



RESEARCH METHODS

# NARRATIVE RESEARCH

A NEW AND BETTER APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING YOUR CUSTOMERS



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## **The Research Problem: Getting Actionable Insights that Guide Success**

If you've ever undertaken market research, you know that it can be an enormous investment that delivers oftentimes limited results. Companies that conduct research as a way to better understand their customers and prospects often end up with information that is hard to use, lacking in context and colored by the biases and assumptions of research sponsors and of the researchers. You may spend tens of thousands of dollars or more on a research study trying to decipher how your markets do business, but in the end you wind up often with data which is too complex, too biased and too narrow to be used as a reliable and meaningful guide for decisive actions.

Ultimately it's not you or the research participants who are to blame for this problem. The problem is rooted in relying on long-established research approaches that increasingly fail to capture the conditions found in today's complex and rapidly changing markets. By the time you complete most market research projects the questions that you need answered and the conditions that you need to test may have changed significantly enough to render many of your research assumptions irrelevant. You want to anticipate how markets will respond to changes in your products and services without getting caught in this expensive trap.

Giving researchers the ability to understand behavior in markets successfully is where a new method called "narrative research" comes in. Narrative research is an innovative data-gathering and analysis approach to market research that offers a richer, more indicative and more valid understanding of large group behaviors and preferences than do many traditional qualitative and quantitative research methods.

## **Narrative Research: Letting Markets Tell Their Stories Naturally**

As the name suggests, narrative research is a market research approach that relies on the gathering and analyses of stories ("narratives"). These stories are told by study participants in response to various scenarios with which they are presented. The scenarios for narratives are designed to enable people to tell researchers about their experiences without the bias of starting assumptions about their possible behavior. This enables the behavioral information extracted through the processing and analysis of these narratives to be free of biases and to expose likely behaviors that may not have been targeted at all by the typical questions and prompts found in most research methods.

For example, if Company ABC was interested in learning more about how and why its customers were using its information products, a topic formed with the narrative method might suggest:



*“Imagine that you are orienting a new sales employee regarding how lead generation is accomplished in your organization using business information from Company ABC. The new employee asks why you are using this particular information source and how important is it to the lead generation process. Think of three stories you might tell her to illustrate Company ABC’s value to you.”*

Compare this to a traditional research approach, which might simply ask a participant, “Tell me why you think company ABC’s information products benefit your organization,” or ask them to complete a grid of possible reasons why they might use it. These traditional approaches try to get answers in the form of an opinion about a starting question or hypothesis that may not match how people actually behave in a given context. In contrast, when a person tells a story about a given scenario through narrative research unprompted by a pre-formed question or hypothesis, you get unbiased insights into how people perceive and act in a specific context, and how they may communicate about their perceptions and actions with other people. It is these types of contexts within a complex marketplace which create the influences on decision-making that marketers need to understand more clearly. The contexts of narrative research story-telling reveal more objectively than traditional research the real behaviors that are occurring beyond a marketing campaign’s direct influence or the reach of a salesperson or research interviewer. Understanding these behaviors is most important to the success of many complex sales and marketing scenarios. Having insight into this kind of behavior in markets is a valuable tool for adjusting product and marketing plans and for testing and devising multiple approaches for your markets.

## **Narrative Research: What Makes It Better?**

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The narrative research approach offers a number of advantages over traditional market research methodologies:

1. ***Narrative research is behavior-based rather than opinion-based.*** For a given individual, the decision-making process and the actions which result from it, are a function of a constantly evolving set of factors and circumstances. Most market research approaches, however, ignore these factors. Asking someone to give an opinion or list a set of criteria without also tying the response to a particular situation assumes that the answers are simply static facts – true at all times and in all circumstances.

Real life, of course, is much more complicated. For example, asking a marathon runner to “Tell me a story about how you recuperate at the end of a race,” will yield very different results than simply asking, “List your favorite post-race drinks.” Not only does the situational context of the narrative approach provide for more valid answers, it adds



a multi-dimensional richness to the data that leads to more useful and more actionable insights. In essence, narrative research helps you to gather insights into likely or actual experiences, not simply opinions or feelings around a particular question.

2. **Narrative research puts control in the hands of the storyteller.** If I ask you a question, and then write down and code your answer, I'm necessarily filtering as I go. Unless I capture every word you say, the decisions I make regarding what to write down, what to throw out, what to prioritize and what it all means, are based on my point of view and my perspective, not yours. That's significant, because it means that when research is conducted the traditional way, you're not really hearing from the participant - we're hearing the participant's point of view translated through the bias and frame of reference of whomever is collecting and coding the results of an interview.

Narrative research, by contrast, puts the task of understanding what a story means into the hands of the storyteller. Not only are respondents given the freedom and flexibility to enhance, embellish and direct the conversation however they like, we ask them to self-code (tag) their anecdotes, label them, and then quantify their stories on a set of scales to facilitate the analysis of their stories.

