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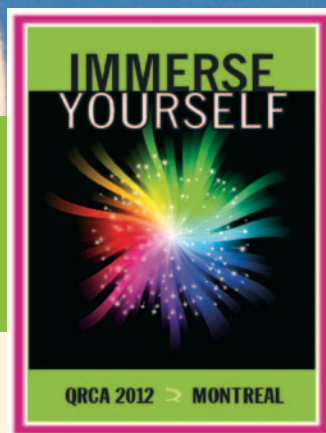
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Why Ask “Why?”

The When and How

By Judithe Andre

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“Never ask ‘Why?’ is part of our conventional research wisdom... and with good reason. Asking “Why?” can put respondents on the defensive and make them feel a need to justify their responses or behavior. Research participants may then give us a “socially acceptable” answer; in effect, they lie by telling us what they think we want to hear. On the defensive, our respondents might suppress their deep, unadulterated ideas, which means those ideas are not articulated or revealed, and the insights that could lead to innovation or productivity do not surface. Does our research go up in flames, all because our interviewing method included the question “Why?”

Why Ask “Why?”

The American Heritage dictionary defines the word “why” as both an adverb (*for what purpose, reason or cause; with what intention, justification or motive*) and as a noun (*the cause or intention underlying a given action or situation; a difficult problem or question*). We can be more effective in using “Why?” and other why-type questions when we are clear about what we intend to elicit. In other words, do we want to figure out all of the influencers behind a purchase or a person’s motivations (essentially, acting on the adverb form of the word) or rather how someone rationalizes her decision (which is determined when we engage in asking the noun form of the word)?

As researchers, we know that the quality of what consumers say during an interview is based largely on the questions they are asked (i.e., the content) and the tone of voice used when those questions are asked (manner of delivery). Let us consider **when** and **how** to pose the “Why?” questions effectively during the interviewing process in order to elicit useful information without leaving respondents feeling defensive or pressured to give us misinformation.

When We Should Ask “Why?”

Just as the definition of “why” suggests, there are a myriad of occasions **when** “Why?” questions are appropriate. And, for those of you with engrained “why

For researchers with engrained “why phobias,” there are ways to word your “Why?” questions without actually saying the word.



phobias,” there are ways to word your “Why?” questions without actually saying the word. For example, if the objectives of your project include the need to:

- Understand/determine a **purpose**.
“Why do you use...?” Instead ask,
“For what purposes do you use...?”
- Understand/determine the **reason**.
“What are the reasons why...?” or
“Why does that matter?” Instead ask,
“What influenced you to...?”
- Understand/determine the **causes**.
“Why does this cause you to...?”
Instead ask, “How does this affect your...?”
- Understand/determine the **justification**.
“Why?” Instead ask,
“How do you justify...?”
- Understand/determine the **intentions or motives**.
“Why did you...?” Instead ask,
“What was your intention or motive?”
- **Reveal the outcome** [of the above questions] (i.e., the purpose, causes, intentions, etc.).
“Given the outcome of X, how does this impact your decision?”

In the above examples, it is important to point out that, implicit in asking these questions, is an innate curiosity or desire to make sense of some previously attained knowledge about the consumer. In other words, what may be driving us to ask “Why?” is our need to collect more or deeper information than what has already been attained. As the adverb definition of “why” suggests, we ask “Why?” because we received some prior information — for example, an answer from the consumer to a question we may have just asked during the interview, pre-collected information from a screener, or insights about the consumer’s segment designation or characteristic — that prompted us to follow up with a “Why?” question. And in doing so, we *modify* and *enhance our knowledge* of the infor-

mation so that it becomes more descriptive, coherent, deep or relevant.

Typical occasions that drive us as moderators to modify or enhance our knowledge include those times when we are seeking to:

- **Become more insightful or familiar** with a consumer type or segment, process, behavior, attitude, choice or idea.
- **Uncover and/or enumerate, in as much detail as possible**, the reasons behind a behavior, event, attitude, choice or an idea.
- **Provide an explanation** for the salient outcomes, innuendoes or other observed implications (e.g., “Is X the reason why...?”).

I describe these types of situations as *residual occasions* for further probing. During the interviewing process, the residual occasions arise only after primary information or insights have been attained and/or shared. That is, we should not ask “Why?” without having already attained answers to the primary questions. Here are some examples of three main types of primary questions (the ones that should precede the “Why?” questions):

- **Background questions** — for example, screening criteria, such as demographics, segment designation, psychographics, a propensity for usage/behavior or openness toward sharing sensitive information in an interview.
- **Fact-building questions** — such as those that reveal or confirm how often a consumer uses a product/service, whether or not he had a particular experience, or his mindset or general sentiments towards your product, message or idea.
- **Initial focused questions** or activities that are designed to get at the heart of the insights attained from the fact-building questions — for example, what are the motivations, deep-seated

issues, preferences or steps/actions that consumers would take toward your product/service?

