the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of Ipsen among 1,514 youth (teens and young adults aged 14-26) and 1,502 parents (adults aged 18+ who are parents to teens and young adults aged 14-26). Both audiences were U.S. residents who saw (or whose child saw) either a primary care provider or pediatrician. The survey was conducted January 30 through February 13, 2026. The healthcare providers survey was conducted among 200 primary care providers and 200 pediatricians. Both audiences were aged 18+, physicians (MDs or DOs) who practiced in the continental U.S., were duly licensed, had at least 25% of their patient population aged 14-26 and at least 15% of those patients managed a chronic condition. The survey was conducted Jan. 29 through Feb. 11, 2026.

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... healthcare research Take as directed – by yourself

Americans routinely
combine both OTC and Rx
meds

A new, nationally representative study published in the medical journal JAMA Network Open provides a detailed picture of U.S. adults' use of over-the-counter (OTC) and prescription (Rx) medications. The study finds that 46% of U.S. adults surveyed reported the use of an OTC medication during the past seven days, often to address everyday, self-treatable healthcare. Nearly two-thirds (62%) reported using at least one medication of any type (OTC or Rx) in the past seven days.

Rather than focusing on prescriptions written or medications taken at any point during an individual's lifetime, the study, "Prevalence of over-the-counter and prescription medication use in the U.S.," captures a snapshot of recent, self-reported use. Within a seven-day period, OTC and prescription medicines were reported at nearly identical rates, reflecting the co-use of different types of medicines within the same week to address distinct health needs.

"Usually, medication evidence comes from prescriptions dispensed by pharmacies or products sold," says Jody Green, principal investigator of the study, "but in this study we focused on what people actually used in the past seven days, which provides a clearer picture of how American adults manage their health conditions in daily life."

Adults often manage multiple health concerns at once, using more than one medication during a given

week. The study evaluated recent, self-reported use of OTC and prescription medications across a range of common conditions, including both single-ingredient and fixed-dose combination products.

No information was collected on the care settings in which medications were taken or on health outcomes. The findings reflect how U.S. adults report managing their individual health needs through the use of both OTC and prescription medications. Prescription medications are commonly used for more serious or longer-term conditions, while OTC medicines are frequently used to manage short-term and everyday ailments.

The published study identified the most commonly used Rx and OTC medicines reported by U.S. adults in the past seven days. The list includes familiar OTC products alongside widely used prescription medicines for chronic conditions, reflecting the

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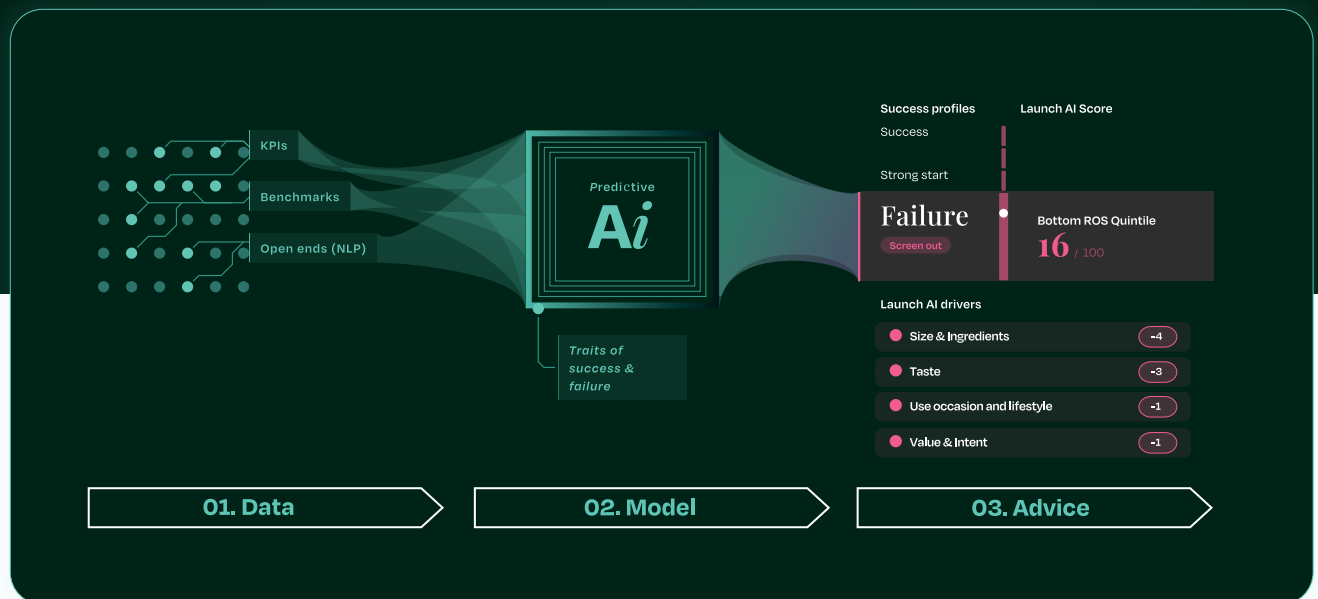
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mix of self-care and clinician-directed treatments people report using in everyday life. This mix underscores an important reality: healthcare is not an either/or proposition. It is a continuum in which consumers responsibly combine self-care and clinician-guided treatments to meet their needs.

"It's also notable that several of the most commonly used OTCs on the list were once only available by prescription," says Scott Melville, Consumer Healthcare Products Association president and CEO. "Over the years, OTC medications – like naproxen, omeprazole, cetirizine and loratadine, to name a few – went through FDA's Rx-to-OTC switch process to change their status from prescription-only access to OTC. Their appearance on the list among the most commonly-used medicines is a great example of how smart regulatory changes can expand consumer

access to safe and effective treatments for better self-care."

Notably, the four most commonly used medicines overall – acetaminophen, ibuprofen, aspirin and naproxen – are all available over the counter, with the top three unchanged from patterns observed in national medication use surveys conducted approximately 25 years ago.

One of the key findings of the study is the extent to which OTC medicines are used for self-treatable health concerns. Overall, six of the 10 most commonly used medicines identified in this study are available, or primarily available, as an OTC medication.

These findings provide context on how Americans use both Rx and OTC medicines as part of everyday health management. By documenting recent medication use rather than prescriptions written or products sold, the study offers relevant data to inform ongoing discussions about self-care,

access and the appropriate role of nonprescription medicines within the broader healthcare landscape.

Using a sample size of 21,000 U.S. adults, researchers conducted the large, nationally representative survey of U.S. adults from June 2023 through April 2024, asking participants to report all prescription and OTC medicines they had used in the previous seven days. Responses were statistically weighted to reflect the U.S. adult population.

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... food research

Frozen is hot

Industry data shows frozen food user base growing

Frozen food has moved from a backup option to a core element of meal-planning for a growing share of American households, according to findings in the fourth edition of the Power of Frozen in Retail report from the American Frozen Food Institute (AFFI) and FMI – the Food Industry Association.

As the national conversation about food, health and affordability is intensifying, the research finds millions of families seeing practical answers in the frozen food aisle. Among the report's significant findings:

The base of core frozen food consumers is increasing. Consumers who use frozen foods every few days or daily now represent 40% of shoppers, up from 35% in 2019. Nearly one-third (30%) plan to buy more frozen food, the strongest purchase intent measured in

years. And 77% now purchase frozen foods with a specific meal or day in mind, up from 71% in 2023; a clear sign that frozen is a key component of meal planning.

Frozen food is helping families stretch their food dollars and reduce waste. Consumers report responding to economic concerns with an increased interest in at-home cooking, meal planning and food waste prevention – all needs which frozen food can meet. Plus, 37% of consumers use frozen food specifically as a way to reduce food waste.

Frozen is meeting the needs of today's families. Consumers appreciate the time-saving benefits of frozen food and also find that the category is meeting their evolving expectations for taste, quality and better-for-you attributes. The top-three purchase drivers identified among shoppers are ease of preparation, price and taste. At the same time, 96% of shoppers believe the frozen food aisle has better-for-you options and 71% report looking for frozen items they haven't bought before.

It's frozen and fresh, not frozen or fresh. Three-in-four consumers (76%)

now combine fresh and frozen ingredients in the same meal. Households are not choosing between the freezer and the refrigerator. They are using both.

The insights follow the recent release of the 2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which call for increased consumption of fruits, vegetables and nutrient-dense foods. "Shoppers seeking value are willing to pay more for health, convenience, enjoyment and entertainment – which can all be found in the frozen food aisle," said Andrew Brown, senior manager of industry relations at FMI, in a press statement. "Food retailers can build loyalty with shoppers by showcasing the ways frozen food options can help families eat well, save time, waste less and provide quality meals that they will enjoy."

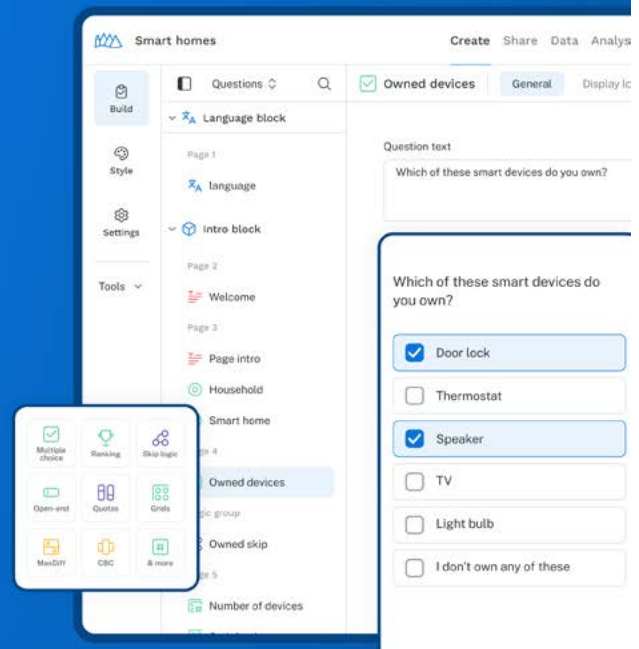
The fourth edition of the Power of Frozen in Retail study was conducted by 210 Analytics, with a Circana sales data overlay. The national consumer survey was conducted in October 2025 among 1,560 frozen food consumers who have at least 50% responsibility for grocery shopping.

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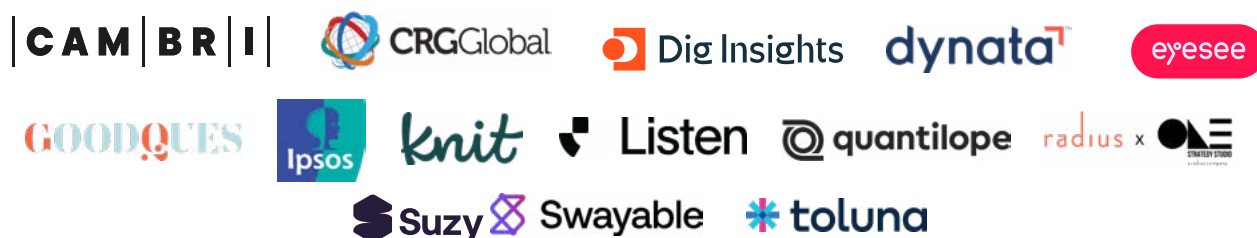
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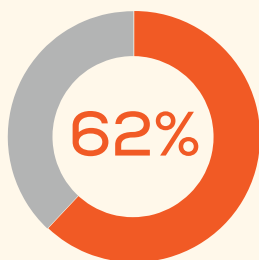
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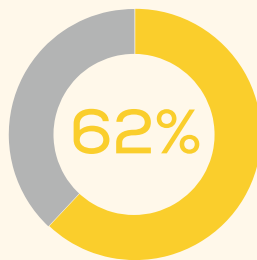


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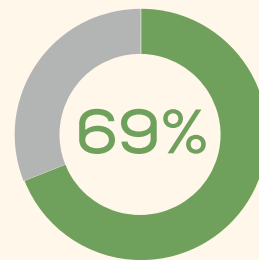
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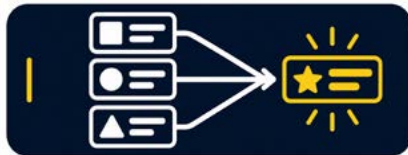
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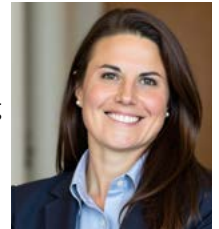
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AI can accelerate research but it can't replace expertise

| By John Hoeppner

abstract

As AI lowers the barrier to “good enough” research, the competitive advantage for organizations shifts decisively toward the researchers capable of framing the right problems and making confident, well-interpreted decisions.

Artificial intelligence is rapidly reshaping the marketing research landscape. From survey design to data summarization to idea generation, AI tools are making it faster and easier to produce outputs that once required significant time and resources.

For research teams under pressure to move quickly, this is a meaningful shift. But as AI adoption increases, an important distinction is emerging, one that has significant implications for how research is conducted – and more importantly, how it is interpreted and applied: AI can improve productivity; it does not replace expertise.

One of AI's greatest strengths is its ability to generate outputs at scale. It can: draft surveys in seconds; summarize large datasets; generate concepts, messages or product ideas; identify patterns across text inputs.

This creates the impression that the research process itself has been fundamentally transformed. In reality, AI is primarily accelerating production tasks, not decision-making quality. And in marketing research, those are not the same thing. Because the value of research has never been defined by how much output is produced but instead by whether the right decisions are made.

Where expertise actually matters

Marketing research is often viewed as a process of gathering and analyzing data. But experienced practitioners know the real value lies elsewhere – specifically in three areas:

1. Asking the right questions. AI can generate a survey. But it cannot determine which questions will uncover meaningful insight versus surface-level noise. Question framing, attribute selection and hypothesis design all require contextual understanding of the category, the competitive landscape and the business objective. Poor inputs still lead to poor outputs, regardless of how quickly they are generated.

2. Interpreting results in context.

AI can summarize findings. But it does not understand what the results *mean* within a real-world market. For example: Is a five-point lift in purchase intent meaningful in this category? Does a high awareness score translate into actual behavior? Are differences statistically significant – or strategically irrelevant?

These are not purely analytical questions. They are interpretive ones. And interpretation is where expertise plays a critical role.

3. Translating insights into decisions. Perhaps the most overlooked aspect of research is the final step: turning findings into clear, actionable recommendations. Data rarely points to a single obvious answer. Instead, it presents trade-offs: short-term gains vs. long-term brand equity; differentiation vs. familiarity; innovation vs. risk.

AI can present the data. But deciding what to do with it – and how confident to be – requires judgment built on experience.

Brand naming provides a useful illustration of this broader dynamic. AI can generate hundreds of potential names in seconds – far more than traditional ideation methods. But naming has never been constrained by idea volume. The real challenge is determining which name will succeed in the market. That requires evaluating

multiple dimensions, including: memorability; perceived quality; differentiation; fit with brand strategy; global and linguistic risk.

These factors are often interdependent. A name that is highly distinctive may introduce risk in certain markets. A name that feels familiar may lack differentiation.

AI can generate options. It cannot reliably resolve these trade-offs. That requires structured research, comparative evaluation and experienced interpretation. And the same principle applies across many areas of marketing research – not just naming.

The risk of ‘good enough’ insights

As AI tools become more accessible, another challenge is emerging: the rise of “good enough” outputs. Because AI-generated content often appears polished and credible, it can create a false sense of confidence. Research may feel complete because: the survey was generated quickly; the data was summarized efficiently; and the findings are presented clearly. But clarity is not the same as accuracy. And speed is not the same as rigor.

Without careful design, validation and interpretation, research risks becoming directionally helpful but strategically flawed. Over time, this can lead to decisions that are incrementally suboptimal, insufficiently differentiated or misaligned with actual consumer behavior.

Paradoxically, as AI becomes more widely used, expertise becomes more important. When more organizations have access to similar tools, the competitive advantage shifts. It is no longer about who can produce the most output. It is about who can frame the right problem, extract meaningful insight and make confident, informed decisions.

In other words, the advantage moves from generation to judgment. This is where experienced researchers continue to play a critical role.

Integrating AI into the research process

The most effective approach is not to view AI and expertise as competing forces but as complementary ones.

A balanced research workflow might look like this:

- Use AI to increase speed and breadth. Generate ideas, drafts and initial analyses efficiently.
- Apply human expertise to structure the research. Define objectives, design frameworks and ensure relevance.
- Validate with real-world data. Ground findings in actual consumer response.
- Interpret and recommend with confidence. Translate insights into clear, actionable direction.

This combination allows organizations to benefit from AI’s efficiency without sacrificing the quality of decision-making.

Make better decisions

AI is an important advancement for marketing research. It can accelerate workflows, expand exploration and improve productivity across many tasks. But it does not replace the core elements that make research valuable: asking the right questions, interpreting results in context and making informed decisions.

Those capabilities are built through experience. And as AI continues to evolve, they will only become more critical. Because in the end, the goal of research is not to generate more output. It’s to make better decisions. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Hoepfner is founder and president of Brand Name Quest, a global brand naming and research firm. With more than 35 years of experience, he specializes in research-driven product, service and company naming across consumer, healthcare and B2B markets. He has led naming initiatives for leading global companies and is author of “Winning the Naming Game When You’re Not First.” Find Hoepfner on LinkedIn: [linkedin.com/in/john-hoepfner-2657805](https://www.linkedin.com/in/john-hoepfner-2657805)



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Remote interviews aren't broken; our approach to them is

| By Michael Carlon



abstract

Remote qualitative research fails not because the medium is flawed, but because moderators apply in-person conventions to a fundamentally different environment. Ten concrete techniques – from hosting with personality to designing for participation – can transform online interviews into genuinely engaging, insight-rich sessions.

