

Professional Research Recruiting – Evolution of an Industry

By Maryanne Livia, PRC & Thomas Livia

Ah, the good old days – 1975 was a wonderful year for researchers. Marketing and advertising were akin to the airline business of the 1950's - glamorous, fun and highly profitable. Almost all projects were focus groups and they took place in lavish penthouses and focus facilities. Wine was served and researchers traveled to many cities conducting numerous focus groups among broad audiences. Budgets were large and fees, which often flowed from consultants to moderators to facilities to recruiters, were more than “fair” and rarely challenged.

Recruiters worked in small quarters, at small desks, smoking cigarettes and calling potential respondents from phone books and 3”x5” index cards. Many recruiters were moms and homemakers who got an opportunity to have a career now that their kids were growing up and attending school. The workday often broke at 3 p.m., just long enough for these “kitchen table” recruiters to get the kids home and set up with a snack before heading back to their desks to make more phone calls.

Research topics were simple and direct – “Do you have dandruff?” “Ingrown toenails?” “Are you available to come to our kitchen and bake a cake using a new Betty Crocker cake mix?” Screeners were also simple! “Do you eat

peanut butter?” “Which of the following brands of laundry detergent have you purchased in the past three months?” “Are you available to participate in a focus group on Tuesday?” “May we have your address so we can mail you a confirmation letter?” Screeners were sent by messenger. Updates were given by phone, eventually fax, on that paper that rolled out and then the ink mysteriously disappeared after a few months. “What happened to the update from that job we did last May?!”

Perhaps research, like the rest of the world, was not as rushed and results-oriented back then. We had more time to allow the process to unfold. First time respondents were common. Professional respondents were unheard of. In fact, more time was spent explaining what market research was to a potential respondent than screening out the “pros.”

Fast forward 35 years to 2010. Today’s typical qualitative screeners are often as long as 17-20 pages, even for consumer jobs! Behavior has taken a back seat to attitude. Algorithms and attitudinal questions are often incorporated into the process. Fees for algorithm dropouts are now incorporated into bids. Recruiters spend hours, sometimes days, trying to find

the “fantastic female” or the “fitness forward male.” “Do you exercise more than three times per week?” “Which of the following best describes your attitudes about exercise?” “If you were an animal, what kind would you be, and why?” The focus facility, once ground zero of qualitative research, is now only one choice of many when it comes to interacting with respondents. New research methodologies such as blogging exercises, idea stations, online focus groups and ethnographies, are often replacing, or at least complementing, traditional eight or 10 person focus groups. “We were wondering if you’d be available for a Web enabled phone interview.” “We’d like to send an interviewer to your office to follow you for six hours while you diagnose patients.” “What we need you to do is cook this food for your family for five days and keep a blog about it and then make a collage of how you felt.”

Yes, the world has changed quite a bit in 35 years. Consumers are more sophisticated than ever. Our preferences are more honed and our behavior more exact. In 1975 there were a handful of television stations broadcasting soap operas, news and sitcoms. Today, viewers may have more than 200 channels available to watch at any given time. An “empty-nester” can

spend the entire day learning to make pasta or understanding the fine points of having a “queer guy” teach a straight bachelor how to eat, drink, decorate and entertain. The marketing industry’s knowledge of that behavior has certainly kept pace, if not, in many ways, caused or encouraged it. Budgets are tighter, requirements more stringent. Technology and its effects on efficiency and our social interconnectivity have, in many ways, made things easier and, in some ways, more difficult. Today, everyone is a marketing target - patients suffering from stage 4 metastasized cancer, parents of children between the ages of 7 and 8 ½, expectant moms in their third trimester, unacculturated Mexican females who have had a stent put in during the past 3-6 months.

One thing hasn’t changed. At the core of qualitative market research efforts today, just as it was 35 years ago, remains the qualified respondent. In order to deliver on that core, however, the recruitment process has matured to be more sophisticated than ever. There is no question that mom, alone at the kitchen table, is no longer fully up to the task. Today’s recruiters, at least those who want to stay relevant, must use the new tools of technology and social networking while learning from the tried and true methods of yesterday. E-mail is blasted to thousands of potential respondents in seconds. Posts are listed on Facebook pages and Twitter accounts. Pre-group tasks are common, sometimes taking hours to complete. Relationships are forged with healthcare professionals and advocates, all to find that one very specific respondent. This evolving technique is now done in less time and on a tighter budget. As budgets tighten, clients are again realizing the importance of quality recruiting. Having less money to waste tends to squeeze out all but the most necessary middlemen. Recruiters, once able to work with little or no knowledge of their chosen industry, are working with more clients, directly, and accordingly, are now called upon to understand and improve the process rather than just perform scripted tasks.

Cars are faster, lives are faster, people move faster, clients move faster and recruiters must move faster. For some, perhaps, the jury is still out as to whether faster is actually better; but, wonderful things have resulted from these changes. The American consumer

is much more aware than ever. We are much more knowledgeable, ask more questions and want more from life. Qualitative recruiting firms are more experienced, knowledgeable and skilled than ever. Most recruiters are grads and post grads, loaded with tons of computer, networking and organizational skills. We are bilingual and trilingual. We are resourceful. We are detectives! We are constantly on the watch for professional respondents who try to scam their way into studies, regardless of how unscrupulous it may seem.

We design screeners, we consult with clients, we look deeper and work harder to find that one exact respondent that is the perfect match for the new and very specific target audience.

It is an exciting time! Qualitative recruiters are being asked to assume more responsibility and, as such, we are treated as partners in a more sophisticated people-finding process. Like many other industries, we are being asked to do more while being paid less, but we are rising to the occasion – learning, doing and delivering more each day.

In the end, the cliché still stands - the more things change, the more they stay the same. In the world of qualitative

market research that “thing” is the need for qualified respondents to participate in research projects. We can conduct interviews online, as an ethnography, in a focus facility or on the phone. We can collect homework assignments or blogs, but few can dispute that the KEY to all good research is to have a qualified respondent. Everything else is fruitless unless we are talking to the right person.

When done correctly, the process is a beautiful symphony with all instruments working together as one - a client with a need; a professional and experienced recruiting firm with a mission; a knowledgeable and resourceful recruiter with a goal; an eager, interested, and qualified respondent with an opinion; meaningful, truthful data to be had and a happy, satisfied client.

And that is the payoff.



Maryanne Livia, PRC is president and **Thomas Livia** is CFO/COO of Recruiting Resources Unlimited, LLC.