Another occasion when it makes sense to ask “Why?” may be considered controversial for some. Use “Why?” when it is your intent to push respondents out of their comfort zone or typical spiel. This occasion, which I describe as the *rock-the-boat* occasion, is still a residual one, but what differentiates it from the previous examples is its intent. The intent behind the *rock-the-boat* occasion is to provoke tension or discomfort in order to shake loose the full-spectrum learning from respondents during an interview.

Recognizing a *rock-the-boat* occasion may be a bit tricky, especially for novice qualitative researchers; typically, the occasion presents itself when all the verbal and non-verbal clues have been exhausted. In these cases, while respondents’ answers seem to satisfy our initial inquiries, we intuitively sense that there is more. During these moments, we should pose the question “Why?” and, in doing so, may just get the deep, creative feedback that otherwise may not have surfaced.

During a recent group discussion with physicians, I received repeated feedback about why they were not receptive to several of the proposed branding concepts being proposed for a new competitive service. Their reasons for overall low appeal were clear and included concerns about how they would be notified about the new service, brand-loyalty factors and logistical concerns. Fearing that I was reaching the point of nearly beating the topic over the head, but still sensing and observing that there was more to what was being said, I felt compelled to inquire further. After all, usage of and familiarity with the service were both very high. Bravely, I asked, “I don’t

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want to dismiss what we just talked about, but before we move on, help me understand one last time, *why* do you feel this way about...?”

At that point, they revealed their real feelings about the category. In short, the branding strategy was not nearly as important to them as the service output itself. While the services they were receiving from the provider were important, the branding was not; and in order for them to be more receptive to the possible new branding options, physicians indicated that the new brand strategy would have to include a description or depiction of the services that mattered most to them. My additional “Why?” probe led to a more focused and productive discussion about how we could creatively implement the important service features in a branding strategy and the impact this would have on their receptivity.

Of note, asking “Why?” in the *rock-the-boat occasion* is more useful in group discussions than in one-on-one interviews because, as we know, sometimes we need to challenge the status-quo reactions in a group to determine if there are underlying individual differences that may not have surfaced because of the group dynamics.

Now, How?

How we ask “Why?” will make all the difference in the quality and usefulness of the feedback that we receive from consumers. Here are five advanced techniques for how to ask “Why” effectively.

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Ask “Why?” as a probe, not as a primary question.

As I mentioned earlier, the occasions for asking “Why?” are based on the need for more information; the moments when these needs arise are the residual occasions. Posing “Why?” at these occasions enable us to probe. Probing with “Why?” questions helps deepen our understanding of the consumer or of an experience, process or idea that she may have already shared with us at some point prior to, or during, the discussion.

Vary your why-type probes.

We should minimize usage of the word “why.” Yes, I did say we should mini-

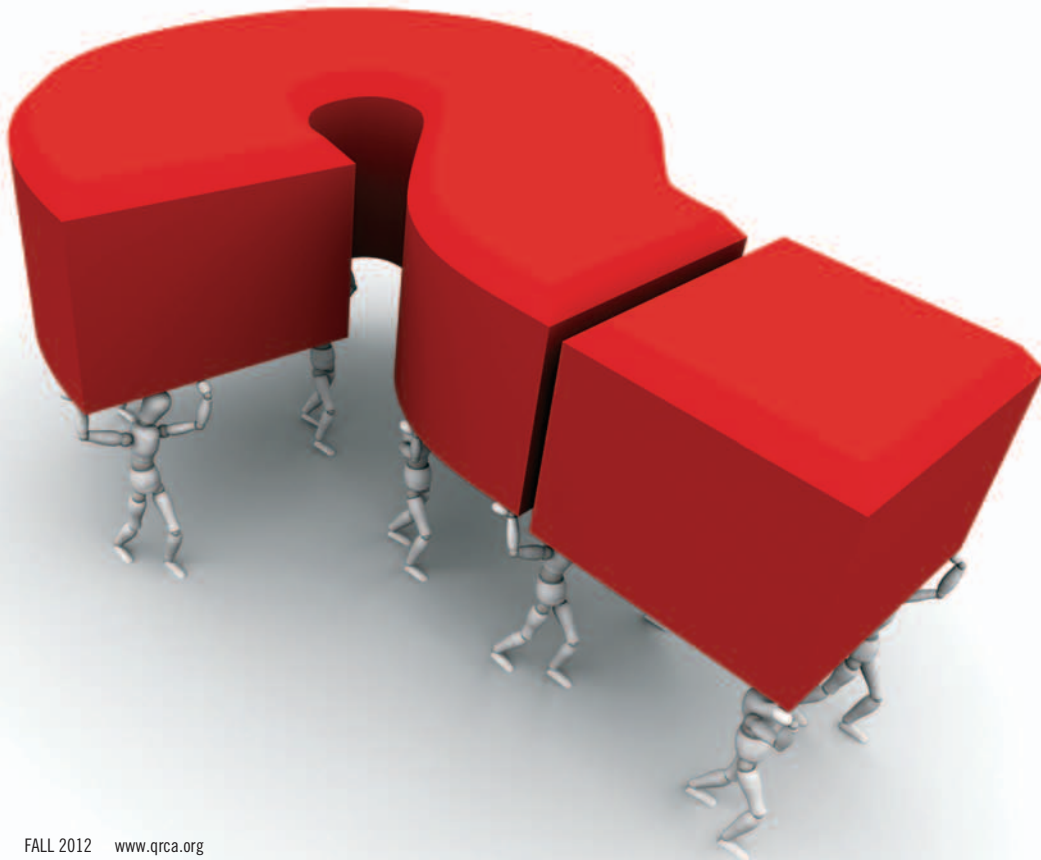
mize (not eliminate) usage of the word “why,” as well as any other probes (such as “Tell me more” and “Uh huh”) that we may find ourselves using repeatedly. The repeated use of any one probe is likely to cause consumers to feel as if we are not listening to what they are saying or that we are looking for a different response.