Earlier this year I attended the annual Qualitative Research Consultants Association conference and one breakout session centered around a familiar question: How can we make online interviews feel more like in-person interviews? It's a fair question. For decades, in-person interviews were the gold standard for qualitative research. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, live remote interviews were chipping away at in-person sessions because they were less expensive to run. There was no need to rent facilities and feed people nor did you have to travel from market to market. Recruiting was easier and national representation was often stronger. Operations were streamlined in ways that made business stakeholders very happy but yet something is different; the dynamic just isn't the same.

As a moderator, it's harder to read the room. You cannot lean forward to invite depth or gently shift posture to move things along. Rather, you have to call on people to prevent them from talking over one another. You are constantly managing microphones, dodgy video, lags and that awkward split second where two people begin speaking at the same time and both retreat.

Attention spans are different online and it's not uncommon for participants to wander while others are talking. Some open another browser window and others scroll on their phones while the remaining half listen while waiting to be called on again. In one-on-one interviews, this is easier to manage, but the traps remain; there are bad connections, background noise and multi-tasking. I once had a hotel front desk agent attempt to complete an interview while on shift, excusing herself repeatedly to help guests with issues.

And then there are the drivers! No matter how clearly we state that participants must be stationary in a quiet environment, someone inevitably logs in from their car on the way to work or while running errands. "It's okay, I can do this while driving," they will say. Well, not on my watch. I don't want that kind of liability, particularly since much of my work is UX-focused – I don't want someone navigating a prototype and a left turn at the same time.

All this is to say I understand why our industry wants to devote brainpower to making online interviews feel more like controlled, in-person sessions,

but I would argue that it's actually the wrong question. The better question is this: How do we create an online environment where participants want to stay engaged, not only to add value to the session but to hear what others have to say?

Remote research is not broken, but our approach to it often is. Here are 10 ways to rethink our craft.

Think like a talk show host, not a moderator. If you want active participation, bring more of yourself into the session. Adopt the persona not only of an unbiased researcher, but of someone who can entertain without compromising rigor. Get participants laughing early to signal that this will not be a sterile Q&A. Energy is contagious, even through a screen, and participants take their cues from you.

Treat them like guests, not participants. Guests are welcomed and introduced thoughtfully and they are invited into a conversation rather than interrogated. The first five minutes matter enormously. In person, proximity creates warmth but online you must manufacture psychological proximity. Consider introducing your guests

based on their screener responses or a bio statement they've shared prior to the session vs. having them introduce themselves. Then start with something light and slightly unexpected that gets everyone speaking early. Once someone has used their voice in the opening minutes, they are far more likely to use it again.

Keep the group small (less is more).

Online groups do not benefit from size; in fact, they suffer from it. Resist the temptation to seat six, seven or eight people just because you can. Four to five participants is often the sweet spot. Fewer voices mean more airtime for each person, less cross talk and more depth. Smaller groups create accountability and intimacy, both of which drive engagement. I'd recommend doing a larger number of smaller groups than a smaller number of larger groups any day of the week.

Be explicit about the stakes. In a facility, the environment itself signals importance; participants may have arranged childcare, driven across town and walked into a space that feels official, which naturally raises the perceived stakes. Online, they may be at

their kitchen tables with a barking dog nearby and an inbox open in another tab. Remote sessions compete with real life in ways in-person groups rarely do. If you do not elevate the significance of the conversation, it risks feeling like just another Zoom call. That's why you must be explicit about impact by clearly explaining how their feedback will shape a product launch, influence messaging or determine what gets put on next quarter's roadmap. When participants understand that what they say will travel beyond the screen and affect a real decision, attention sharpens, engagement deepens and they show up with a level of presence that goes well beyond the incentive.

Name the distractions before they sabotage you. Since you know attention will drift, address it directly. I often say at the beginning, "If you are tempted to check e-mail while someone else is talking, that is usually when the most interesting comments happen." It is part humor, part challenge. People respond when you raise the bar and treat them like capable contributors rather than passive respondents.

Design for participation instead

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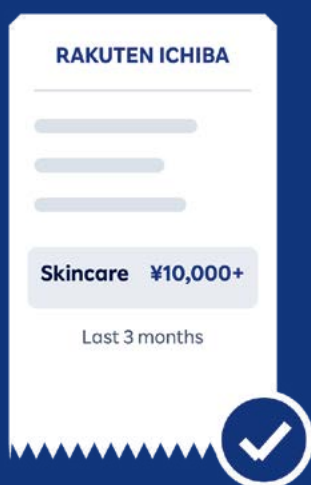
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of waiting for it. Rather than posing broad questions and hoping volunteers jump in, create micro-commitments. Tell participants you are going around the room for quick reactions before diving deeper. Remove the dominance dynamic that allows two strong personalities to take over. People engage more when they know their voice is expected, not optional.

Encourage participants to respond to each other, not just to you. It is easy online to become the hub of every exchange so resist that instinct and redirect deliberately. If someone is nodding, ask what resonated in another participant's comment. When participants begin listening for meaning rather than waiting for their turn, engagement increases dramatically.

Use the platform intentionally. In person, people react to one another with body language. Online, silence can look like disengagement even when it is not. Ask for quick signals in chat. Use visible thumbs up or down or built-in reactions in whatever tool you are using. Consider polling briefly before opening the floor. Movement creates energy and also gives quieter participants a low-risk way to

contribute before speaking at length.

Introduce tension on purpose. Online groups often default to polite agreement because disagreement feels awkward on screen, yet conflict is frequently where the richest insights live. When you sense harmony settling in too quickly, ask who sees it differently. Ask what the counterargument would be if this were a real debate. Give permission for friction and the conversation will come alive (just like Peter Frampton).

Shorten the segments, not the depth. Attention online works in waves so break topics into tighter arcs and signal transitions clearly. Let participants know when you are shifting gears and when you are moving quickly. Momentum keeps people with you; it mirrors how good storytellers structure scenes – and make no mistake, we are in the storytelling business.

Chasing a ghost

Remote research is not a downgrade from in-person work; it's simply a different stage. The camera is unforgiving, but it is also intimate. You see people in their kitchens and home offices. You glimpse their real lives. There is a

humanity in that setting that does not exist in a focus group facility or hotel conference room. If we continue asking how to make online feel like in-person, we will keep chasing a ghost. Instead, if we ask how to make remote sessions compelling in their own right, we elevate the craft. Perhaps this is where the next generation of great moderators will distinguish themselves. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Carlon is director of user experience research at Charter Communications. With nearly 30 years of experience in qualitative research, marketing and user experience, he has helped global brands uncover human insights to build better products and services. He holds a BA in psychology from University of Connecticut and an MBA with a concentration in marketing from Fairfield University. Find him at [linkedin.com/in/mikecarlon](https://www.linkedin.com/in/mikecarlon)

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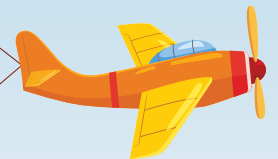


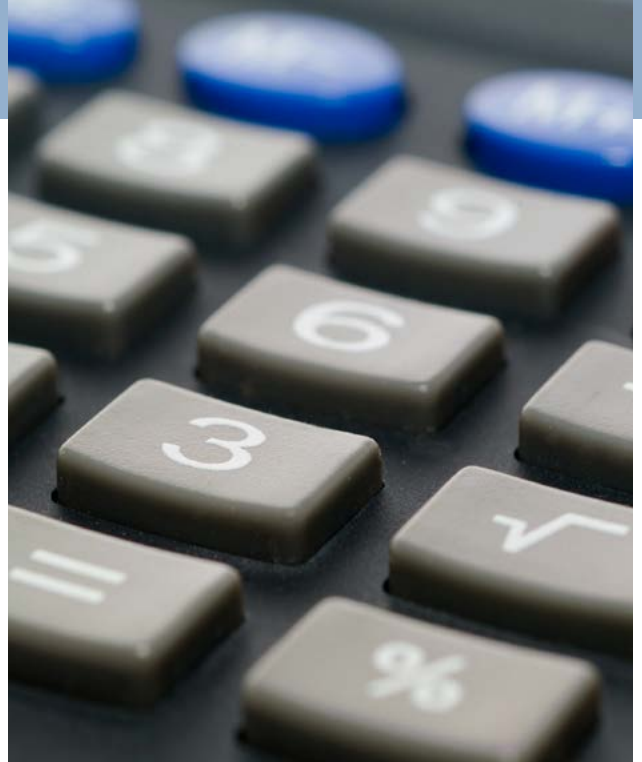
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Using internal consistency measures to find bad survey data

| By Bob Wood and Toshi Yumoto

abstract

Traditional survey quality checks often catch only the most obvious cases of poor respondent behavior. An internal consistency framework offers a more adaptive way to identify low-quality responses by evaluating how well answers align with the natural relationships within the data.

Few issues worry insights professionals more than bad survey data. We can design elegant questionnaires, recruit carefully and analyze rigorously, but if a meaningful share of respondents is not answering each question thoughtfully and truthfully, everything downstream is at risk. Models become noisy, segments blur and decisions drift away from reality.

The uncomfortable truth is that bad data is not rare. Multiple industry studies over the past decade suggest that anywhere from 15% to 30% of online survey responses may be partially or wholly unreliable (Callegaro, 2014) (Gao, 2016). The exact number varies by panel, incentive structure and survey length, but the problem itself is well established. As research continues to move faster and cheaper, the economic incentives that produce low-effort responses have not gone away (Kennedy, 2020).

The harder question is not whether bad data exists but how we should detect it without damaging the data we are trying to protect.

The cost and prevalence of bad survey data

Low-quality responses create two kinds of damage. The first is obvious: respondents who click randomly, straightline grids or answer without reading dilute the signal in the data. The second is more subtle and often more dangerous. Standard cleaning rules tend to remove certain types of respondents more than others, introducing bias even as they reduce noise. For example, removing speeders tends to bias results toward higher education and older populations (Zhang, 2014).

Researchers have long documented this tension. For example, speeders do not always provide poor data and slow respondents are not necessarily careful ones. Attention checks can identify some careless respondents, but they can also frustrate engaged participants and change how they answer later questions. Pattern detection catches obvious straightlining but misses more sophisticated forms of satisficing. Self-reported effort checks tend to identify only a small fraction of problematic cases.

In other words, the industry knows bad data is common, but the tools we use to find it are blunt. They often work best for the most extreme cases and worst for the gray area where real harm occurs.

Standard approaches and their limits

Most survey quality controls fall into a few familiar categories.

Timing-based rules flag respondents who complete surveys “too quickly,” assuming speed implies inattention. In practice, completion time can be helpful, but it can be noisy and needs to be combined with other checks. Some kinds of respondents just generally go faster, especially experienced panelists or mobile respondents (Berry, 2019).

Instructional manipulation checks and trap questions test whether respondents are reading carefully. These can work, but they are also easy to learn and avoid. More importantly, they interrupt the natural flow of the survey and can change respondent behavior after the check is encountered by interrupting the interview flow (Paas, 2018).

Consistency checks repeat or mirror questions to see whether answers align. While intuitive, these checks lengthen surveys and can feel punitive to attentive respondents. They also assume that inconsistency is always a sign of carelessness, which is not necessarily true in attitudinal research.

Pattern detection looks for straightlining or simple response sequences. This is useful for the most obvious fraud but fails when respondents give random-looking answers that still pass superficial pattern tests.

Each of these methods can remove some bad data. None of them scale well to the more common problem of respondents who answer plausibly but without much thought. And nearly all of them rely on external rules imposed on the data rather than on the structure of the data itself.

A different idea: measuring internal consistency

An emerging class of approaches starts from a different premise: thoughtful respondents tend to give answers that hang together, even when the survey does not explicitly enforce consistency. Someone enthusiastic about their job is more likely to recommend their company. A satisfied customer is more likely to buy again. An experienced hiker will more likely have clear opinions about camping equipment.

This idea leads to what we can broadly call an internal consistency measure (ICM). Instead of testing respondents against predefined traps or timing thresholds, ICM methods examine how well each respondent’s answers conform to the natural relationships present in the survey data.

At a high level, the logic is simple. In most surveys, some questions are statistically related to others. These relationships may not be obvious on the surface, but they are detectable in the aggregate data. If a respondent answers thoughtfully, their responses should generally respect those relationships. If they answer randomly or carelessly, their answers are more likely to violate them.

The key is that the method does not require us to specify those relationships in advance. They are learned empirically from the data itself.

How internal consistency is modeled

In practice, an ICM approach typically works in three stages.

First, the system identifies which survey questions share meaningful statistical relationships. This is often done using measures such as mutual information, which captures how much knowing the answer to one question reduces uncertainty about another. Mutual information is more flexible than simple correlation and works well with categorical survey data.

Second, these relationships are organized into a probabilistic structure, often using a Bayesian network or something similar. Each node represents a question and connections represent learned relationships between questions. The structure reflects how responses tend to co-occur across the full sample. These connections between questions aren’t assumed to be causal, but the answers thoughtful people give between these questions are related.

Third, each individual respondent is evaluated against this structure. The system computes how likely that respondent’s full set of answers is, given the learned relationships. Respondents whose answers consistently violate expected dependencies receive lower internal consistency scores.

When these scores are plotted across the sample, a familiar pattern often emerges. Most respondents form a smooth distribution of relatively good consistency. A smaller group often forms a distinct tail or secondary cluster with lower scores. These are the responses most likely to reflect low effort or fraudulent and random behavior.

Crucially, this evaluation happens after data collection and does not depend on special preset survey design features. The survey can be written naturally, without trap questions or artificial repetition.

Why this approach is different

The internal consistency method addresses several limitations of the more traditional quality controls.

ICM is content-agnostic. The system does not need to “understand” the meaning of the questions, only the statistical relationships among answers.

It is adaptive. The relationships are learned from each dataset, making the method robust across topics, audiences and survey designs.

It is non-disruptive. Because no attention checks or traps are required, respondents are not prompted to manipulate their behavior mid-survey.

And, instead of a simple pass-fail rule, respondents receive a consistency score. Researchers can decide whether to remove the lowest scorers, down-weight them or simply flag them for sensitivity analysis.

In large, real-world surveys, this class of methods has been used to identify problematic responses that traditional rule-based checks likely would have missed, while leaving engaged respondents much more likely to end up in the analysis data set. The intuitive appeal is strong: We are judging answers by how well they fit with each other, not by how fast someone clicked or whether they noticed a trick.

Practical considerations and caveats

Internal consistency is not a silver bullet. Legitimate respondents with genuinely unusual attitudes can also produce low-probability answer patterns. For that reason, it is more practical to treat ICM

as a diagnostic tool, not an automatic deletion engine.

It also works best with surveys that contain enough interconnected questions for relationships to emerge. Very short surveys or collections of entirely unrelated items offer less structure to learn from.

Finally, as with any advanced method, transparency matters. Researchers should understand how scores are generated and should test the impact of exclusions on key outcomes.

A stronger foundation for cleaner data

The industry has spent years trying to outsmart careless respondents with faster checks and cleverer traps. Internal consistency approaches suggest a quieter, more robust addition or alternative: let the data itself tell us when something does not add up.

By focusing on how answers relate to one another, rather than on how respondents behave externally, these methods align more closely with how thoughtful

responding actually works. As survey data continues to underpin high-stakes decisions, that shift in perspective may be one of the most important advances in data quality in years.

Bad data may be inevitable but letting it damage the good data no longer needs to be the price we pay. 

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Bob Wood is director of data science at J.D. Power with more than 20 years of experience in analytics, market research and consumer behavior. He has led data science organizations at Lands' End, Resonate and Merkle, supporting major global brands. He holds advanced degrees in mathematics, statistics, business and psychology, including a Ph.D. focused on consumer decision-making.

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USER INSIGHTS	
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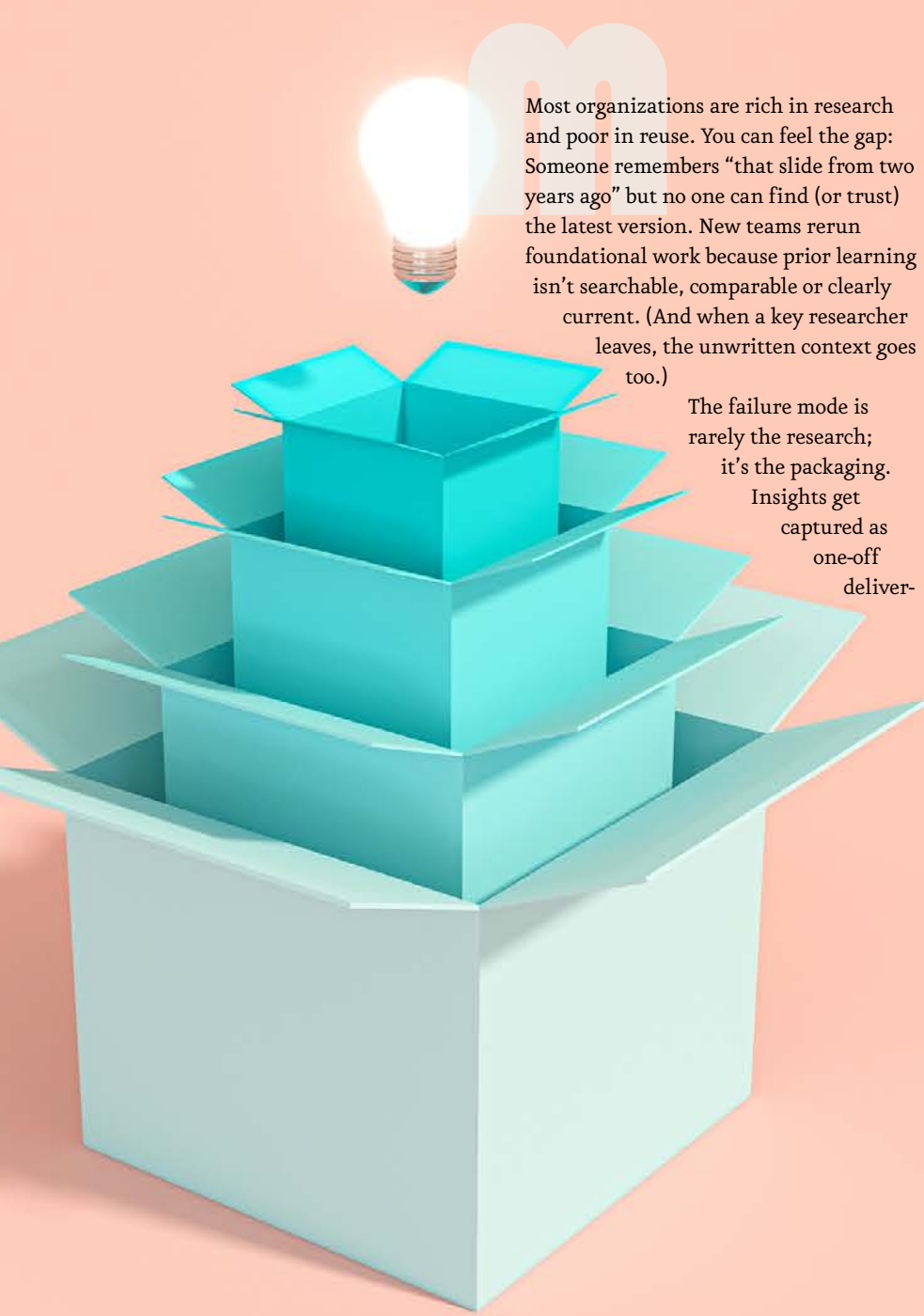
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Productizing insights

How to build research that lasts

| By Jess Waldschmidt

Research teams often generate valuable insights, but without proper systems, knowledge is lost and work is duplicated. Treating insights as products encourages reuse and trust, making foundational research accessible to all teams. Jess Waldschmidt outlines a maturity model for reusable knowledge assets and provides steps to move from single-use reports to enduring operational insights.



