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the Voices of Customers*

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I Hear You; I Do: MODERATOR TIPS FOR VALIDATING THE VOICES OF CUSTOMERS

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The soft, intangible skills of moderating, although at times taken for granted by newcomers to the field and even us seasoned researchers, are critically necessary to retain and master in order to “validate” our respondents during an interview.

I am, admittedly, an Oprah Winfrey fanatic, a fact known to very few of my fellow QRC colleagues, until now, of course. Recently, in celebration of the 10th anniversary of Oprah’s *O Magazine* I, along with thousands of other fans, took advantage of the special occasion and traveled to New York to see Oprah “live.” During her performance, she mentioned a familiar phrase — one that she has echoed countless times before on her show. However, this time hearing it again while on the heels of completing a project where I moderated interviews with chronically ill patients, Oprah’s statement resonated more profoundly. In close paraphrase, she said, “I’ve learned that we all want to be validated, to know that what we say matters, that it means something.”

I like to think I know a thing or two about “validating” what people say. After all, I am in the business of eliciting and dissecting the feedback and opinions of consumers, patients and other professionals to inform many of the product, service and communication plans that are out in the marketplace today, contributing to our economy. If that does not mean I validated what they said, then I am not sure what does.

However, hearing Oprah’s statement this time led to my own “Aha moment,” as I was left pondering: just how well do we as moderators “validate” the voices of our respondents who, presumably, like all other human beings, want to believe we truly care about what they say when they share their unique and, at times, very personal needs, opinions and emotions with us? It reminded me that the soft, intangible skills of moderating, although at times taken for granted by newcomers to the field and even us seasoned researchers, are critically necessary to retain and master in order to “validate” our respondents during an interview.

Over the years, I have witnessed the detrimental impact that a moderator’s lack of empathy can have on research in general, and specifically the impact it has on research aimed at understanding and uncovering the stated and unstated needs of respondents, such as Voice of Customer research. Lack of moderator empathy plays itself out in a number of ways, such as poor communication of the introductory remarks, failure to establish and maintain rapport, over-relying on scripted questions and overall lack of preparedness and confidence. Whether one or several of these symptoms are enacted, they portray lack of regard, and

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they often mitigate respondents' ability to fully share their individual opinions about a product, service or idea. The impact is results that yield very little new and actionable insights that a client team can then execute.

In this article, I do not intend to preach to the choir by reviewing the reasons *why* it is important to promote an attitude of care, appreciation or interest (i.e., validate), while moderating to elicit an understanding of customer needs. Instead, I will address *how* to effectively moderate in a manner that validates — and to use terms less common in our industry — *care* about or *appreciate* our respondents when conducting voice of customer research. Before I share these tips, I want to say a few words about developing rapport with respondents.

A Word about Rapport

Rapport building, the catch-all phrase for the process of developing — through varied words and actions — both a sympathetic relationship and an atmosphere of comfort with respondents, may be top-of-mind when you think about the notion of exhibiting care while moderating. Indeed it should be top-of-mind. I believe that developing rapport with respondents is the most important step when conducting these interviews, and it should be nearly an organic part of the Voice of Customer exchange. Given its significance in the work that we do as moderators, let us just consider rapport building a “given,” already accounted for in our arsenal of moderator “must do’s” during an interview. It is just that important.

Tips for Validating

So, moderators, are you ready to care? Here are a few guidelines for how to project authentic interest and (in other words) appreciate respondents while moderating. These tips are based on an accumulation of hands-on experiences, trainings and observations I have had

over the years. They have worked supremely well for me, and they will help draw out your respondents' true needs.

Appreciate.

Besides not forgetting the obvious — that is, sincerely thanking your respondents during your introduction for their willingness to participate in your project — there is no greater way to show appreciation while moderating than through your actions. Your nonverbal behavior should make respondents feel respected and acknowledged. Giving them eye contact, sitting or standing with shoulders relaxed with a slight leaning towards the respondent and nodding occasionally to indicate that you understand or need more information are all subtle, yet impactful ways of being attentive to your respondents.

Plan.

This goes without saying, but preparation is a must, particularly as it relates to the discussion guide. Before your interview, prepare and review both an outline of questions and a strategy for asking those questions. You should prepare enough so that you are not reading your topic guide verbatim, as this will stifle the natural fluidity of the discussion and cause you to lose eye contact with respondents. Your preparation will breed confidence, which is a surefire way to establish greater rapport with respondents.

Perceive.