Pose “Why?” in an inquisitive and non-judgmental tone.

To be inquisitive and not judgmental has more to do with our tone of voice than with the words we use. For example, let’s say you conduct six in-depth interviews with respondents,

who all respond similarly to an issue, but then the seventh respondent answers completely differently. Responding with “Why that?” or “Why did you say that?” in a tone of voice that suggests you did not expect to hear her response could result in her feeling judged or defensive. The fact is, even if you welcomed the different perspective or were pleasantly surprised that new insights were emerging after the seventh interview, phrasing the “Why?” probe in an inquisitive and neutral tone (e.g., “Tell me about why you...” or “Describe why you prefer...”) makes a world of difference in how consumers will respond.

Probing with indirect “Why?” questions forces consumers to think outside their immediate box and, in doing so, could lead to an uncovering of latent, deep or subconscious reactions and insights that could have been missed.



Say nothing at all.

In lieu of articulating the question “Why?” we can engage in non-verbal inquiry by using wordless signals — our body language, gestures and facial expressions — to solicit more information from respondents. Asking “Why?” non-verbally entails remaining actively silent after a respondent reveals information, while simultaneously communicating non-verbally. Examples of non-verbal inquiry include providing consistent eye contact, nodding, leaning in or walking towards the respondent to show that you are engaged in what he is saying, or sharing a smile as a means of showing your anticipation of hearing more. We can use numerous other non-verbal cues to elicit more information from respondents, but the key is to utilize non-verbal signals judiciously and with prudence. Non-verbal inquiry requires skill and precise timing, and if executed intently, it can go a long way in making consumers feel unencumbered by our “Why?” questions.

Note: While most non-verbal cues are universal across the globe, when working with respondents with cultural or geographic differences of which we are unfamiliar, we should be particularly mindful of what are acceptable and unacceptable non-verbal signals to avoid misinterpretation.

Ask “Why?” indirectly with “imaginative” questions or through projective techniques.

Indirect “Why?” questions are particularly useful when talking to consumers who, because of their deep attachment to or close involvement with a product/service, may not always articulate the finer points about how they really feel towards that product/service. Therefore, probing with indirect “Why?” questions forces consumers to think outside of their immediate box and, in doing so, could lead to an uncovering of latent, deep or subconscious reactions and insights that could have been missed.

In a recent focus group, for example, I had each respondent select images from various sources to create a collage that illustrated the impact of immigration on their day-to-day lives. Upon probing to understand why respondents selected their specific images, we

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identified poignant underlying emotional content that was not articulated prior to our asking “Why?” indirectly. In the end, our understanding of the emotional consequences influenced the client’s messaging campaign about immigration.

Examples of imaginative questions include:

- Asking respondents to complete sentences. Instead of, “How does your credit card make you feel?” ask, “If your credit card were a car, what kind of car would it be? Give me three adjectives that describe that car.”
- Asking respondents to describe how an object or person would respond if facing a similar situation or decision. Instead of, “What would you do if your bank called your credit line?” ask, “Thinking of your neighbor, how might she react if her bank pulled her credit line?”

- Ask respondents to select images or words that portray an experience they may have had or that express how they feel about a certain topic.