Most organizations are rich in research and poor in reuse. You can feel the gap: Someone remembers “that slide from two years ago” but no one can find (or trust) the latest version. New teams rerun foundational work because prior learning isn’t searchable, comparable or clearly current. (And when a key researcher leaves, the unwritten context goes too.)

The failure mode is rarely the research; it’s the packaging. Insights get captured as one-off deliver-

ables, filed away in places that are hard to search and hard to keep current. Good work turns into duplicate work.

The result is predictable:

- Questions get re-asked because prior answers aren’t findable or trusted.
- New teams lack visibility into past insights and start from scratch.
- Insights teams become translators instead of multipliers.

This isn’t an effort problem. It’s structural and it’s cultural. The fix isn’t “do more studies” or “build a bigger repository.” It’s to treat insights like a product: design a reusable asset, assign ownership, maintain it over time and build habits that make reuse the default.

The more polished and tailored the deliverable, the less reusable it is. Decks optimize for persuasion, not later discovery or comparison. Rigor stays locked inside projects instead of living in a system.

That creates a scaling ceiling: demand grows and one-off work grows with it.

In this article, I’ll share a “build once, use everywhere” maturity model for scaling insights, plus the operational moves that shift teams from one-off deliverables to reusable knowledge. The payoff is faster answers to repeat questions, higher trust in what already exists and less duplication.

Scaling requires a shift from “deliver the deck” to “maintain the asset” – reusable formats, governance and update cycles that keep insights trustworthy after the project ends.

What it means to treat insights like a product

Productization is designing research assets to be reused, not just delivered. It means structuring insights so they can be applied, compared and updated over time with infrastructure that makes them findable and interpretable beyond a single project.

For example, a canonical insight record might capture:

Claim: What we believe to be true (in plain language).

Evidence: Links to the underlying study/data and key supporting facts.

Context: Audience, segment, product area, journey moment, geography.

Confidence: Strength of evidence, caveats and known limitations.

Provenance: Date, methods, owner/steward and version.

It's not a slide library. A shared folder of decks isn't reusable if it still requires the author to explain it.

It's not stakeholder self-service. Productization isn't expecting non-researchers to navigate raw data or interpret findings alone.

And it's not less rigor. Standardization doesn't replace good research practice, it helps preserve it at scale.

At its core, productization is a design choice: answer today's question in a way that can be used again, by someone else, in a different context.

Rigor moves into the system

Concerns about productization are predictable; people worry it will oversimplify work or dilute rigor. Done well, it does the opposite: rigor moves into the system instead of being reinvented in every project.

- Scoping is standardized. Core questions, decision criteria and boundaries are defined at the framework level.
- Method selection is governed. Approved methods, when to use them and how to combine them are captured as shared standards.
- Metadata carries context. Audience, sample, timing, confidence and dependencies are structured so insights stay interpretable over time.

- Governance keeps the bar high. Ownership, review and update cycles keep reusable assets aligned with current standards.

When rigor lives in scoping standards, method playbooks, metadata and governance, projects can move faster without cutting corners.

Beyond knowledge management: the product lens

This isn't a new diagnosis. Quirk's has long covered "insight farming" over "insight hunting," getting insights out of decks and into searchable libraries and treating research as an ongoing program not one-off projects.

This article adds a different lens: product development and maintenance culture. Productizing insights treats core learning like a versioned product with owners, roadmaps, QA, change logs and deprecation. Making it stick is less about tools than norms: how work is requested, published and rewarded.

Knowledge-management language is useful, but it can hide the hard parts: lifecycle ownership, maintenance work and behavior change. A product frame makes those requirements explicit.

How do you run insights like a product team?

Name a steward per domain. One accountable owner for what's "current" and why.

Keep an insights roadmap. A backlog of assets to create, improve or retire (not just studies to run).

Version and deprecate. Mark what's current, what changed and what's legacy. Set maintenance cadences. Decide review cycles and update triggers up front.

Measure reuse. Time-to-answer, percent resolved from existing assets and repeat use of the same frameworks.

The 'maintenance tax' of productized insights

Productized insights aren't "set it and forget it." They come with ongoing cost and responsibility. Once research becomes an asset, someone has to own its lifecycle: creation, validation, updates and retirement. Without maintenance, even great assets drift out of date.

The risk isn't just stale content, it's lost trust. If stakeholders find outdated numbers or legacy frameworks, they route around the system and go back to bespoke requests.

Designing for productized insights means designing for upkeep:

- Clear ownership. A named steward with authority to keep assets current.
- Defined lifecycle. Create, review, update, archive/retire – explicitly.
- Planned review cadence. Set cycles by domain pace (quarterly, annually, etc.).
- Versioning and signaling. Version numbers, change logs, current vs. legacy.

With explicit ownership, lifecycles, cadences and versioning, productized insights stay trustworthy enough to use in real decisions.

With that product frame in mind, organizations tend to move through a set of recognizable stages as they shift from one-off research to scalable, reusable knowledge (Table 1). Across these stages, the shift is from producing answers to building a system that retains, connects and reuses them.

Addressing the 'bespoke bias'

Resistance to standardized insights is usually less about quality and more about what stakeholders feel they're giving up. Tailored decks feel "just for me," so shared assets can initially feel generic.

The shift is cultural as much as operational: position standardization as reliability (faster answers, clearer comparisons, shared language) and involve stakeholders early so assets reflect the decisions they need to make.

Flexibility matters; keep core structures consistent, with configurable elements that can be tailored without starting from scratch.

A few practical ways to chip away at bespoke bias:

- Make the time savings visible. Track and show how often a standardized asset lets you answer a request in hours instead of weeks.
- Showcase reuse stories. Highlight concrete examples where a shared framework or asset helped multiple teams move faster or align on a decision they'd previously debated in circles.

- Involve stakeholders early. Run working sessions where stakeholders react to prototype assets, name what's missing and help prioritize which views matter most. Co-creation builds ownership.
- Build feedback loops. Treat standardized assets as living products: collect feedback after they're used, iterate on what's confusing or missing and close the loop by showing what changed as a result.

Over time, the goal is for “custom” to feel like the exception you choose intentionally, not the default you fall back on because nothing reusable feels good enough.

Your minimum viable insight system

Stage 3+ organizations are defined by a small set of repeatable, designed assets: canonical insight formats, structured intake forms, a lightweight taxonomy, standard research plan templates and clear QA checkpoints. Together, these create a consistent path from request to reusable insight – so each project adds to

a shared system instead of disappearing into a single deck.

A traditional deliverable is a static deck built for one moment and audience. A productized insight is a modular record: a discrete claim linked to evidence, tagged by context (segment, product, journey), versioned over time and designed to be pulled, combined and updated as new studies land.

Build the system, not the deck

Scalable insights don't come from doing more research. They come from designing what you already know so it can be found, trusted and reused.

The future of the insights function isn't louder storytelling or more heroic decks. It's quieter infrastructure: intake, formats, taxonomies and governance that keep delivering value even when no one from the team is in the room. When organizations stop paying for the same answers twice, they unlock capacity for better questions instead.

That shift is less about acceleration and more about discipline. The highest-leverage teams do less rework and more maintenance. They treat insights as

productized, reusable knowledge – assets with owners, lifecycles and version histories – not as disposable outputs. When the culture values that kind of reuse, infrastructure compounds quietly in the background and the impact of every new study extends far beyond the slide where it first appeared. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jess Waldschmidt is assistant director of market research and strategy in the Division of Educational Ventures at Oregon State University, where she leads market research, forecasting and strategic analysis for degree and certificate programs. With over 12 years of experience in higher education research and strategy, she holds a survey research certification from the Burke Institute and volunteers as a research fellow studying workforce transformation and the future of work.

Table 1: The insights product maturity model

Stage	What it looks like	Limits	Signals	Next move
1. Ad hoc	Reactive, project-based research. Each request is scoped and executed from scratch; outputs are tailored to a single stakeholder and moment.	Duplicative work, long timelines, inconsistent insights; heavy reliance on individual researchers.	Frequent “have we done this before?” questions; low visibility into past work; knowledge walks out the door when people leave.	Introduce light structure: a simple intake, basic templates, shared storage and minimal documentation standards.
2. Repeatable	Common methods, templates and reporting formats. Execution is more consistent and efficient.	Outputs are still static and hard to reuse; knowledge remains locked inside deliverables.	Quality and speed improve, but rework persists; archives grow yet stay difficult to navigate or synthesize.	Shift focus from consistency of execution to usability of outputs – define what the reusable “unit” of knowledge is.
3. Productized	Research is intentionally designed for reuse. Insights are modular, structured and searchable without the original author.	Maintenance and governance become the hard part; without clear ownership, systems degrade over time.	Repeated use of the same frameworks; faster responses to common questions; fewer net-new studies for known problem spaces.	Invest in the connecting tissue: taxonomy, stewardship, QA, versioning and workflows that keep assets current and trusted.
4. Integrated	Insights behave like a system: continuously updated, connected across studies and embedded in decision workflows.	Requires sustained investment, clear governance and cross-functional adoption; without it, the system fragments.	Stakeholders can independently access and apply insights; teams spend more time on net-new questions and synthesis than retrieval.	Treat insights as infrastructure: fund maintenance, formalize governance and integrate insight references into planning and delivery processes.

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The image displays a screenshot of the Dynata+ self-serve platform interface. The main dashboard features a progress bar with four steps: 01 Project details, 02 Audience attributes, 03 Survey details, and 04 Launch settings. Below the progress bar, the 'Audience attributes' section is active, showing filters for Age (18-24 (50%), 25-34 (50%)), Gender (Male (50%), Female (50%)), and Region (Northeast (50%), Midwest (50%)). To the right, the 'Feasibility and pricing' section shows a 'Feasible' status, a CPI of \$3.62, and an Estimated CPI of \$0.00. Below this, a list of project details is visible, including 'Project details', 'Audience attributes', 'Survey Details', 'Launch Details', and 'Checkout'. The 'Audience attributes' section is expanded, showing a list of attributes for 'Electric Vehicle Owners'.

Project details Audience attributes Survey details Launch settings

Age
18-24 (50%), 25-34 (50%)

Gender
Male (50%), Female (50%)

Region
Northeast (50%), Midwest (50%)

AUTOMOBILE
Electric Vehicle Owners

Decision makers for automobile purchase

Type of engine: Electric

Primary vehicle category: Electric car

Secondary vehicle category: Electric car

Feasibility and pricing

Feasibility **Feasible**

CPI \$3.62

Estimated CPI \$0.00

Project details

Audience attributes

Survey Details

Launch Details

Checkout

Need help finding the right audience?

●●● user experience research

Make accessibility your default

Designing research and marketing that work
for more people

| By Meryl K. Evans

abstract

Excluding people with disabilities from research and marketing isn't usually intentional – it's structural. Assumptions about how people communicate, consume content and complete tasks quietly narrow your data and your reach.

Revisiting those assumptions costs less than most teams expect and improves more than they anticipate.

Designing for disabled people often creates solutions that work better for everyone and what begins as access for some quickly becomes usable for all. The same principle applies to research and marketing. When teams design with more people in mind from the start, they capture better data and reach more of the audience they're trying to understand.

Most teams aren't actively trying to exclude anyone. Yet many research and marketing practices quietly leave out large segments of the population. Sometimes it's people with permanent disabilities. Other times it's people in temporary or situational circumstances: someone watching a video in a noisy office; a parent carefully navigating steps with a stroller; a sick person who cannot take a phone call.

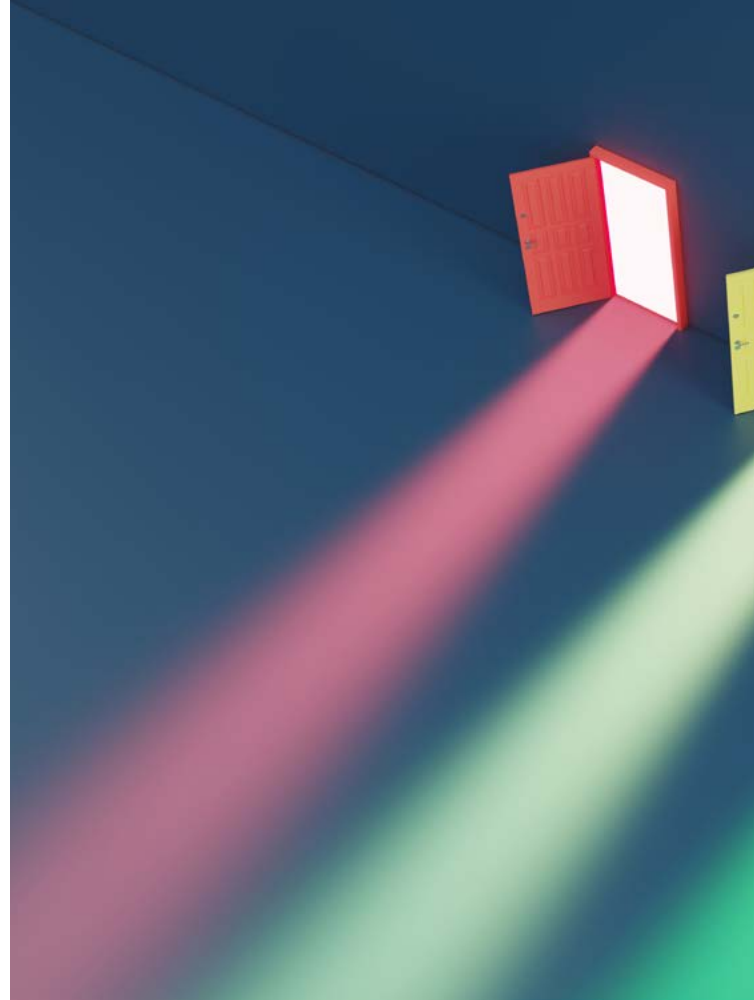
When people can't participate or comfortably engage, the result is incomplete data, skewed insights and campaigns that fail to tell the real story. Not because the ideas are wrong but because the execution assumes a narrower audience than the one that exists.

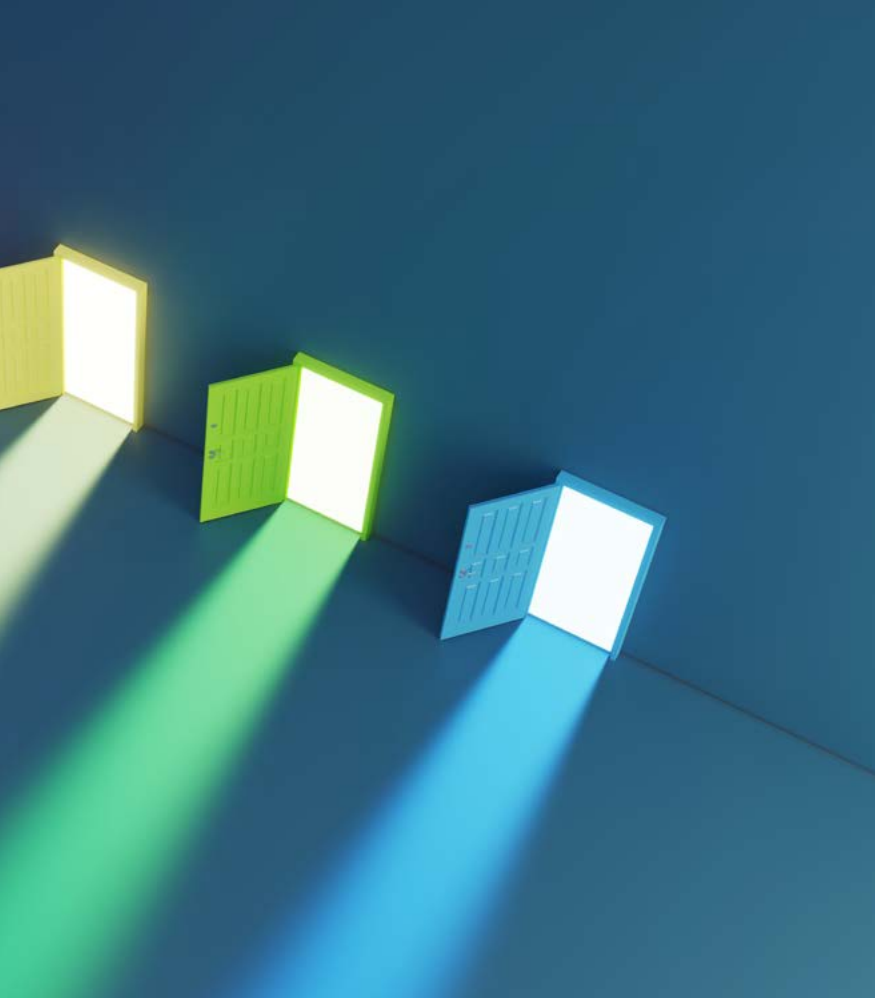
The good news is that accessibility does not require special versions or extra work. When it's built in from the start, it makes the work easier for everyone and more effective overall.