The scales used are not your typical "strongly agree/disagree" scales, either. They relate to the particular story in question, and are therefore linked to the context itself rather than some abstraction. So, for example, after sharing a story and giving it a title, a story-teller would be asked to rate four or five scales. Here's a sample:

	Sales people in this story talk about the process in a way that shows										
the value of the data	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	how easily the process runs
	Does not apply <input type="checkbox"/>										

Note, by the way, that because the story a person chooses to tell may not relate to a given scale, we permit "Does not apply" as one of the answers, at the discretion of the story-teller. This scaling of answers provides measurement information to help quantify the importance of key concepts related in a story in a way that helps to predict which of two opposing concepts are most likely to be related to behaviors in a story scenario - without introducing the bias of questions possibly unrelated to likely behaviors.

3. **Narrative research is more flexible.** Notice in the traditional research examples cited above how the development and phrasing of the questions themselves introduces bias



and an inherent hypothesis. In the “List your favorite post-race drinks” question, for example, there are assumptions built into it regarding the importance of post-race drinks, as well as a belief that racers will, in fact, have a preference. The narrow scope and phrasing of the question limits the possible responses.

The narrative approach, on the other hand, simply asks the subject to describe his or her method of recuperation. While the subsequent story may indeed reveal something about drink preferences, narrative questioning remains open to a much wider – and often unanticipated – range of responses more related to actual behavior in relation to behaviors that drinks are meant to address.

Narrative research also provides a more flexible approach to using the results of a research study. When you field a study that answers specific questions or hypotheses, you cannot return to that research easily to answer new questions or to test new hypotheses. In contrast, the more open-ended nature of narrative research responses combined with the story-teller’s coding makes it easier to return to the research again and again to test new hypotheses against the actual and likely behaviors of people.

Instead of investing heavily in answering a few questions for a few decisions, narrative research enables its sponsors to invest in the ability to test more product and marketing ideas more rapidly. This can enable narrative research sponsors to validate courses of action more efficiently and objectively before committing to large-scale product or marketing plans.

4. ***Narrative research can be more cost-effective.*** Traditional research studies have a fixed timeline and sequence:

*Create study >> gather data>> analyze data>> create report.*

Once the work is done, you cannot go back and change the process to get additional information. You can only start a new process that will measure opinions at a new specific point in time that may – or may not – relate to how people’s behavior has changed over that time frame.

Narrative research, by contrast, is always open to the seamless addition of more and more stories and, as such, is inherently longitudinal. For companies that want to measure changes in point of view over time, this can provide an extremely cost-effective methodology. Once the collection and analysis infrastructure for a particular story is in place, the administrative costs are negligible for gathering new stories that can reveal completely unanticipated changes in behaviors that traditional methods would not capture.



In addition, because a single participant can yield multiple stories, narrative research is often a more efficient means of gathering the data needed from a cooperating pool of story-tellers to draw statistically significant conclusions. This can enable narrative research to provide the benefits of both qualitative and quantitative research more cost-effectively.

## Analyzing the Data

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For all its benefits, of course, simply gathering and coding narratives does not yield results that can be understood, much less acted upon, on a large scale. Towards that end, we rely on a sophisticated software system to facilitate the rapid analysis of collected stories and data. Originally conceived as a means of gauging the motivation, capability and intent of terrorist movements, the empirically developed software system uses collected narratives and associated tagging, together with demographic and other relevant participant data, to generate an interconnected, understandable, visually intuitive set of information to analyze this information more rapidly and effectively.

Using the SenseMaker™ system, nontechnical business executives are able to experience the insights available in individual narratives and to tie them to larger trends; track subtle changes over time that would have been missed by one-time, snapshot approaches; and view the overall business landscape through the perspective of a number of different filters that they may choose to apply.

(For more on the SenseMaker™ software system and how it works, visit our web site here: [www.shore.com/files/sensemaker.pdf](http://www.shore.com/files/sensemaker.pdf))

## How Your Organization Can Sponsor Narrative Research

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Shore Communications regularly accepts participant companies into new, narrative studies, each with a target of 500 unique narratives. These can be collected privately for your specific needs but can be collected also for joint studies, intended to give you the ability to participate in a much larger data pool than would normally be possible in a single-firm project. Since the narratives collected are focused on many common key industry scenarios and not biased towards specific pre-formed questions or hypotheses, participating in a joint Shore narrative research project can provide a source of industry insight that can respond rapidly to your research needs at any point in time without revealing your market hypotheses to others.

Participating companies contribute a minimum of 100 stories from their own customers, as well as benefit from access to the additional 400 stories from among the other participants. (Participant names and specific product descriptions between companies are kept confidential.)



In addition, because participant companies are not “buying a panel,” but are using instead their own customers as study respondents, there are significant savings in the cost of data gathering.

Private studies using Shore narrative research services may be executed at any time, independent of the joint studies.

For more information on joining our next study, please contact a representative of Shore Communications Inc.



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