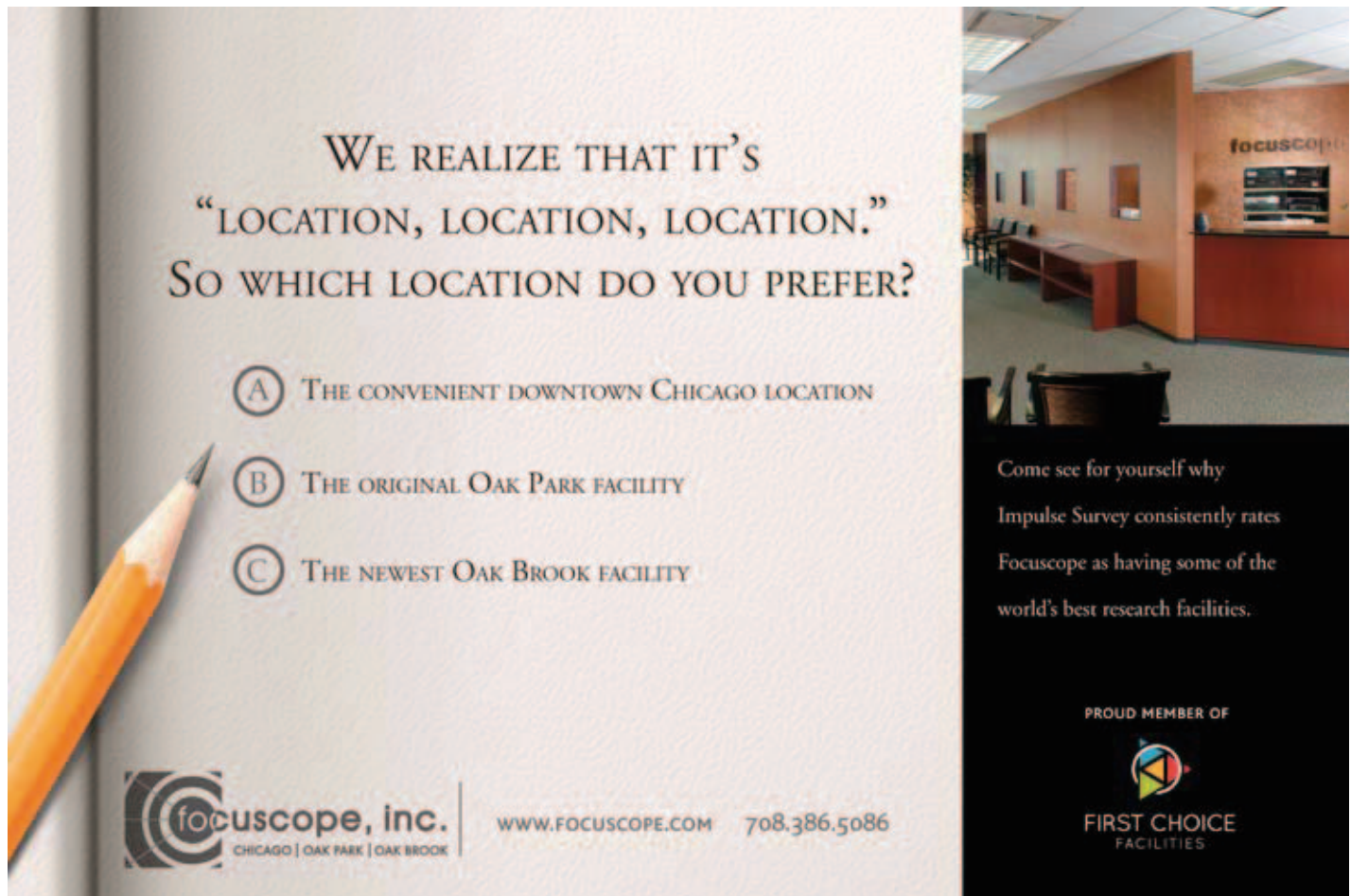
Summary

Ask it in French (Pour quoi), Spanish (¿Por qué), German (Warum), Chinese (为什么, Wèishéme) or, in my parents’ native language, Haitian Creole (Poukisa), but ask “Why?” anyway (in the language that suits your market, of course!). Let us reconsider the advice of “Never ask ‘Why?’” especially since eliciting the “Why?” answers from consumers is part of our job as research moderators. The key is to know **when** and **how** to pose the “Why?” questions so that consumers do not feel uncomfortable and answer truthfully.

On a macro level, we should ask “Why?” questions when we want to

become more familiar with a given insight, to uncover and enumerate as much information as we can about an insight or to provide explanations after the primary questions have been asked. Asking “Why?” to create an atmosphere where respondents will feel out of their comfort zone can also yield deep insights that may not have been discovered had respondents not been challenged.

How we ask the “Why?” questions is crucial, however. Applying the five techniques — reserving “Why?” for follow-up questions, varying your probes, being inquisitive, saying nothing at all and using indirect questions — will make a world of difference in the quality and usefulness of the feedback we get back from consumers. 



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