Accessibility is already mainstream

Ramps were originally designed for wheelchair users. Yet anyone who has dragged a rolling suitcase, pushed a stroller or maneuvered a shopping cart knows the ramp is the obvious choice. No one stands at the bottom of a staircase with luggage and thinks, "I would rather carry this up the steps."

Video captions follow the same pattern. An Ofcom study found that about 80% of people who use captions are not deaf or hard of hearing. They simply prefer captions because they make content easier to follow in noisy, quiet or multitasking environments.





Designing for a wider range of needs includes more people and creates experiences that work better for most users in more situations.

When defaults quietly exclude

Most exclusion in research and marketing comes from defaults, not intent. A researcher tried to recruit me for a study entirely by phone. They never provided their e-mail address, so I never followed up. After several missed calls, they finally e-mailed. When I explained that phone calls were not an option, they asked if someone in my household could take the call for me. That's when I broke up with the study and opted out.

The study lost a participant who could have contributed valuable insights. The team likely assumed they had a complete dataset. In reality, they had a dataset with a gaping hole.

And this isn't unusual. According to the Centers for Disease Control, more than one in four U.S. adults has a disability. If a study's design makes it difficult or impossible for those participants to take part, the resulting data is structurally biased. Leaders make decisions based on the people who could participate, not the people who would have participated if the study had considered universal design.

A survey by digital experience accessibility company Fable asked disabled people what problems they encountered when trying to participate in market research. More than 20% reported that surveys, locations, sign-up processes, meetings or tools were not accessible or that researchers were uninformed or ableist. In other words, the barriers often appear before the research begins. When people can't get past those barriers, the data falls short. And when the data falls short, the decisions do too.

When marketing misses the moment

The same pattern shows up in marketing. A team launches a video campaign with strong creative, clear messaging and a solid media plan. On paper, everything looks right. Yet performance lags. Watch-through rates are low. Shares are fewer than expected. Conversion fails to achieve projected numbers.

In one case, the culprit was simple: The videos had no captions. A large portion of the audience watched with the sound off. Not because they were deaf or hard of hearing but because they were in open offices, public transportation, waiting rooms or next to someone sleeping.

The campaign didn't fail because the message was wrong. It failed because the format assumed everyone had sound and could understand it. Once captions were added as a standard part of the workflow, engagement rates improved. Watch-through rates, shares and conversions all increased.

Those gains didn't come from a small subset of users with disabilities. They came from everyday people in everyday situations. Accessibility expanded reach not because of disability but because it removed friction.

Another example: an e-mail that looked clean and readable on desktop but became nearly illegible on mobile. In dark mode, the text melted into the background. Some mobile e-mail clients auto-invert colors in dark mode. If the design does not account for that, the message can become unreadable.

That's not a niche accessibility issue. It's a universal usability failure. If people cannot read the message, they can't respond to it.

The business case for accessibility

Many people often view accessibility as a compliance requirement or a moral imperative. It's both. But more importantly, it's a business advantage.

Research and design firm Return on Disability estimates that people with disabilities, plus their families and supporters, represent \$18.3 trillion in global spending power, including \$1.3 trillion in the United States alone. When re-

search and marketing exclude disabled people, they leave money on the table.

From a cost perspective, IBM has reported that baking in accessibility from the start adds only 1% to 5% to project costs, while retrofitting later can add up to 30%. Inaccessible work creates extra work. Accessible work reduces rework.

Think about it this way. Your company plans to build a new office. It will, of course, have a sidewalk. The designer opts not to add a ramp to the sidewalk. After the building opens, the company receives a complaint from someone who couldn't get into the building. The company spends more money to fix the sidewalk to add a ramp.

The company was building something. Had it thought of accessibility and universal design from the beginning, it would've included ramps. It wouldn't add anything to the cost. And it prevents spending more money later to retrofit it.

For researchers, more-accessible studies mean more diverse participants, fewer silent drop-offs and data that better reflects the real audience. For marketers, more-accessible campaigns mean higher engagement, better performance across more contexts and devices and stronger brand perception among people who notice and appreciate inclusive design.

Instead of treating accessibility as a separate initiative, view it as a way to improve the quality and impact of the work already being done.

Disability is a spectrum, not a persona

One reason accessibility gets oversimplified is that disability is often treated as a single, uniform category. In reality, every disability is a spectrum.

Take deafness. A common assumption is that people born deaf are all fluent in sign language. The Census has found that fewer than 3% of deaf and hard of hearing people in the United States use sign language. Some sign, many don't. Some lip-read, some don't. Some use hearing devices, some don't. Some love haptics, some dislike them.

On a LinkedIn post about an app with haptics, one commenter wrote, "I speak for all deaf people when I say we don't like haptics." Many of us chimed in to say we love them.

If user research only includes one person who says, "I hate haptics," and that voice is treated as representative, a team might remove haptic feedback from a product and alienate the many others who rely on or prefer it.

Inclusive research requires variety, not assumptions. It means intentionally recruiting participants with different communication preferences, access requirements and comfort levels. Otherwise, the data reflects the easiest-to-reach subset, not the full spectrum of users.

Who we design for shapes what we learn

Researchers often design studies for the people who are easiest to reach, not the people they most need input from – which is understandable under time and budget pressure but it comes with consequences.

In a travel study, for example, excluding disabled travelers because the method is phone-only or the location isn't accessible means missing a set of experiences that are often different from the norm. Those experiences can reveal pain points, workarounds and unmet needs that would never surface in a more homogeneous sample.

When participants share the same communication preferences, access to technology and comfort with standard formats, the resulting data is convenient but incomplete. It tells a partial story.

Who we design for shapes what we learn. If we design without accessibility in mind, we get convenient data, not comprehensive data. And convenient data is biased data.

Accessibility as a better default

Research and marketing often rely on forms as touchpoints. A single field can make the difference between someone completing the form or abandoning it.

For example, the phone number field can be a problem. Many forms require a phone number with no alternative. For people who avoid phone calls, whether because of hearing, anxiety, schedule constraints or simple preference, this can stop them from filling the form.

A more inclusive pattern is to require contact information but offer options. For example:

Preferred contact method (required):

- ☐ E-mail
- ☐ Text message
- ☐ Phone call

The form still ensures a reliable way to follow up. But it lets people choose the mode that works for them. This positions accessibility as part of process design, not just interface design.

How accessibility builds affinity

Accessibility does more than remove friction. It builds trust and affinity.

When a city council chamber renovation included large monitors with live captions, it sent a clear signal to people who rely on captions. That design choice didn't just make the space more usable. It created a positive story shared publicly in talks, articles, books and conversations.

Similarly, when a nonprofit turned on captions for an all-boards meeting without being asked, it communicated that accessibility was part of how the organization operates, not an exception. That kind of experience influences where people choose to volunteer, donate and invest their time.

For researchers and marketers, the takeaway is that people notice accessibility and universal design. People remember when they can fully participate without having to ask for special treatment. Over time, those experiences shape brand perception and loyalty.

Practical shifts for researchers

Accessibility in research doesn't require a complete overhaul. A few targeted shifts can significantly improve participant diversity and data quality.

- Offer at least two ways to participate. Always.
- Write instructions for skimmers, not just careful readers.
- Audit screeners for hidden filters.
- Test tools with assistive technology.

Practical shifts for marketers

Marketers can include accessibility as a standard part of their workflow without adding extra work or overhead.

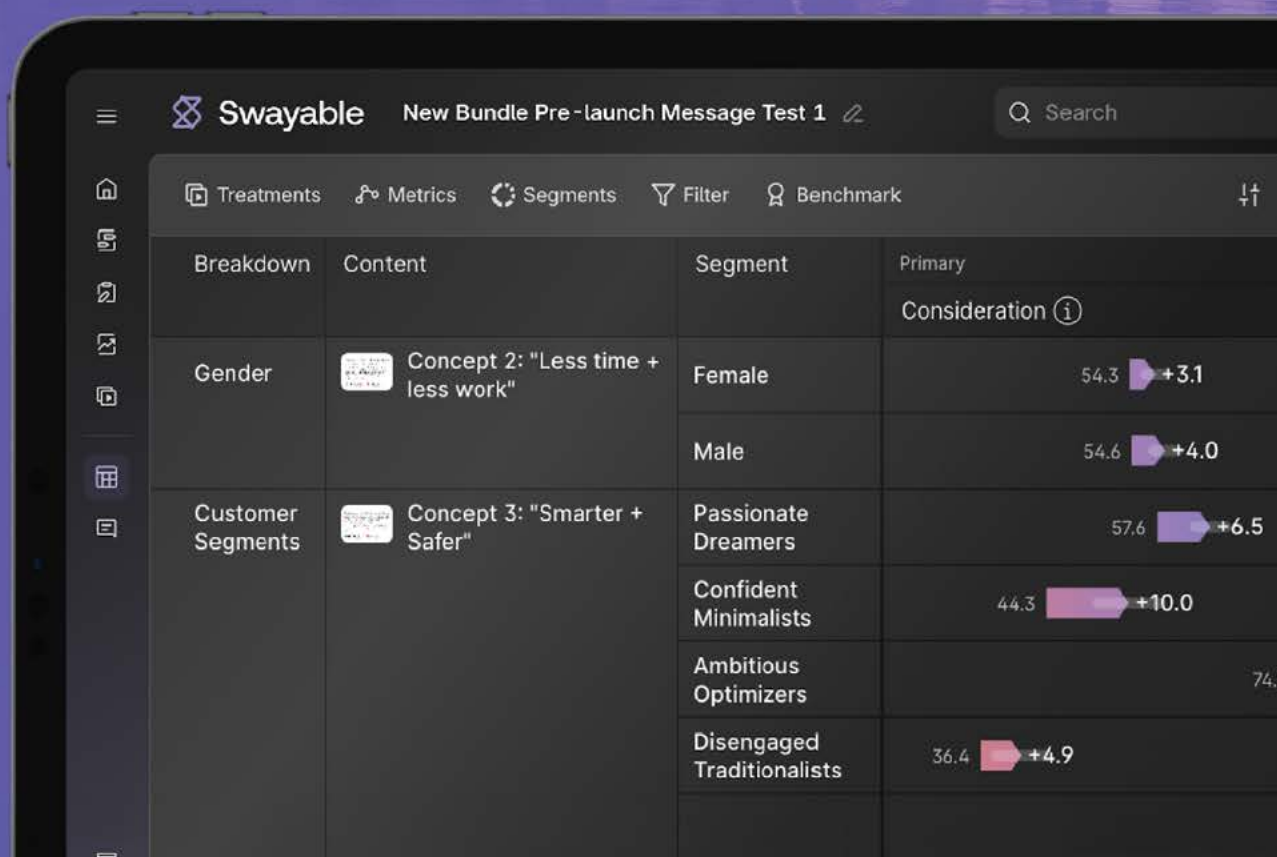
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- Make high-quality captions and transcripts standard.
- Check forms and landing pages for keyboard traps.
- Test content in dark mode, on small screens and in monochrome.
- Treat accessibility as part of the brand experience.

Progress over perfection

Teams may feel overwhelmed when they start thinking about accessibility and universal design. The gap between current practice and ideal practice can seem large. But accessibility moves forward through progress, not perfection.

Baking provides a useful analogy. What happens when someone bakes cupcakes and omits a tiny teaspoon of salt? Someone will notice. Sprinkling salt on top afterward won't fix the problem. And the cupcake ends up very salty. The salt must be mixed in from the beginning. And it will cost more to fix it. They have to buy more ingredients and spend time baking again.

Accessibility works the same way. Compensating at the end tends to be

more expensive and less effective than tackling it from the start.

For research and marketing teams, progress over perfection can look like adding one more participation mode to the next study, making captions standard for the next campaign or auditing one high-impact form for accessibility issues.

Each improvement reduces friction, increases participation and moves the organization toward more inclusive defaults.

The ramp principle

At their core, accessibility and universal design remove friction so more people can participate, engage and ultimately convert, whether that means becoming customers, employees or loyal supporters.

It follows the same principle as the ramp: something built for a few becomes useful for all.

When research and marketing design with more people in mind from the beginning, they reach more of the people they're trying to understand.

Studies capture a wider range of experiences. Data reflects the real world instead of the easiest slice of it. Campaigns perform better across more contexts and devices.

Accessibility and universal design strengthen research, sharpen insights and drive better business outcomes by removing the barriers that keep people out. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Meryl K. Evans is an accessibility and inclusive experience strategist at meryl.net in Plano, Texas, with more than 20 years of experience helping marketing and UX research teams create more accessible, effective experiences across digital, communication and in-person touchpoints. She holds the Certified Professional in Accessibility Core Competencies credential and is recognized as a LinkedIn Top Voice.



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May AI have your attention, please?

Cultural considerations for researchers with AI-moderated qualitative interviews

| By Autumn D. McDonald, Melissa Vogel, Christopher Ashford, Maximino Matus-Ruiz, Tharius Sumter and Josie Murphy



abstract

A head-to-head comparison of AI and human moderators finds that AI-moderated interviews with Afro-descendant and Latine respondents produced shallower data, weaker rapport and missed culturally specific cues – exposing a critical quality gap that researchers must weigh before treating "qual at scale" as a like-for-like substitute for skilled human moderation.

AI is playing a critical role in the work of many market researchers and some believe that market research with “human interaction may soon become a thing of the past” (Bohne 2025). With these shifts, we are witnessing the rise of companies touting capabilities for AI-moderated qualitative research. And researchers have embraced AI qualitative interview moderation to achieve what some refer to as “qual at scale,” a term that captures the benefits of reduced costs, larger samples and faster results.

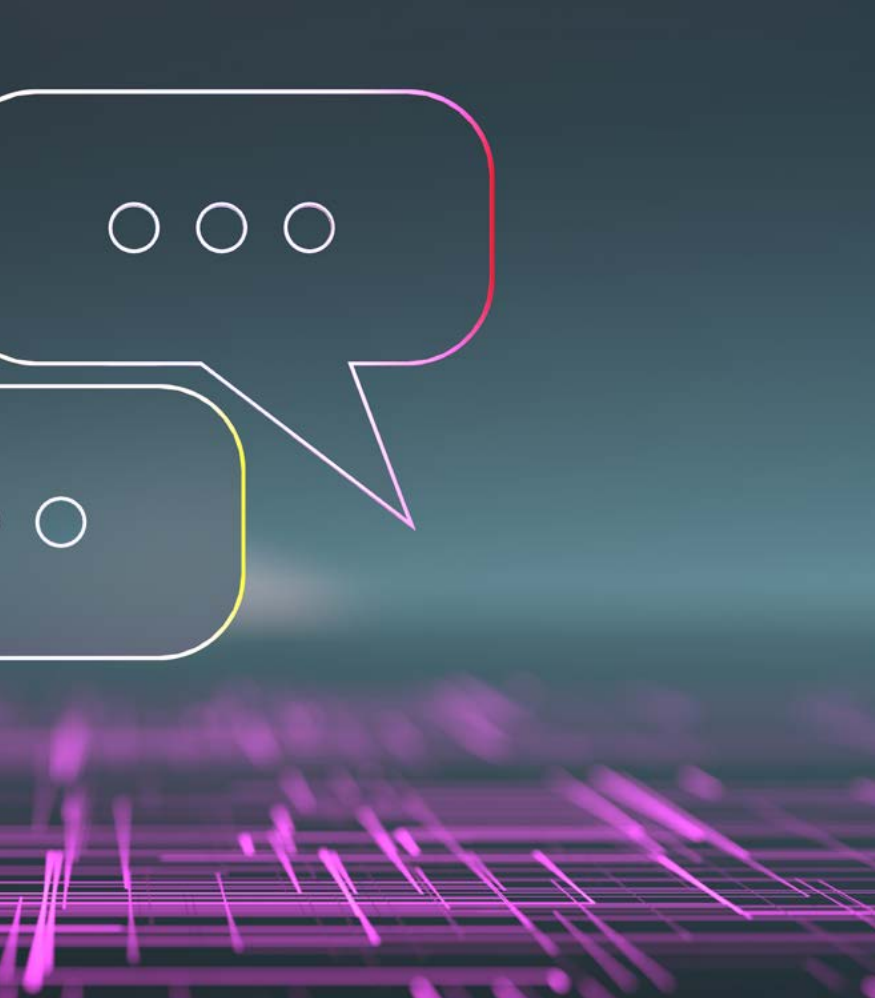
Just as market researchers did their due diligence in the 1990s when shifting from computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI) to online fieldwork, due diligence is needed now with the adoption of AI tools across market research (McDonald 2026 forthcoming). By conducting this comparative analysis, we seek to provide key considerations for employing AI moderation in qualitative research. Further, we hope these findings and recommendations will inspire greater collaboration between the research and commercial technology communities. Such collaboration is essential to maximizing the benefits of AI moderation while mitigating the harm and risk that can emerge from unexamined usage.

Methodology

Our analysis documents observed differences in video footage and transcripts derived from AI and human-moderated interviews. The topic of brand trust, one commonly explored in market research contexts, was the focus of these interactions.

We conducted 34 online qualitative interviews, comparing AI-moderated and human-moderated approaches. The interviews were divided between human social scientist moderators and AI moderators.