Multitasking is an inherent part of our job as moderators. Engrossed in our moderator “duties” during an interview, however, we run the risk of not being fully aware of our present environment, and we may even lose sight of key information, innuendoes and nuances. To combat this, I have learned to do what I typically require from respondents, and that is to perceive.

For a moderator, the practice of perceiving requires making a concerted effort to block out thoughts or distractions that are unrelated to your current discussion with respondents. Distracting thoughts that can prohibit us from engaging fully in the moment with respondents could include self-absorbed and self-critical thoughts. Self-absorbed thoughts are the ones that usually include the word “I” and may reek of apprehension: (e.g., How am I going to tie this to what was said yesterday? What am I going to write in the report? What else should I ask from my list of questions?). The self-critical thoughts can rob even the most experienced and confident moderators — causing us during an interview to over-analyze or critique what we coulda, shoulda, woulda said or done, as opposed to assessing matters later at a more opportune time.

Other types of distractions, such as traffic, loud noises or constant interruptions, should also be immediately mitigated if they occur while you are interviewing. With the distractions gone, you are left with a keen awareness that allows you to notice, for instance, the rolling of eyes after a new concept has been read, or a palpating sense of frustration or heavy silence that fills the air as respondents use a product or describe an experience. These subtle instances provide opportunities for you to follow up and learn more during your discussion with respondents, potentially uncovering unspoken needs that could have been missed.

Reassure.

Respondents want to share their stories with us, but they may not always be confident in doing so. Therefore, whether you sense their doubt or not, frequently reassure them with positive and encouraging words, such as “Sure, tell me more”; “Yes, thanks for that”; and “Oh, right.”

Being inquisitive about and seeking to apprehend the experiences that respondents share help foster natural rapport, empathy and regard.

Empathize.

At its core, empathy requires understanding another's situation or feelings. We can achieve greater empathy by listening attentively to what our respondents are saying. Attentive listening — with both eyes and ears — enhances our ability to pick up vital verbal and nonverbal clues, intonations and mannerisms. In its execution, it requires that we let respondents speak freely, in their own jargon or slang, without correcting them or using our own words to summarize their thoughts. It also means we do not interrupt, judge or focus our attention on other matters or objects in the room while engaged with respondents.

Converse casually.

The goal here is to make conversation without saying too much — after all, you are primarily there to listen to and validate what they say. Dialogue should occur to probe respondents so that they explain more about their experiences. It should not be an opportunity for you to run through your list of scripted questions.

Inquisitive.

The goal of typical Voice of Customer research requires identifying as many (or all) of the respondent needs as possible. Therefore, while perceiving what is being said and observed during an interview, we must be very inquisitive

— to the point of near awkwardness — so that we can identify the relevant needs that, more times than not, lie below the surface of what is being said or seen. Yet, keep in mind that we have to do this without prodding respondents, but instead in a relaxed and natural fashion. Using probes — such as, “Why? Tell me more about that.” “What was your intention, your expectation?” “What problems or issues did you encounter?” — will assist the art of natural inquisition.

Apprehend.

We must not only be inquisitive, but we must also understand what respondents are telling us and not assume anything.



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Making sure we apprehend what we are hearing enables us to capture the actual voices of respondents and promotes sincere interest in what is being said. Strategies to ensure apprehension include paraphrasing what was said, asking for clarification from respondents or referring back to what was said earlier in the conversation and tying that into a current topic.

Totally you.

Be yourself. Enough said.

Experience.

Through the years, I have learned that solely asking respondents what they need yields vague and inadequate new insights. Instead, getting respondents to talk about an experience or observing them in the process of an experience reveals significantly more information that otherwise would go undiscovered. Being inquisitive about and seeking to apprehend the experiences that respondents share help foster natural rapport, empathy and regard.

Closing Thoughts

It is no accident that the key guidelines described above spell out the word A.P.P.R.E.C.I.A.T.E. We can effectively appreciate (i.e., validate) respondents when conducting needs assessments by beginning each project with a planned outline of questions and strategies to address them during the interview. This preparedness not only breeds confidence, but enables us to totally be ourselves, conversational, empathetic, inquisitive and reassuring, while engaging respondents to share their experiences. During the process of hearing or observing the experiences, we should be especially perceptive of the verbal and nonverbal clues, seeking to apprehend as best we can without making assumptions.

Managing all the above with actions that show you appreciate what is being shared by the respondents will resonate care and attentiveness on your behalf. The above guidelines, along with rapport-building strategies, are sure to leave respondents feeling like what they say does in fact matter and mean something. 📧