

The Death of Professionalism

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The Qualitative Research Consultant profession as we know it is dying. It is a slow but relentless decline and what little is being done to stop or reverse it is not sufficient. The immediate cause of this malady is the renegeing of our professional responsibility to provide consultation, instead of just moderation, in the research that we conduct for our clients. If this continues, within a few short years we will no longer be a consulting profession. Like global warming, the signs are everywhere but are largely ignored.

Years ago, when research buyers wanted to do qualitative research, they hired a qualitative research consultant. Not a moderator, a consultant. They met with the consultant before the project started to discuss the research issues and the specific question or decision that the research was to address. Afterward, the consultant was expected to recommend appropriate study design options and, when the study was approved, produce an effective screening questionnaire. Then the critical task of developing a discussion guide would begin. While the client might provide possible questions and areas for inquiry, it was understood that it was the consultant's experience and skill that would transform this input into a workable discussion outline. Clients would never dream of trying to write a discussion guide. The consultant, now a moderator, would then conduct the interviews utilizing whatever techniques and procedures were necessary to obtain the desired information. Upon completion of the last interview, the moderator became an analyst to make his/her most important contribution to the process: taking what the respondents said, determining what it means, relating it back to the original research problem, and recommending what the client should do about it. Back then, the qualitative research consultant was a valued member of the client team and respected for the contributions he or she made in solving the client's problem. This paradigm, in my opinion, is on life-support and it is just a matter of time before the plug is pulled.

Things are different today. Many clients no longer see us as partners or consultants. We are simply suppliers...order-takers. They tell, not ask, us what type of study will be conducted and what type of respondents will be included. They often write the screener, supervise the recruiting, and they may even provide the discussion guide without our input. Our biggest, perhaps only, significant contribution is the interviewing, and even this is becoming a commodity service. Almost anybody can moderate, they say, so we'll go with the best we can get for the least amount of money. Then they sit behind the mirror

and often pay as much attention to critiquing our style as listening carefully to what is being said. And the worst part, the thing most responsible for sending the QRC profession into decline, is the fact that they often don't even ask for our analysis and interpretation. To them, this is not our job, not our problem. They don't see any value in our objectivity, or any problem with their lack of same. They frequently don't ask us to write a final report, or even discuss findings or implications. Instead, they are content with a couple of he-said/she-said bullet-points on a PowerPoint...*and no recommendations, thank you very much.*

What really irks me about all this is that it is mostly our own fault. With some exceptions, most of us tend to let it happen. It no longer seems to bother us that we are not consulted about problem definition or study design. We don't object to letting clients take care of the recruiting and write the guide. We enjoy it when we can just show up and moderate some groups...after all, that's the fun part. And we are often more than happy when we can walk away without having to analyze data and write a report. Some of us even think that this is the way it is supposed to be. In short, we have given up our role as consultants, and in doing so we are contributing to the death of this vital aspect of our professionalism.

There are those of us who will ignore the crisis by saying that this is not their problem. They recognize what is happening but insist that it does not apply to them. They will say that they still provide consultation and that their clients appreciate their feedback and insight. Others will agree that this situation exists but will suggest that it is unique to the U.S. and is not indicative of any worldwide trend in qualitative research. I would ask those in both of these groups, respectfully, to take their head out of the sand. Just because it does not currently apply to you does not mean that it will not ultimately affect you.

The death of professionalism results in serious collateral damage as well. Ignoring our consultative responsibility to clients, who may not be skilled analysts and who, by definition, are rarely in a position to be objective, leads to poorly analyzed research and misguided business decisions. This, in turn, erodes the efficacy, the reliability, and therefore the overall confidence that research buyers have in qualitative research. Admittedly, not all projects require extensive analysis and interpretation; it may be quite clear that the red packaging was superior to the blue. But it's not always that simple. How often have we done a fairly straightforward group, only to find out afterward that the five client observers saw and heard five different things? And how often have we seen that the accepted interpretation is the one from the highest ranking client, regardless of its accuracy? It is a recipe for disaster and it happens every single day. Ineffective research is often the result. For clients who have made poor decisions based on these studies, casting the blame becomes easy: focus groups suck, respondents are not being honest, moderators don't use enough projective techniques, etc. Some believe that the answer is to find "new" and "better" methodologies, perhaps ethnography, online, or the next qualitative flavor of the

month. But these too are doomed to failure if our input as consultants is unwanted or ignored.

Can the death of professionalism be averted? Yes, it is not too late, but we need to act before the situation gets any worse. To restore the QRC profession to good health and vitality, we must strengthen the “C” in QRC. Developing the Professional Competencies was a strong beginning because we now have a clearer, more specific definition of who we are, what we do, and the contributions we can make to improve qualitative research. While it is obvious that we have to use these competencies to make ourselves better, it is also essential that we use them to redefine our role and our skill set to research buyers. There are eleven QRC competencies; interviewing is just one of them. We must make clients appreciate the benefit of using us as more than just moderators. We have to prove to clients that we have real value as consultants. We have to demonstrate how our input will result in more effective research. We have to revive and restore our position as problem solvers and respected, valued members of the client team. *The impetus to make this happen will not come from clients. It has to come from us.*

Strengthening our professionalism is the mandate of the Professionalism Committee. We have a perspective, an approach, and a specific plan for how this might be done. But one committee cannot do it alone. It will take all of QRCA's resources, working as a team, to be successful. The first step, I believe, is to recognize the problem. I deliberately wrote this article to be provocative, perhaps even controversial. I hope it makes you stop and think. Professionalism is dying. We can save it. Let's do that.