Recruitment occurred with Sago, and respondents were given a monetary incentive. The sample was split between self-identifying Afro-descendant and Latine respondents over the age of 18, including English-speaking and



source data that predominately reflects sources written in English with white, male, heterosexual perspectives (see Atari et al, 2023; McDonald 2026 forthcoming). This gap necessitates the intentional inclusion of underrepresented participant groups when evaluating the application of AI tools. Because scalability, efficiency and profitability are attractive to us, we examined carefully where AI helped and where it risked undermining data quality and participant care.

This research leveraged AI-moderators from two companies (Table 1). We use pseudonyms (K and L) as we desire to encourage healthy improvements in AI-moderation across the market research industry – not to endorse or denounce any specific vendor as they evolve.

AI and human moderators used the same semi-structured discussion guide with a prescribed, 20-minute limit to complete each interview. Questions were asked regarding which brands are trusted or not trusted, why or why not, feelings associated with brands and how a brand's relationship with the participant's community factors into trust. Both human and AI moderators were permitted to prompt beyond the provided questions.

An analyst coded de-identified transcripts without knowing the comparative nature of the study or who the moderators were. In addition to human coding, AI-assisted evaluation of transcripts was conducted using a large language model (LLM) to assess nuance, coherence, depth of insight, market research effectiveness and interview length. LLM matching of transcript excerpts to conclusions was checked by a human researcher who reread transcripts to confirm correct matches by the LLM.

The sample structure does not allow us to draw conclusions related to gender, geography, country of origin, acculturation, technological proficiency, socioeconomics and the languages spoken among

Spanish-speaking participants. Screening used conventional market research questions to recruit respondents across gender, employment, age, brand decision-making, income, race, ethnicity, language, education, marital status and geography.

We have focused this research on constituents from Afro-descendant and Latine populations for two reasons. The Afro-descendant and Latine populations in the U.S. are increasing, while the white non-Hispanic population is shrinking – making the former of considerable importance for growth-focused businesses. Secondly, many AI tools have been created by teams that lack the diversity present in modern society and have often been trained on open-

Table 1

COMPLETE INTERVIEWS

	AI moderator K n-x	AI moderator L n-x	Human moderators n=x	Totals
Latine respondents; English-speaking interviews	5	4	4	13
Latine respondents; Spanish-speaking interviews			4	4
Afro-Latine respondents; English-speaking interviews			2	2
Afro-descendant non-Latine respondents; English-speaking interviews	5	4	6	15
Totals	10	8	16	24

Table 2a

FORMULAIC RESPONSES

AI-moderator K Example 1	AI-moderator K Example 2
Preceding verbatim (Participant):	Preceding verbatim (Participant):
"It makes me feel represented."	"I stopped trusting them because of ethics."
Target verbatim (Moderator):	Target verbatim (Moderator):
"Okay."	"Ethics?"
Following verbatim (Moderator):	Following verbatim (Participant):
"What other brands do you trust?"	"Yes, how they treat workers."

AI-moderator L Example 1	AI-moderator L Example 2
Preceding verbatim (Participant):	Preceding verbatim (Participant):
"They have good customer service."	"I trust Nike because everyone wears it."
Target verbatim (Moderator):	Target verbatim (Moderator):
"So customer service is a key reason you trust them?"	"So popularity plays a role in your trust?"
Following verbatim (Participant):	Following verbatim (Participant):
"Yes, that's the main reason."	"Yes, it feels safer that way."

research participants. In addition, this structure does not enable an evaluation of street-race or phenotype matching as factors in human-moderated interviews.

Findings**LINE OF QUESTIONING AND PROBING**

AI-moderated interviews followed a more standardized sequence of questions demonstrating limited flexibility. This ensured consistency across interviews, but constrained probing and clarifications. AI interviews slightly extended participant responses beyond initial statements and often interpreted pauses as completion, advancing to subsequent questions before participants had expressed their ideas fully. AI-moderator responses typically echoed the participant's statement or provided formulaic responses (e.g., "Okay," "I understand"). As a result, participant contributions were more likely to remain surface-level – a pattern observed across

both Afro-descendant and Latine interviews.

Human-conducted interviews elicited more nuanced and detailed responses (Table 2a). Human moderators demonstrated flexibility in adapting to participants' answers through probing, follow-up and clarifications, encouraging reflection and elaboration. AI interactions were efficient at producing responses that were concise, consistent and closely aligned with the questions asked.

By contrast, more adaptive probing of human-moderation fostered depth and narrative breadth – producing data that captured subtleties in participant experience and stories (Table 2b). AI-moderation, while efficient, limited elaboration and narrative surfacing.

VARIABILITY VS. CONSISTENCY

The interview transcripts show high consistency across AI interviews, alongside significant variability across the five human moderators in this study. Data from

video and interview transcripts show human moderators, who are each trained social scientists, making intentional behavioral and linguistic pivots in real-time to adjust for the specific comments, demographics, language and communication style of the study participants.

As evidenced by the observed thematic differences (Table 3), these human adjustments resulted in greater depth of understanding, which is conducive for developing breakthrough insight and highly relevant indicated actions. These observations highlight important considerations for qualitative research design, particularly when detailed, contextually informed insights are required. The need for consistency differs in qualitative contexts versus when the aim is survey-style data collection.

ENGAGEMENT AND NONVERBAL BEHAVIOR

In AI-moderated interviews, participant engagement was lower and visible markers of irritation were higher (Table 4). When participants attempted to interrupt the AI (for example, asking "Can you repeat that?" or elaborating after a pause), the system often ignored the cue, advanced prematurely or repeated the same wording, sometimes leading to visible annoyance or requests to end the interview.

Afro-descendant participants displayed behaviors such as eyerolling, skeptical glances, turning away from the screen and visible multitasking (Table 4). These behaviors signaled skepticism and annoyance, with the AI moderator as a partner. Among Latine participants, participants frequently showed reduced eye contact, gestures of frustration and less-expressive communication once it became clear that the AI system was not highly responsive (Table 5).

This is extremely important because in collectivist and relationally-oriented traditions common among Afro-descendant and Latine communities, trust and disclosure emerge through relational cues such as eye contact, gaze management, warm facial expression and culturally attuned back-channeling rather than the neutral, efficiency-oriented style more typical of white, middle-class interview norms (Larivière et al. 2025) in the U.S. Taken together, these patterns suggest that in this sample AI struggled to build and sustain rapport with Afro-descendant

Table 2b

ADAPTIVE PROBES AND IN-DEPTH RESPONSES

Human-moderator ME Example	Human-moderator CH Example 2
Preceding verbatim (Participant):	Preceding verbatim (Participant):
"Um, it's something that I purchased one time and I, I'll never do it again. So CVS eyedrops."	"Apple."
Target verbatim (Moderator):	Target verbatim (Moderator):
"So, sticking with the CVS eyedrops mm-hmm <affirmative>. What feeling does that, what feelings come to mind when you think about the CVS eyedrops?"	"Apple. Okay. Give it to me. Gabrielle, come on now. Please tell me more about that."
Following verbatim (Moderator):	Following verbatim (Participant):
"Disappointment. Waste of money. Did I hurt my, did I injure my eye? You know, <laugh>. Yeah. Um, you know, because you put it in your, in your body, right? And so when I did that, I was like, God, these are awful. Um, never did it again. Threw it away and just even told people never buy CVS eyedrops."	"Okay. Look, I'll say this. Apple was, was interesting and inspiring when, uh, Steve Jobs was around. However, I still thought that it was very expensive for the device that it was, I know it was trying to bring like, luxury and like, um, high-end tech or whatever. But over the years, I don't really like the practices that they have with like, some, uh, their devices. It's hard to get them repaired if you needed to. Um, and also like the, like the exclusivity of like, you can really only use Apple products with other Apple products and like Android is kind of almost universal. Like, I can't use a Apple watch with my phone and if I were to have a Mac, I'd kind of be screwed. 'cause I don't, there are very few ways I would be able to like, share the information or, uh, the files that I have on that with like anywhere else, unless I were to get like a, a, a hard drive or something like that."

and Latine respondents, while human-moderators were better able to recognize and respond to culturally patterned verbal and nonverbal signals, supporting more open and nuanced conversation.

EXPLORING SENSITIVE TOPICS

These differences in nonverbal cues became even more apparent when participants discussed racism, community tensions or family stress. The AI moderator accepted these accounts without acknowledging their weight, often

mis-sequencing follow-ups and failing to rephrase confusing or culturally specific questions, contributing to confusion and withdrawal. For Afro-descendant participants, these failures interacted with histories of surveillance and dismissal, making nonverbal markers such as eye

Table 3

Aspect of Brand Trust	AI-Conducted Interviews	Human-Conducted Interviews
Framing of trust	Predominantly functional and evaluative; focused on trust through experience	Predominantly emotional and rational; focused on feelings, relationships and brand qualities
Personal experiences	Briefly referenced experiences	Frequently shared detailed stories and reflections
Emotional language	Limited; more matter of fact	Widespread use of words reflecting reliability and emotional connection
Variety of themes	Concentrated on a smaller set of core themes; reliability and quality	Broad range of themes explored; transparency, communication quality and reliability
Depth of reasoning	Moderate; participants mainly focused on surface-level reasons of trust	High; participants explained the "why" behind trust
Consistency across participants	High; themes repeated tightly across interviews	Moderate; more variation in perspectives

Table 4

Afro-descendant nonverbal behavior	AI-conducted interviews (observed pattern)	Human-conducted interviews (observed pattern)
Brief, non-sustained smiling	Typically in response to the novelty of the system or an awkward moment; smiles faded quickly and were not followed by warmer tone or more expansive sharing.	Smiles there tended to emerge in response to shared humor, recognition or affirmation and were followed by continued narration or additional examples, reflecting a relational stance grounded in Black communicative traditions.
Eye-rolling	Occurred as a reaction to the AI's phrasing or premature turn-taking; in context, eye-rolling functioned as a culturally legible sign of skepticism/ annoyance.	Direct eye-rolling at the interlocutor was not present; when frustration surfaced, Afro-descendant participants typically voiced it ("That's a hard one," "I don't get the question") and moderators adjusted accordingly.
Sideways or skeptical glances toward the screen	Seen when the AI moderator moved on too quickly or repeated a question; these glances indicated doubt and low trust in the AI as a legitimate interaction partner.	Action: None. This describes a person's mailbox, not their motivation. It offers no guidance on Sustained skeptical glances of this kind did not appear in human-conducted interviews; participants did look away at times but typically returned to the interviewer's face when talking through meaningful experiences, consistent with Black rapport-building norms design.
Turning body or chair away from the device	Observed where the participant shifted their torso and chair away from the screen and remained partially turned, signaling withdrawal and resistance to grant the AI moderator full embodied attention.	This kind of sustained turning away did not occur in human-moderated sessions; while participants adjusted in their chairs, they generally reoriented their bodies toward the interviewer during key questions or follow-ups, reflecting cultural expectations of reciprocal presence and respect.
Multitasking	Clearly visible; checking their phone and scanning the room while the AI "listened," treating the exchange as "just another system" extracting information rather than as a discussion demanding presence.	Human-conducted interviews were not characterized by sustained multitasking; while quick glances away or brief adjustments occurred, respondents rarely stayed on their phones or scanned the room while the moderator spoke.

rolling and turning away salient indicators of skepticism and self-protection. For Latine participants, similar shortcomings by the AI moderator damaged conversational orientations observed in human moderated interviews that typically support *confianza*.

Discussion

"Qualitative interviewing is about more than just the ability to ask a lot of relevant questions – it's about body language, tone, silences, hesitations, enthusiasm, passion, boredom. These are subtle elements that require powers of reasoning, cultural understanding, and human empathy that AI simply doesn't possess" (Wilson 2023). This creates a high bar for an AI moderator, which currently lacks the interpretive abilities gained from human life experience, such as the ability to read culturally specific responses through nonverbal communication (e.g., gestures, facial expressions, silence, body language, etc.).

The core promise of AI moderation rests on delivering speed, scale and ef-

ficiency without sacrificing quality. AI interviews were easier to code due to their structured format, but this came at the cost of thematic richness, personal narratives and nuanced reasoning. Therefore, fast, "frictionless" data collection should not be equated with qualitative understanding.

This research demonstrated that AI moderators currently still lack the ability of human-moderators to maintain engagement, foster depth and storytelling, capture subtlety and probe fluidly when conducting qualitative market research interviews with Afro-descendant and Latine respondents in the U.S. AI systems may be able to approximate surface markers of empathy but at present lack the ability to adaptively recognize emotion, clarify meaning and adjust questioning in culturally rooted fashions.

This gap greatly matters in AI-moderated interviews. Some people may potentially talk more because they feel less judged, but what gets lost is the culturally grounded back-and-forth work of recognizing emotion, clarifying meaning

and adjusting questions in real time to the contours of a particular life. In this sense, AI-moderation can yield helpful content, but still miss emic meaning. Subtle shifts in affect such as hesitation, irony and sudden silence may be ignored or treated as noise.

Recommendations

Currently, the use of AI-moderators would be advantageous with Afro-descendant and Latine study participants when scale and speed of responses are required more than nuanced insight, social understanding, emotional understanding or cultural understanding. In addition, AI-moderated interviews may serve as a valuable replacement for conventional open-end responses in survey work. AI moderation also may be applied to quickly and inexpensively explore new topics of interest that emerge from the analysis of quantitative data.

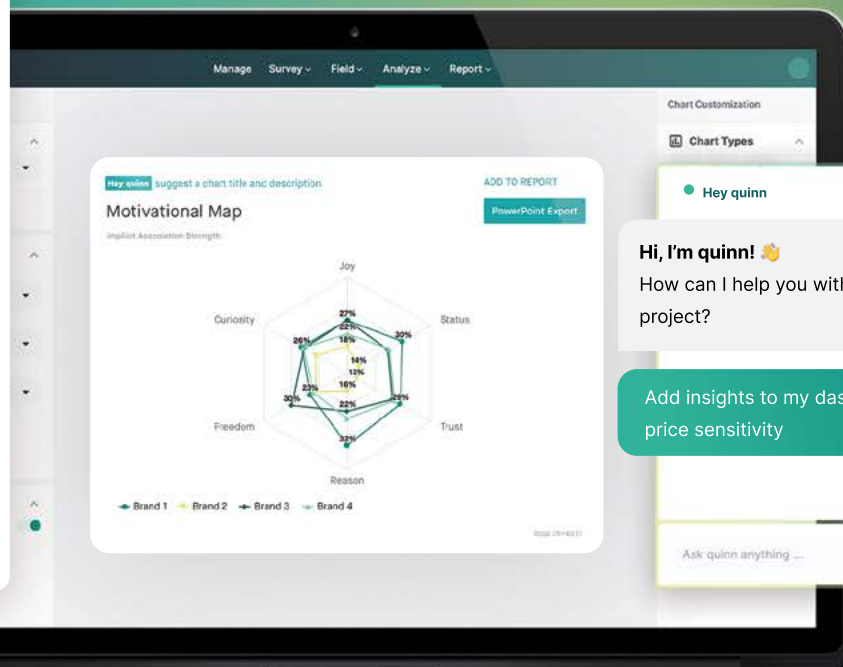
Importantly, caution should still be taken and a critical lens applied when considering use of AI-moderators in market research with Afro-descendant



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Table 5

Latine nonverbal behavior	AI-conducted interviews (observed pattern)	Human-conducted interviews (observed pattern)
Gaze patterns	Participants looking briefly at the screen and then letting their gaze wander or drop while answering, reduced direct gaze.	None of the Latine participants in human-conducted interviews exhibited sustained gaze avoidance; eye contact functioned to signal respect and emotional processing.
Facial expressiveness	Participants showed brief smiles or animated expressions, after which facial affect flattened as timing glitches or repetitive prompts signaled that the AI was not “with” them at an emotional level.	This flattening of facial expressiveness did not appear in human-conducted interviews; Latine respondents generally maintained expressive faces, using smiles, frowns and raised eyebrows to co-create an emotional atmosphere with the interviewer and to build <i>confianza</i> (trust).
Gesture and body movement	Few visible gestures, keeping hands closer to the body or out of frame.	No comparable reduction in gesture was observed; hand movements and upper-body shifts remained frequent and synchronized with the story, supporting narrative intensity and relational connection with a live listener.
Proxemics and orientation	Latine participants were observed sitting back from the screen or angling their bodies slightly away, treating the device more like a functional tool than a conversation partner.	None of the Latine participants in human-moderated sessions oriented themselves away in this sustained manner; participants were more likely to lean slightly toward the camera or face the interviewer directly when discussing personally meaningful/emotional topics.

and Latine respondents – because every human interaction is influenced by culture. Skilled human-moderation is currently still needed to establish rapport, maintain engagement, read cues, build trust, encourage sharing and probe topics in culturally grounded ways that would otherwise be misinterpreted.

As the capabilities of artificial intelligence tools evolve, it will be important to conduct ongoing research regarding the amelioration of concerns expressed here, such as the interpretation of human emotion, understanding of cultural dynamics, inability to appropriately express empathy and general potential for errors. It remains unclear whether the interpretation of culturally specific nonverbal cues will soon be feasible by an AI moderator.

Attitudes towards AI vary within and between countries and communities, which may lead to biased samples if individuals who distrust AI prove less likely to participate – or participate with less engagement – in studies conducted by and about AI-moderators. Importantly, the findings of our comparative research have implications beyond Afro-descendant and Latine populations in the U.S. We encourage practitioners to conduct research on research of AI moderation platforms and seek more than cursory reassurances regarding the capabilities and training data underlying them. Ongoing improvement in AI moderation can be achieved by partnering with and

obtaining feedback from both qualitative research experts and study participants.

AI is reshaping qualitative research. Will the market research industry deploy

it in ways that preserve cultural intelligence, protect nuance and maintain the integrity of the communities we all study? 🗣️

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Changing the conversation

Patients are bringing AI into the exam room

| By Michelle Kirsznar and Jennifer Francis



abstract

Generative AI is reshaping cancer care interactions and creating new challenges for insights teams and healthcare providers. As AI tools become more advanced and more trusted by patients and their doctors, how will that impact care-related decision-making?

