

New Trends in Qualitative Research First Detected by Recruiters

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Business-to-business recruiting changes the rules

Being on the front lines, recruiters are often the first to detect new trends in qualitative research. One of the interesting trends to emerge in the past year is the increase in research in the business-to-business sector. (Anyone who doubts that this sector has gradually been gaining momentum should consider the fact that recruiters are not the only ones to note that activity in this sector has heated up. For instance, Toronto-based IMRAC is sponsoring a day-long conference for business-to-business marketers and researchers at the Metro Conference Centre on September 30th.)

Of course, business-to-business marketing is hardly a new sector of the economy, even though many of these industries are much less visible than consumer goods since most do not advertise on television. Nonetheless, the number of people who make their living selling industrial or business-related products to other companies must number in the tens of thousands. There is even a flourishing industry of trade magazines serving these sectors.

For a recruiter, research in these industries poses some interesting challenges. This is related to the reasons for the increase in the use of qualitative research among companies in this sector. One of the main causes of the increase in the use of qualitative research is technological change. Consider this predicament: your customers are sophisticated in assessing their own needs, but with the increasing use of information technology in your products, your customers are increasingly hesitant about making purchase decisions because they're having trouble assessing how your new products will suit their needs. Also consider the following related predicament: you have traditionally sold your products through highly trained sales personnel, but worldwide competition is driving prices down so sharply that the cost of face-to-face sales is becoming prohibitive.

How does this affect recruiters? We find that we are having to become increasingly adept at selling the idea of research to prospective respondents for business-to-business studies. In the first place, these are sophisticated buyers. And since there are severe demands on their time, merely being friendly on the phone simply isn't sufficient to get their commitment to attend. You have to tap into the respondent's professional interest in learning more about a topic which concerns their work, and offer a chance to compare notes in an informal setting with their peers. Your credibility as a recruiter is often dependent upon your ability to demonstrate your understanding of their industry and articulate what it is about their situation or expertise which makes their particular perspective so relevant and valuable to the research being conducted.

No one likes to be harassed by repeated unwanted approaches on the phone, but in these days of new problems and new answers, business people are more receptive than usual to hearing about new ideas. They are prepared to hear you out, provided you can do this succinctly and confidently. But there's no second chance. And in a target market where the entire universe is small to begin with, this tends to up the stakes. Will we soon be training recruiters the way we train salespeople?

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