Today's patients aren't walking into oncology appointments empty-handed. They're arriving with ideas. Opinions. Possible treatment paths. And increasingly, those perspectives are shaped before the visit even begins – by generative AI

In a recent mixed-method study among cancer patients and oncologists conducted by Lieberman Inc., we found that generative AI is already shaping how patients prepare for visits, what they ask, what they request and how they process information throughout the care journey.

The implications extend well beyond healthcare.

In high-stakes categories where decisions are emotional and clinically complex, generative AI is acting as an invisible intermediary between patients and doctors. Individuals are increasingly forming perspectives before engaging directly with experts, brands or systems themselves.

For insights and research teams, this introduces an important new question: How do we understand decision-making when part of the journey is happening in conversations we cannot see?

Already part of the care journey

Generative AI is now embedded in how patients seek, interpret and revisit complex information. In our research, we found that many cancer patients use generative AI to better understand their diagnosis, interpret test results, explore treatment options and prepare for clinical conversations.

What is particularly striking is how quickly usage becomes habitual. Once patients begin using generative AI, many incorporate it into their ongoing care journey, returning regularly as new questions, symptoms and uncertainties arise.

Clinicians are noticing this shift as well. Two-thirds of oncologists report seeing an increased number of patients bringing AI-generated infor-



information, clarity and reassurance and generative AI offers an immediate way to explore those questions privately. For some patients, AI has evolved beyond a search tool into a companion available 24/7 to help process complex information and emotionally navigate uncertainty in real time.

Trust is rising faster than understanding

As people engage with generative AI, many quickly begin to view it as a credible and most say they trust the accuracy of the medical information they receive (Figure 1).

At the same time, awareness of the technology's limitations remains relatively low. Fewer than one-third recognize that AI can generate inaccurate or hallucinated responses.

Patients are also engaging with these tools in highly personal ways. A substantial number report uploading sensitive medical documents such as test results into AI platforms and nearly all say the experience helped them interpret the information. Concerns around data privacy, however, remain surprisingly limited.

Together, these findings point to a critical shift: trust in AI is accelerating quickly, often ahead of a full understanding of the risks, limitations or clinical context behind the information being generated.

For researchers, marketers and healthcare stakeholders, this creates a blind spot. Patient perspectives and decisions are increasingly being shaped by inputs that exist outside traditional healthcare visibility.

AI is influencing what gets discussed and what gets requested

Generative AI is doing more than helping patients gather information. It is actively shaping the nature of the clinical conversation with their doctors.

Half of patients report discovering cancer-related information through AI that had not previously been discussed by their doctor and most bring that information to appointments.

What makes this especially important is the nature of the topics patients are raising (Figure 2). Patients are bringing forward potential treat-

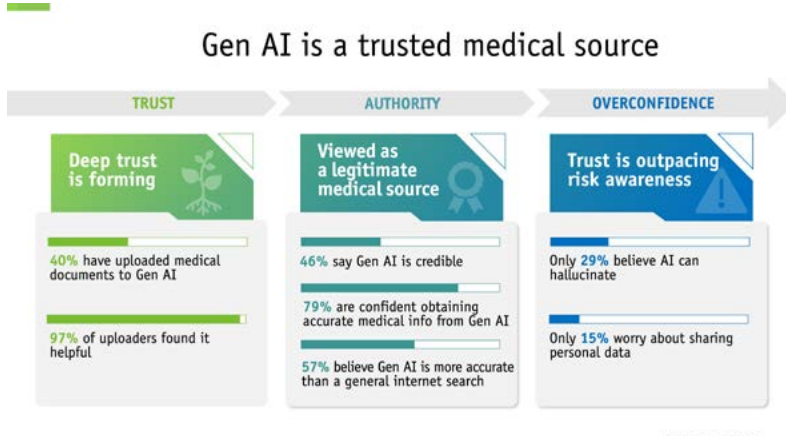
mation into appointments and an even greater number expect this trend to continue growing.

Together, these findings suggest that AI is increasingly shaping how patients think, prepare and engage before conversations with providers even begin.

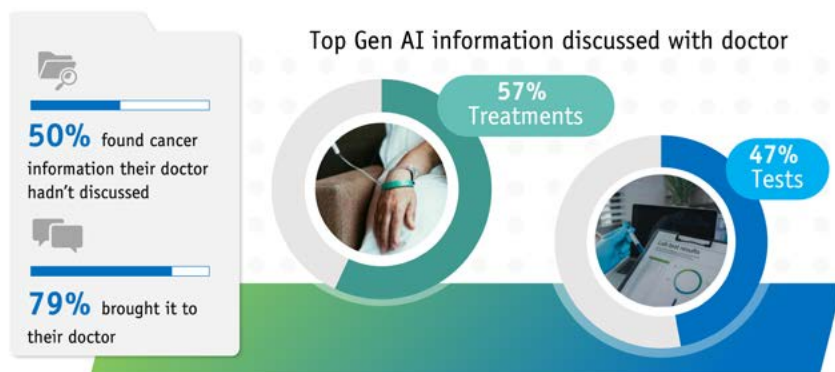
Adoption intensifies during moments of uncertainty

AI adoption appears to accelerate during periods of heightened stress and uncertainty in the cancer journey. Among patients using generative AI, 72% experienced a negative cancer-related event in the previous six months, compared with 51% of the broader patient population. Common triggers included treatment side effects, worsening disease and insurance or financial concerns. In these moments, people are actively searching for

Figure 1



Gen AI broadens the clinical discussion



ment options, diagnostic testing ideas and even suggestions for clinical trials that may be relevant to them.

This signals an important evolution in the patient journey. AI is increasingly influencing how patients think about next steps, shifting not only what gets discussed, but potentially what enters the decision-making process itself.

Even more striking, many of these AI-driven conversations translate into action. Over half lead to treatment re-

quests and roughly two-thirds lead to requests for diagnostic testing. Physicians approve many of these requests, including 77% of treatment-related requests and 75% of testing requests.

Strengthening doctor-patient interactions

One of the more surprising findings is that AI may be strengthening, rather than weakening, the patient-provider relationship. Most say AI helps them prepare for appointments, ask better

questions and feel more empowered in conversations with their doctors.

Importantly, many also say their relationship with their doctors has improved since using AI and oncologists largely agree that AI-informed patients can contribute positively to engagement when the information is interpreted appropriately.

As one patient explained:

"I now know the better ways to ask questions and express that I am concerned, but without engaging in a power struggle."

These findings suggest that generative AI is changing not only the information patients bring to appointments but also how they navigate discussions.

Shadow layer of decision-making

At the same time, generative AI is creating a new layer of healthcare activity that exists largely outside traditional observable systems.

Many patients report turning to AI instead of contacting their doctor's office, while nearly half say they use it to ask questions they do not feel comfortable raising directly with their

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physician. Yet only a minority of doctors say their patients are asking fewer questions in between appointments. In reality, these questions are being directed to AI.

AI is also playing an emotional role in the cancer journey. More than half of patients say these tools help reduce anxiety and many describe using AI to process fear, uncertainty and difficult information in real time.

Perhaps most importantly, patients are no longer relying on a single source of truth. Instead, they are triangulating information across AI and human experts. Large majorities report validating AI-generated information with their doctors while also using AI to interpret, pressure-test or contextualize what experts tell them.

Together, these behaviors point to the emergence of a “shadow layer” of decision-making where interpretations, concerns and preferences are increasingly formed before the formal healthcare interaction occurs. For healthcare organizations and researchers, this creates a growing visibility challenge. Many of the influences shaping patient thinking now exist

outside traditional touchpoints and research frameworks.

Experts are adapting but remain cautious

Most oncologists do not view generative AI as inherently threatening. In fact, many are actively encouraging appropriate patient use and recognize the potential value these tools can provide.

At the same time, clinicians express substantial concerns around misinformation, interpretation and clinical relevance. Many describe growing challenges around helping patients determine what is credible, medically appropriate or personally applicable to each unique situation.

Clinicians are navigating a shift in which patients are increasingly informed, albeit through different channels and perspectives. The physician’s role is increasingly extending beyond education into interpretation, contextualization and helping patients navigate an expanding universe of information.

As one oncologist noted:

“Patients come in with more information on the plate. But we have to differentiate between what is good information versus what is bad information.”

This shift may ultimately reshape how expertise is delivered in the healthcare experience.

The human relationship remains central

Despite the growing role of AI, patients and clinicians continue to place enormous value on human expertise, judgement and reassurance.

Most patients view AI as a support tool within the healthcare journey while still seeing their physician as the ultimate authority when it comes to determining what is right for them personally. Clinicians largely share this perspective. Many expect AI to reshape aspects of their role, but few see it replacing the human dimension of care.

Across our research, one theme remained remarkably consistent: expertise matters, but human reassurance matters more.

As one patient explained:



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“AI gives me information, but it doesn’t give me reassurance. My doctors know me, they’ve seen what I’ve been through. That matters more than what an algorithm can tell me.”

Implications for research teams

For insights professionals, this shift introduces a significant new blind spot.

People are increasingly forming opinions, questions and preferences after interacting with AI-generated interpretations, often before engaging directly with brands, healthcare systems or experts. Traditional research approaches frequently assume visibility into the major drivers of decision-making, but those assumptions are becoming less reliable.

This raises important new questions for the industry:

- How do we understand what individuals are seeing before they enter the system?
- How do we measure the influence of AI-generated interpretations on attitudes and behavior?

- How do we capture decision drivers that may never surface in traditional customer journeys or research conversations?
- What happens when AI becomes an invisible intermediary between consumers and institutions?

These questions extend far beyond healthcare.

Entrenched in the journey

Our research reveals a broader shift in how healthcare decisions are taking

shape. Generative AI is increasingly influencing how people interpret information, form opinions and prepare for interactions before engaging directly with healthcare systems or experts. A new, non-human entity is entrenched in the patient journey.

For healthcare organizations, pharmaceutical companies and insights teams, understanding these invisible influences will become increasingly important to understanding patient behavior itself. 

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Michelle Kirsznar, senior vice president of qualitative research at Lieberman, New York, has 17 years of international research experience leading strategic healthcare research programs across the U.S., U.K. and Australia. Kirsznar holds an M.S. from the London School of Economics and Political Science and a BA with First Class Honours from the University of Melbourne.

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●●● ai and marketing research

Generating more questions than answers

Insights from Sawtooth users and Quirk's articles on AI's impact on researchers

| By Bryan Orme

abstract

Sawtooth's Bryan Orme offers tips for navigating the way forward with AI, from current views and applications of AI to its effects on training future researchers and setting departmental budgets.

AI is disrupting the marketing research industry and making many time-consuming workflows much more efficient. I don't use the term disrupting lightly. I think its impact on our industry is bigger than the internet, online panels and big data were. This disruption isn't without controversy: some AI applications are near-universally seen as slam-dunk wins, whereas others are fraught with controversy.

This article presents findings from Sawtooth's annual customer survey regarding AI use and its impact on research practice followed by a comparison to the variety of AI-related opportunities referenced in Quirk's magazine articles, editorials and columns.

What motivates and qualifies me to write on this topic? Sawtooth has provided DIY tools for general survey writing since the 1980s (we're not just the "conjoint guys"). I've been at Sawtooth since the mid-1990s. We've kept busy over the decades in the transition from DOS to Windows to web and now with AI-enabled web surveys and analysis.

Despite the attention given to more advanced or speculative applications like synthetic data in trade magazines like Quirk's, for Sawtooth users, AI's greatest impact is found in more practical, day-to-day uses – particularly coding assistance and open-end analysis.

Sawtooth feedback survey

Sawtooth conducts an annual survey of its customers and this year we included questions to understand which AI capabilities and activities are having the greatest impact on their research practices. Sawtooth customers consist mainly of researchers within consultancies, client-side researchers within brands or corporations as well as healthcare and academic/government researchers.

Drawing on our own experience, as well as input from ChatGPT, we identified 12 AI-related insights research activities. We asked Sawtooth



Table 1: Percent use and percent most positive impact among Sawtooth users (2026 Feedback Survey)

	%Used	%Most Positive Impact
Helping to write code (such as in R, CSS, HTML, JavaScript, Python, etc.)	83%	45%
Analyzing open-end responses	83%	24%
Suggesting interpretations of the data	66%	7%
Translating questionnaires into different languages	62%	3%
Creating reports	62%	5%
Composing questionnaires	61%	3%
Reviewing questionnaires for bias, clarity and design errors	53%	4%
Smart open-end probing ("You said XXX, tell me more about...")	47%	3%
Detecting low-quality respondents or bots	47%	2%
AI-generated data, for testing statistical models	28%	0%
AI-led/moderated surveys	26%	2%
Synthetic data for augmenting or taking the place of real respondents	22%	1%

customers to consider each activity using a grid question, indicating whether their organization uses it frequently, sometimes, not at all or if they are unsure. The question and list of activities are shown below.

How much does your organization use AI for:

- ☐ Composing questionnaires
- ☐ Reviewing questionnaires for bias, clarity and design errors
- ☐ Analyzing open-end responses
- ☐ Translating questionnaires into different languages
- ☐ Suggesting interpretations of the data
- ☐ Creating reports
- ☐ Smart open-end probing ("You said XXX, tell me more about...")
- ☐ Synthetic data for augmenting or taking the place of real respondents
- ☐ AI-generated data, for testing statistical models
- ☐ AI-led/moderated surveys
- ☐ Helping to write code (such as in R, CSS, HTML, JavaScript, Python, etc.)
- ☐ Detecting low-quality respondents or bots

We carried forward (piped) AI activities respondents reported their organizations did frequently or sometimes into a single-select question that asked which one had the most positive impact on their research practice. In case we neglected to include an important, high-impact AI activity for a given respondent, we asked an open-end where they could describe the AI-powered activity that we failed to mention.

The results are shown in Table 1 (sorted by %Use).

The striking thing is that just two activities dominated the others in terms of having the most positive impact on research practice: helping to write code and analyzing open-end responses. The frequent mention of coding is likely due to the more technically-oriented workflows of survey programmers and quantitative analysts (who dominated the sample) and may not generalize to the broader insights profession.

Table 2: Frequency of topics mentioned in Quirk's (author's tabulation)

	% of Articles
Analyzing open-end responses, voice, video	41%
Analyzing quantitative data	41%
Creating reports	38%
Synthetic data for augmenting or taking the place of real respondents	30%
Suggesting interpretations of the data	27%
Generative AI for messaging, graphics	19%
Helping to write code	16%
Composing questionnaires	14%
Detecting low-quality respondents or bots	11%
AI-led/moderated surveys	11%
Reviewing questionnaires for bias, clarity and design errors	8%
Smart open-end probing	8%
Automating the synthesis of multiple research projects, primary and secondary data	8%
AI-generated data, for testing statistical models	5%
Translating questionnaires into different languages	0%

I find it interesting that we've seen so much attention at Sawtooth research conferences, in LinkedIn posts/articles and in journals/industry magazines dedicated to investigating (and hotly debating) the value of AI-generated synthetic data. Yet, a modest 22% of Sawtooth customers say they use AI-generated synthetic data and only 1% reported it having the most positive influence. This may reflect the early-stage nature of synthetic data – widely discussed, but not yet broadly adopted in practice. Or, it could indicate that synthetic data is falling short in terms of delivering real value, and I admit I am one of the doubters when it comes to the value of AI-generated synthetic data.

Review of Quirk's articles 2023-2025

After seeing the 2026 Sawtooth feedback, it made me wonder how closely the AI activities reported by Sawtooth users align with the topics discussed in Quirk's print magazine –

specifically across its non-sponsored articles, columns and editorials.

To explore this, I examined issues beginning with the first print edition after the November 2022 release of ChatGPT, covering January/February 2023 through January/February 2026. I manually (not relying on AI) reviewed and categorized AI-related topics mentioned across 37 articles, columns, and editorials. My tabulation is presented in Table 2.

The frequency that topics appear in Quirk's articles does not necessarily reflect how widely they are used in practice. It may reflect more the interest level that authors and editors have in discussing them.

"Using AI to analyze open-ended responses" (text, voice and video) was the top-mentioned activity, aligning closely with Sawtooth customers' reported most frequent usage. In contrast, synthetic data ranked fourth, being mentioned in 30% of Quirk's articles, but ranked lower at 12th place among Sawtooth users in terms of actual use.

Sawtooth users identified "using AI to assist with coding" as the most impactful activity on their work, yet it ranked seventh in terms of frequency of mention in these Quirk's articles. This likely reflects the fact that coding is a practical, day-to-day task for many survey programmers and quantitative researchers – highly valuable in practice, but less compelling as a focal topic for a trade magazine catering to a more general audience.

A limitation of our Sawtooth customer survey is that we did not explicitly include "AI-assisted quantitative analysis" as a category in the grid question and respondents didn't mention it either in the open-end follow-up. Large language models can still be inconsistent in this area and these quant researchers typically rely on established tools such as Sawtooth, tabulation software, R, Excel and Python. By contrast, "AI-driven quantitative analysis" was tied for the most frequently discussed potential use of AI in Quirk's articles.

Opportunities and pitfalls

AI's biggest impact is not in generating insights, it's in accelerating the work behind the scenes. Tasks that used to be time-consuming, such as coding open-ends and drafting documents, are readily completed by large language models. The challenge is making sure to double-check AI-generated output, much as you would review the work of a bright but inexperienced research assistant.

I use AI almost every day to help with writing documents, e-mails and marketing content. I also rely on it for research tasks such as refining code, conducting literature searches and for discussing statistics/methodology as if I were collaborating with a research colleague. As an executive, I use it to stress-test decisions and challenge my thinking.

For good reason, many of us have concerns about AI's impact on the insights profession.

Will AI take my job? Experts suggest that those who learn to leverage AI will become more valuable than those who do not. However, if AI reduces the amount of work flowing into an organization or department,

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even the best employees who aggressively adopt AI may face pressure.

Will research budgets shrink? Some in the C-suite might see AI as a convenient reason to cut research budgets. This could lead to fewer primary research studies, reduced investment in strategic research and smaller budgets for training. "Can't we just ask AI for the answer?" they may say. The pendulum may swing back in the future, but for now these pressures are real. AI is grounded in patterns from past data and struggles to forecast for truly novel situations or behaviors that have no close precedent. Much of the work we do in new product development, messaging, emergent attitudes and pricing involves asking real respondents about products, new ideas and prices for which the answer is hard to find in past data. Using AI for these endeavors can be like trying to drive a car while looking out the rear window.

Are we training up the next generation of researchers? We and other event organizers have noticed a drop in attendance for in-person training since the COVID-19 pandemic. While 2022 showed some signs of recovery, the recent emergence of AI may be contributing to this decline. At the same time, we're seeing an increase in virtual training opportunities, but these fall short of replacing the rich experience of attending an event in person with like-minded colleagues and mentors. This leads us to the next point...

Are we shortchanging skill development? If AI handles many of the foundational tasks that junior researchers once performed, the next generation will miss out on critical learning experiences. Some skills cannot be shortcut, and without having performed them, researchers are deprived of these essential developmental experiences.

Are we trading off quality for AI convenience? I am cautious about relying on AI for research design, questionnaire writing and drawing conclusions from data. Sure, AI can provide valuable feedback, suggest creative directions and stimulate human thinking. But in the hands of a rushed or inattentive researcher, it can also produce shallow, unorigi-

nal, misguided and even erroneous results. It's no surprise that three dictionaries/publications named either "slop" or "AI slop" the word of the year for 2025 (Merriam Webster, Macquarie and The Economist).

What are the implications for researchers and organizations? Consider the following:

- Focus initial AI efforts on practical workflow improvements (starting with coding, smart open-end probing and open-end analysis) where impact is already being proven.
- Be cautious about overinvesting in speculative areas like synthetic data until we see clearer value.
- Continue investing in primary research, especially for novel or forward-looking questions where past data falls short.
- Ensure junior researchers still develop foundational skills, even as AI automates parts of their workflow.
- Maintain strong quality control, particularly when using AI for research design and interpretation. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

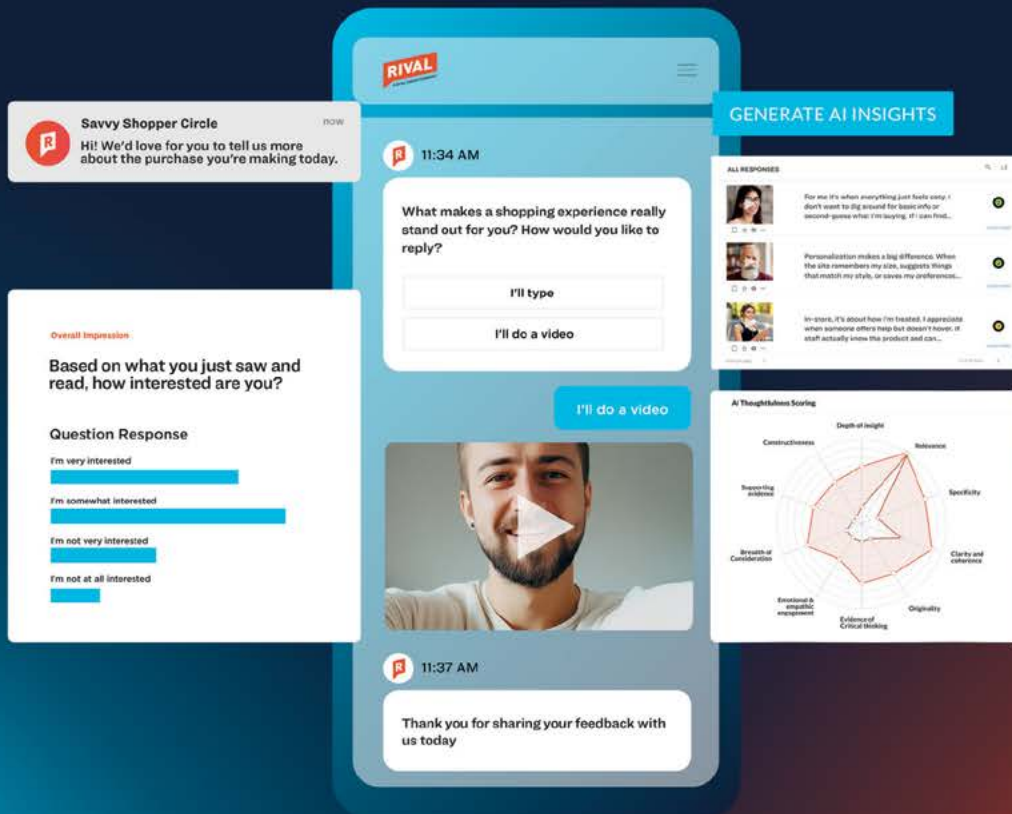
Bryan Orme is CEO of Sawtooth Software, with over 30 years of experience in survey research. He is the recipient of the 2017 Charles Coolidge Parlin Award, awarded by the American Marketing Association for leadership in the marketing research industry. Find Orme on LinkedIn: [linkedin.com/in/bryan-k-orme/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/bryan-k-orme/)



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11:34 AM

What makes a shopping experience really stand out for you? How would you like to reply?

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For me it's when everything just feels easy. I don't want to dig around for basic info or second-guess what I'm buying. If I can find...

Personalization makes a big difference. When the site remembers my size, suggests things that match my style, or saves my preferences...

In-store, it's about how I'm treated. I appreciate when someone offers help but doesn't hover. It staff actually know the product and can...

Overall Impression:

Based on what you just saw and read, how interested are you?

Question Response

I'm very interested

I'm somewhat interested

I'm not very interested

I'm not at all interested

AI Thoughtfulness Scoring

Depth of insight

Constructiveness

Relevance

Specificity

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Emotional & empathic engagement

Breadth of Consideration

Supporting evidence

11:37 AM

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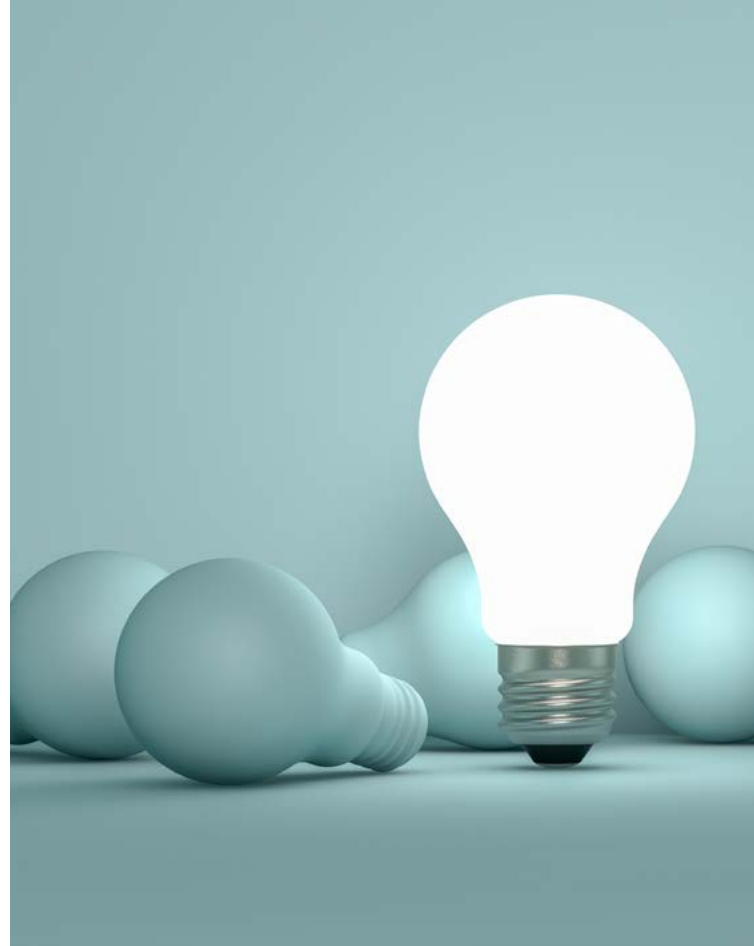
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●●● synthetic data

Beyond simulation

How to turn synthetic data into strategy-grade insights

| By Keith Rinzler



abstract

To move from cautious experimentation with synthetic data to high-stakes ROI, organizations must integrate real-time independent human validation as a definitive structural layer. This article identifies how the AI validation chasm is created by the closed loop, unreliable data and model drift problems and outlines actionable methodologies to securely anchor digital models in verified human truth.

The potential of synthetic data is breathtaking. It promises a world where we can simulate a thousand product launches in an afternoon, stripping the friction from traditional research. Yet, despite the hype, the industry remains in a state of cautious experimentation. A recent report revealed a glaring trust gap: while 75% of researchers use AI to summarize a meeting, fewer than 10% are willing to bet their strategic budgets on unvalidated synthetic audiences.

This skepticism isn't just caution; it's a survival instinct. We've seen what happens when brands "modernize" based on digital echoes rather than lived reality. When a model contradicts real-world behavior, the financial fallout is immediate. Whether it's a menu pivot that alienates loyalists or a rebranding that misses the cultural mark, the cost of "modeled" insights is often a loss of market cap that takes years to recover.

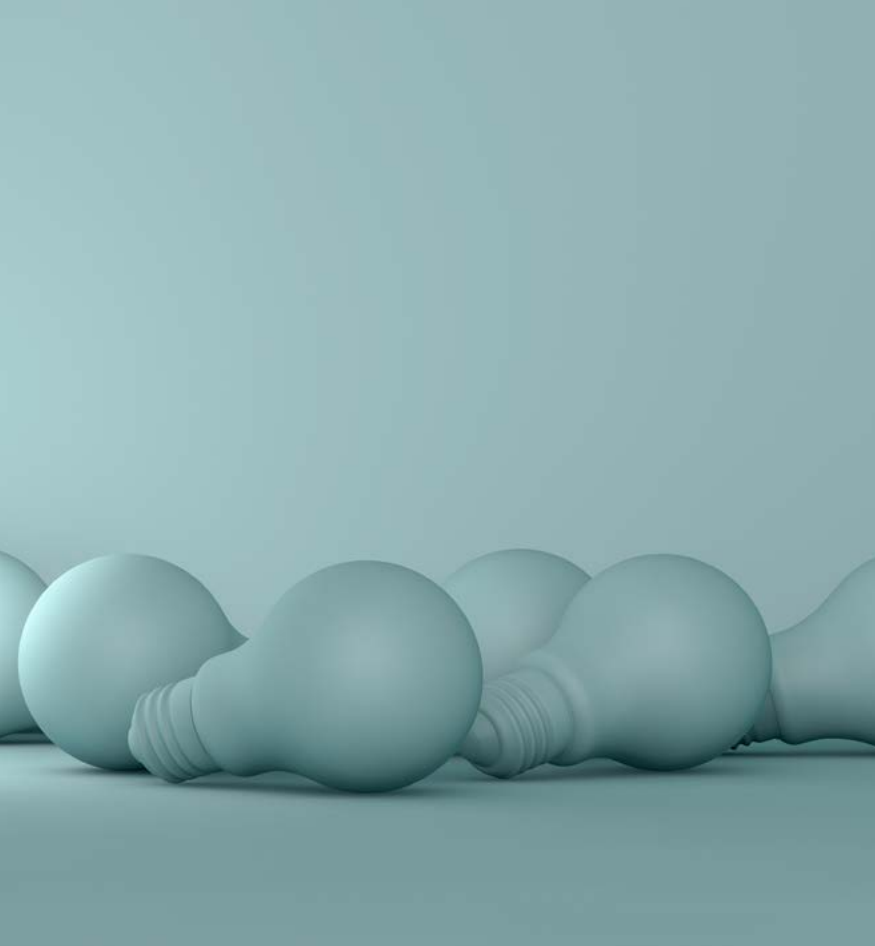
Consider the recent backlash against Cracker Barrel's logo redesign. It forces a hard question: How much of that decision was driven by a digital model that lost the plot? When a pivot fails this spectacularly, it usually means a modeled insight was prioritized over authentic human sentiment.

We have moved past the era of asking, "Can we generate this data?" The urgent, high-stakes question now is: "How do we know any of this actually reflects human truth?"

The validation problem

In my 15 years at the intersection of insights, analytics and emerging tech, I've watched a predictable and dangerous pattern: a new technology promises a revolution, only for real-world deployment to expose the flawed assumptions beneath it.

We are repeating that history today. In the rush to embrace AI, the industry is making the classic mistake of confusing internal consistency with external reality. A model can produce outputs that look perfectly logical on a slide deck, but if they aren't tethered to fresh human behavior, they are nothing more than digital echoes.



Ray Poynter, a fellow of the Market Research Society, put it bluntly: "Synthetic data will be faster and cheaper, but I do not believe it will be as good as primary data. Buyers need to be careful."

I agree. If synthetic outputs are designed to approximate human thinking, they cannot be validated against historical patterns alone. They must be stress-tested against real-time human responses. To move beyond simulation and toward a true, bankable strategy, we must dismantle three structural failures currently baked into the synthetic ecosystem.

1: The closed-loop problem (grading your own homework)

The most common flaw in AI validation today is the closed loop. We are seeing models evaluated by comparing their outputs to the very same datasets used to train them.

This is a fundamental failure of logic. As Andrew Ng, founder of DeepLearning.AI, famously cautioned: "You should not evaluate your model on the same data you used to train it."

When you validate a model against its own training set, you aren't testing accuracy; you are testing memory.

It's a self-referential echo chamber where the AI simply confirms its own biases. In any other business context, we'd call this "grading your own homework" and it's a shortcut that leads directly to strategic blind spots.

2: The unreliable data problem

AI is a mirror, not a filter. If the "human" data used to train a model is compromised by bot farms and inattentive respondents, the synthetic output will be equally hollow.

In my 2025 open letter to the consumer insights industry, originally published in Quirk's (<http://bit.ly/4arGma5>), I highlighted how the shift toward programmatic sampling, routers and marketplaces has created a dangerous incentive structure. Because these platforms profit regardless of data quality,

they have effectively subsidized low-quality, non-human responses. This is not an incidental glitch; it is a structural crisis.

Melanie Courtright, former CEO of the Insights Association, put it best in a 2024 interview with Research World: "The two greatest risks are using AI on data that is not fit for purpose, which can amplify existing biases and weaknesses, and failing to base AI data and insights in primary data from real participants that reflects their values, needs and expectations in real time."

If your foundation is fractured, your synthetic skyscraper will eventually lean or collapse.

3: The drift problem

Human sentiment is not static; it's a moving target. We react to news, culture and economic shifts by the hour. Yet, many models rely on historical snapshots that are already out of date.

A study in Nature by Ilia Shumailov et al. warns of "model collapse," where AI trained on its own or outdated data gradually loses its grip on reality. Shumailov uses a perfect analogy: "Just as a photocopy of a photocopy can drift away from the original, output can also drift away from reality."

Navigating a 2026 market with a 2024 map is a recipe for a strategic wreck. For any leadership team, basing future-defining decisions on unvalidated synthetic data is the proverbial wooden stake through the heart of the insights function. When data drifts and reality remains unverified, everyone responsible for the decision loses the one thing they cannot afford to waste: the organization's trust.

The solution: independent human validation

To bridge the validation chasm, we must stop viewing AI as a finished product and start treating it as a high-speed hypothesis generator. To make those hypotheses bankable, the industry must adopt independent human validation as a mandatory structural layer.

This isn't a secondary "sanity check" performed by the model itself. It is an external, primary research exercise where AI predictions are stress-tested against verified human beings who have zero relationship to the training data.

It is a dangerous fallacy to assume that synthetic expansion eliminates the foundational rules of sampling. Expanding to real-world respondents into 100 synthetic profiles does not reduce risk; it merely amplifies the patterns and the biases of the original human seed.

Because simulation can multiply signals but cannot create truth where it was never properly measured, real-time independent human validation must ensure that the human anchor is representative and statistically sound. Without this rigor, scaling a narrow or skewed sample only

increases digital confidence, not actual accuracy.

This is why Richard Preedy argues: "Everything marketing researchers do must be anchored in human truth and verified back to humans." This anchoring is the only way to systematically dismantle the structural risks we've identified.

Breaking the loop with "out-of-sample" truth: We bypass the circular logic of AI grading itself by introducing data the model has never seen. True generalizability – the ability to predict the future rather than just recite the past – only exists when a model is proven against fresh, independent human groups.

Neutralizing fraud through human verification: While synthetic models often ingest "polluted" panel data, an independent, trustworthy validation layer uses high-fidelity, verified human responses as a ground-truth benchmark. As Courtright noted in her 2026 SampleCon presentation, as AI-generated content scales, "real human truth" becomes our most vital (and scarce) asset.

Arresting drift with real-time calibration: Human sentiment moves at the speed of culture; models move at the speed of their last update. Independent validation provides a live feed that acts as a compass for models drifting into the past. Without this, we risk operating in what Chris Chapman, executive director of the Quantitative User Experience Association, calls a "simulated reality," one that feels right on a screen but is disconnected from the actual needs of the customer.

By implementing this layer, we stop treating AI as a crystal ball and start treating it as a tool that must be proven right by real people. Sri Narasimhan,

CVS's vice president and head of enterprise customer experience and insights, confirms this necessity: "We're never going to stop talking to real customers. It's vital to constantly have that flow of testing against real humans."

Implementing the validation layer

How can research teams practically build this validation layer? It requires shifting away from the very methodologies that polluted our primary data to begin with. We cannot validate next-generation AI with legacy, fraud-prone sampling. If your human validation layer is compromised by bots, your synthetic model validation becomes useless.

Here are four structural steps any organization must implement to ensure their human validation layer is sound.

Mandate "push-only" data collection: Open-source recruiting and survey routers that allow respondents to "pull" surveys from posted lists inherently incentivize bot farms. The "take survey now" button is the mechanism that rewards bad actors. Researchers must shift to "push" models, where validation surveys are exclusively delivered to individual, prequalified members based on specific sample sizes. Removing the ability to hunt for surveys eliminates the financial incentive for automated abuse.

Demand 1:1 device verification: Validating digital models requires abandoning uncontrolled, browser-based environments. Implementing validation via secure, app-based platforms or requiring responses from a validated mobile phone (SMS) ensures a strict one-to-one ratio between a human and a physical device. This single structural wall drastically neutralizes duplicate accounts and click-farms.

Treat compensation as a data quality metric: High-quality human validation cannot be acquired on the cheap. Utilizing a pay-per-response approach and providing immediate, tangible compensation respects the respondent's time and eliminates the rush-through behavior that plagues commodified samples. If you want high-fidelity ground truth to anchor your models, you have to fund it.

Enforce live "out-of-sample" testing: To break the closed loop and arrest model drift, models must be validated against fresh cohorts they have never encountered. If your digital twin predicts consumer reaction to a new pricing model,

you must immediately field that identical scenario to a verified, real-time, guaranteed-human group. If the gap between the synthetic prediction and the live human response is too wide, the model must be recalibrated before a single dollar is spent.

Closing the validation gap

Synthetic models will undoubtedly reshape our industry, but simulation without real-time independent human validation is a recipe for false confidence. The closed loop, the unreliable data crisis and model drift are not merely technical glitches, they are fundamental structural risks to your business strategy.

In the age of AI, the organizations that win won't be the ones with the biggest models. They will be the ones with the most reliable human anchors. This is the reality we have been preparing for at our firm. Researchers can structurally eliminate fraud and systematically bridge the trust gap by taking actionable steps to shift to "push" methodologies, demand device-level authenticity, compensate fairly for quality and enforce strict out-of-sample stress-testing.

Artificial intelligence can simulate human behavior at scale. But only real people can confirm whether those simulations reflect reality. The chasm is real, but with a verified human anchor, it is one that your business can be finally ready to cross. 🗨️

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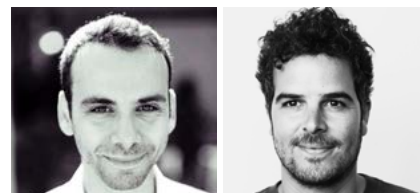
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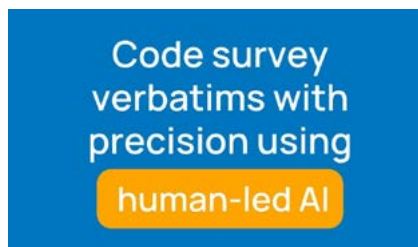
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Harmon Research

Founded 2009 | 125 employees
Stephanie Vincent, Executive Vice President

Harmon Research specializes in delivering high-quality qualitative and quantitative insights across 43 countries. Today's research threats don't wait until the



end of fieldwork and neither does our new DataDefense AI Suite. This integrated protection system safeguards your data at every stage of data collection. NoBot, our fraud protection software deployed before surveys begin, blocks automated traffic and duplicate entries at the source. LiveShield, our real-time monitoring technology, continuously analyzes respondent behavior during surveys and flags suspicious activity before compromised data can skew your results. Together, these AI-powered tools ensure that every insight you receive is trustworthy, accurate and actionable, whether you're conducting quantitative studies or in-depth qualitative research across global markets.

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Ironwood Insights Group LLC

Founded 2017 | 300 employees
Brad Larson, CEO and Founder

Ironwood Insights Group developed the Ironwood Online™ panel and sampling platform that combines expert sample design, advanced sample sourcing and industry-leading quality control. The centerpiece of Ironwood Online™ is RealRespondent™, an adaptive, AI-driven fraud prevention ecosystem that continuously evolves to stay ahead of increasingly sophisticated bots, fraudsters and bad actors. Powered by Ironwood's proprietary technologies and trusted partners including Verisoul, CAPTCHA and IBM Watson, RealRespondent™ integrates layered detection and prevention tools such as digital fingerprinting, geolocation verification, fake email and duplicate IP detection, behavioral bot identification and advanced respondent quality screening. In keeping with Ironwood's Human-in-the-Loop



(HITL) philosophy, our seasoned project management team continuously monitors, refines and optimizes fraud controls to generate cleaner online samples and more accurate and reliable insights. Contact us today to learn how Ironwood's AI tools deliver real insights based on real respondents.

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MINDSTATE

Mindstate Group

Founded 2014 | 10 employees
Will Leach, CEO

Most market research tells you what consumers did. Mindstate Group uncovers the psychological drivers behind why they do it – and how to influence what they do next. Using behavioral science and AI-powered customer personas trained on your consumers, brand and category, we help teams test ideas, sharpen strategy and make more emotionally intelligent decisions faster. Simply put: We help brands understand and change consumer behavior.

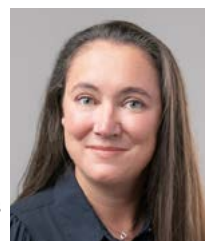
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MX8 Labs

Founded 2022 | 10-25 employees
Megan Daniels, CEO

MX8 Labs is an AI-native market research platform built by researchers, for researchers. Founded in 2022, MX8 Labs automates every step of the survey workflow,



from questionnaire programming, link testing and respondent sourcing to quota management, weighting, open-end coding, statistical testing and report assembly. Each step stays fully editable, so research teams keep the design control of a custom study while removing the slow, manual work that traditionally consumes most of a project's time. The result is enterprise-grade quality with roughly 80% faster turnaround and 70% lower cost, letting teams run about three times the studies on the same annual budget. MX8 Labs' large language models handle the mechanical work so researchers can focus on framing questions, interrogating data and guiding business decisions.

Email: megan@mx8labs.com
Phone: 1-774-230-0200
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My-Take

Founded 2010 | 40+ employees
Todd Hoskins, Co-founder
Rich Armstrong, Co-founder

My-Take is a continuous research insights technology company that helps brands make faster, better decisions through the Insight Community+™ platform and a dedicated professional services team. The proprietary platform serves as a research hub for organizations running market research online insight communities (MROCs), supporting qualitative, quantitative, CX, and UX research across 13+ activity types with DIY, hybrid and full service models. My-Take is a 6x GRIT Top Innovative Supplier. MyAI is collaborative AI built for researchers, embedded across the platform's administration and reporting workflows. MyAI draws on community data, study objectives, past research, member activity and web intelligence to work alongside teams as an intelligent thought partner. Additional platform AI includes SmartDeck™ automated reporting with AI-enhanced analysis and client-



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Nuance

Founded 2013 | 10+ employees
Lisa Hazen, President

Nuance helps organizations transform open-ended feedback into clear, actionable insight through expert coding and analysis, language analytics and human-led AI workflows. Built on decades of experience supporting global brands, agencies and consultants, Nuance combines the knowledge, judgment and flexibility of experienced researchers with the speed and scalability of advanced AI. For organizations that manage survey verbatim coding and analysis internally, Colibri® is Nuance's feature-rich SaaS platform designed specifically for open-end data workflows. Developed from real-world coding and research experience and operations, Colibri® combines AI-assisted coding and theme analysis, real-time collaboration, conversational data exploration, project management and translation in one centralized platform built for accuracy, efficiency and quality control. Together, Nuance and Colibri® support both outsourced and in-house approaches to unlocking deeper insight from customer feedback.

Email: lhazen@nuancecoding.com
Phone: 1-817-640-6170
www.nuancecoding.com/colibri



Outset

Founded 2022 | 80 employees
Aaron Cannon, CEO and Co-founder
Michael Hess, CTO and Co-founder



Outset is the first and only AI-moderated research platform that listens, sees and understands. Through its instant guide creation, dynamic probing, vision-aware moderation, automated reporting and broad multilingual capabilities, Outset helps customers scale their qualitative research and conduct studies that would be otherwise impossible, all without sacrificing depth or rigor. Often used for concept tests, in-home testing, diary studies, shop-alongs, brand research, creative testing and more, Outset has powered some of the most business-critical decisions at companies like Nestle, Microsoft, Uber, Hubspot and Google. Built by researchers, for researchers. You're in good hands with Outset. Connect with us at sales@outset.ai to learn more.

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ReadingMinds.ai

Founded 2025 | 12 employees
Stu Sjouerman, CEO

ReadingMinds. AI replaces survey guesswork with a voice-native research platform that captures how customers actually express themselves, not just what they type into a form. Our AI-moderated interviews adapt



in real time, probe deeper and reveal why customers buy, stall or leave. Each response is scored with the ReadingMinds Expression Fingerprint, tagging cues such as sadness, anger, confrontation, neutrality, cheerfulness and enthusiasm as the conversation unfolds. Revenue teams get decision-ready insights tied to real customer quotes, so every finding is traceable to the source. No black box. No static forms. No keyword-only analysis. In hours, not weeks, ReadingMinds helps teams sharpen targeting, messaging, positioning and sales conversations, while improving satisfaction, retention and churn risk visibility. Turn voice-rich evidence into confident GTM decisions. Start your Live Test Drive and hear the signal for yourself.

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SIS AI Solutions New York

Founded 2025 | 10 employees
Ruth Stanat, CEO

SIS AI Solutions was launched in 2025 as an intelligence monitoring and tracking system to accelerate recruitment, report writing and the delivery of research-backed articles in minutes. The SIS AI Solutions Global Research Database offers 135-country coverage with local expertise. It also provides participant recruitment from 80 million panel records across 135 countries, as well as 250,000 opt-in records. The SIS AI Solutions Knowledge Center delivers deep research drawn from our 500,000 reports, along with external information. It provides trend scanning, PESTEL and economic and sentiment analysis. Proprietary insights are highlighted with citations and are available as exportable branded PDF and Word



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TESTSET

TestSet

Founded 2024 | 270 employees
Michael Sanfelippo, President



TestSet was created to reshape the future of consumer insights data. Founded by industry veterans who have consistently anticipated and adapted to evolving trends, TestSet is at the forefront of transforming how businesses access first-party data. Now, we're taking that vision further. Meet Tess, TestSet's AI intelligent agent, directly integrated into a brand-new website, is live and available 24/7 to connect visitors with our team, answer questions and get projects started simply by having a conversation. Tess comes equipped with a diverse and ever-evolving set of skills including recruitment, conducting surveys and more. She connects with Slack, Claude and other leading apps to keep projects moving with full-service backend functionality from end to end. At TestSet, we don't just embrace what's next. We build it. Visit www.testset.com today.

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Zoho Survey

Founded 1996 | 15,000+ employees
Karthikeyan M, Product Marketing Manager

Zoho Survey is an AI-powered survey platform to create smarter surveys at scale and uncover actionable insights across customer experience, employee engagement and market research. It enables teams to generate ready-to-send surveys in seconds using simple prompts – from measuring customer satisfaction to gauging employee sentiment and studying market trends. Its built-in AI capabilities including sentiment analysis; word cloud and open-ended response summarization help researchers uncover patterns quickly without manual coding. Zoho Survey connects seamlessly with CRM, help-desk and other research tools to turn feedback into decisions. Backed by 15+ years of experience and trusted by brands including Samsung and Marriott, Zoho Survey ensures enterprise-grade privacy and never uses customer data to train external AI models. Zoho Survey: Listen better. Decide smarter.

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CALENDAR OF EVENTS

●●● can't-miss activities

AURA will host the Auras Awards 2026 on **July 9** in **London**. Visit www.aura.org.uk/events/auras-awards-2026.

The National Research Federation will host NRF Nexus 2026 on **July 22-24** in **Colorado**. Visit nexus.nrf.com.

Quirk's Media will host the Quirk's Event – New York on **July 29-30**. Visit www.thequirksevent.com.

CommerceNext will host Retail IT Connect US on **August 1-2** in **Nashville**. Visit retailitconnect.wbresearch.com.

Corinium Global Intelligence will host CDAO Chicago on **August 5-6**. Visit da-metro-chicago.coriniumintelligence.com.

ESOMAR will host ESOMAR Congress on **September 1-4** in **Valencia**. Visit esomar.org/events/congress-2026.

CMSWire will host Customer Connect Expo Atlanta on **September 9-10**. Visit cmswire.com/events/conference/customer-connect-expo-atlanta-2026.

Insights Association will host CRC on **September 15-17** in **Chicago**. Visit www.insightsassociation.org/Events/Event-Info/sessionaltcd/2026CRC.

WBR will host eTail Australia on **September 22-23**. Visit etailaustralia.wbresearch.com.

Empresarial will host Le Printemps des Études on **September 24-25** in **Paris**. Visit www.printemps-etudes.com/en/accueil-english.

Quirk's Media will host Quirk's Virtual – DIY Research on **September 24**. Visit www.quirks.com/events?q=QuirksVirtual.

Informa Connect will host TMRE on **October 5-7** in **Denver**. Visit informaconnect.com/tmre.

MRSI will host its 34th Annual Market Research Seminar on **October 13-14** in **Mumbai**. Visit www.mrsi.co.in/event/34th-annual-market-research-seminar-the-next-human-156/synopsis-guide.html.

Insight Platforms will host the Qualitative Insights Summits on **November 10-11**. Visit www.insightplatforms.com/summits/the-qualitative-insights-summit-2026.

ESOMAR will host ESOMAR North America Unfiltered on **November 3-4** in **Atlanta**. Visit esomar.org/events/north-america-2026.

6sense will host 6sense Breakthrough on **November 2-5** in **Las Vegas**. Visit 6sense.com/breakthrough.

Quirk's Media will host the Quirk's Event – Virtual Global on **November 4-5**. Visit thequirksevent.com/virtual-global-2026.

Reuters Events will host Strategic Marketing 2026 on **November 16** in **New York**. Visit events.reutersevents.com/marketing/sm.

National Retail Federation will host NRF 2027: Retail's Big Show on **January 10-12, 2027** in **New York City**. Visit nrfbigshow.nrf.com.

Customer Management Practice will host Customer Contact Week Orlando 2027 on **January 25-27, 2027**. Visit www.customermanagementpractice.com/ccw/orlando.

Travel and Tourism Research Association will host TTRA Marketing Outlook Forum 2027 on **January 25-27, 2027** in **New Orleans**. Visit ttra.com/events/2027-marketing-outlook-forum.

Merlien Institute will host Qual360 EU 2027 on **January 27-28, 2027** in **Berlin**. Visit eu.qual360.com.

Quirk's Media will host The Quirk's Event – Los Angeles on **February 24-25, 2027**. Visit thequirksevent.com.

Event details as of June 24, 2026. Please see websites for more details.

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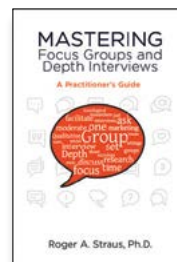
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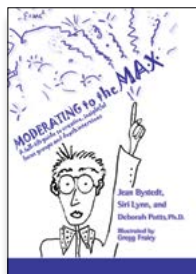


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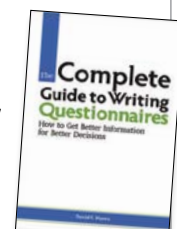


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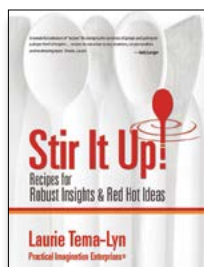
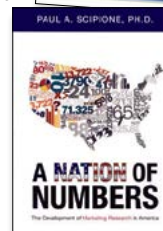


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10 minutes with...

Susan Paul

Manager, Market Insights and Strategy, Sheridan College

How do your experiences as both an agency- and client-side researcher impact your current role at Sheridan College?

Having worked on both sides of the research relationship has made me very focused on one thing: making sure research actually gets used.

On the agency side, I learned how to design strong studies, work fast and tell a compelling story under pressure. On the client side at Sheridan, I really see what happens after the deck is delivered. I'm much closer to the teams who use the research, which means I can see how findings are interpreted, where things land clearly and where they don't. In hindsight, I wish I'd had this perspective earlier in my career because it would have made me a better consultant and partner much sooner.

One of the biggest shifts for me has been how I think about communication. I joined Sheridan during the pandemic, when fatigue was very real and attention was scarce. People didn't have the time or energy to wade through long reports, even well-crafted ones. That forced me to become much more ruthless – in a good way – about clarity, conciseness and tailoring insights to different audiences. Rewriting research for how people actually consume it became just as important as the analysis itself.

Working in an academic environment adds another layer. Stakeholders bring varying levels of statistical familiarity, so I have to be thoughtful about how I explain advanced analytics – e.g., segmentation or conjoint – without defaulting to technical debates, keeping the focus on meaning and implications.

Over the next five years, how will client-side insights leaders need to evolve as expectations for strategic influence grow?

The idea of the insights leader as a strategic partner isn't new. We've been talking about it for years. What has changed is the context. When data was harder to come by, influence came from access and analysis. Today, data is everywhere. The real challenge isn't getting more of it; it's understanding what we actually need to know to move a decision forward.

As expectations for strategic influence grow, insights leaders will need to spend less time generating data and more time framing the problem. That means being comfortable challenging the brief, asking "What decision are we really trying to make?" and occasionally pointing out that more data might just be a very respectable form of procrastination.

In a data-saturated world, synthesis and judgment become the differentiators. Influence comes from distilling complexity into a small number of clear implications; not from showing every chart we could produce. The goal isn't to prove how much we know, but to make the path forward obvious.

This is also where the client-side researcher has an advantage. Being closer to the business makes it easier to shape questions upstream, understand constraints and see how insights actually get used. Strategic partnership becomes less aspirational and more practical, grounded in day-to-day decisions.

Ultimately, the insights leaders who will have the most influence over the next five years won't be the ones with the most data, but the ones with the clearest judgment about what matters and the confidence to help their organizations focus on solving the right problems.



"In a data-saturated world, synthesis and judgment become the differentiators."

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