

Focus on the Conversation

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When I first started AZtech, our chief competitive differentiator was the fact that we backed up all our recommendations with our own qualitative market research. We interviewed hundreds of customers, partners, thought leaders and vendors every month. Our clients were always stunned at the depth of information we uncovered and the stature of people we spoke to. Soon they wanted us to do custom research for them.

And that was when the trouble started. Well, not trouble exactly. Let's just say we had a definite difference in opinion with marketing departments on the way one should approach market research. The first challenge we faced was that marketing wanted something easy to analyze, but sales and product development wanted something with deep insight. Back in the late 90's, when we first started, there were very few tools to analyze unstructured data. Plus they were expensive and complicated to learn. Marketing simply couldn't get their heads around how we were going to translate 1000's of pages of conversation in nice PowerPoint charts. They kept pushing for more and more multiple choice questions that force a customer into a set of answers that aren't actually true...or at least not as accurate as they could be.

The other challenge was that marketing and product development wanted to validate what they thought they knew, but sales wanted to understand potential customer objections so they could better prepare. Marketing kept asking we include a series of leading questions.

As a result, we spent weeks on an exercise that should have taken a half day. But, it was worth it. The process itself helped all stakeholders understand the inherent flaws in quantitative research as well as the importance of being very careful how you structure qualitative research. Perhaps even more important, as we reviewed draft after draft the teams began to internalize why it was that we always uncovered such great insight. The sales teams even began to adopt many of our practices.

What were we doing that was so different? We had conversations. Our interview guides, then and now, are designed to facilitate conversation. Shane Snow's guidance in this [Fast Company](#) article is spot on. Our researchers weren't experts, but they were inherently curious and had no fear of asking for explanations. They participated in the conversation, they didn't interrogate. The result was that our average interview with C-level executives last over an hour! In fact, the circumstances of our interviews make for great stories. I'll never forget the interview one of my researches had with the CIO of Bank of America. He called her from his car, planning to blow her off, but became so engaged he talked to her for over an hour including a stop at the dry cleaners and picking up pizza!

Traditional quantitative market research has its role. The key is not to rely on it entirely. Having real conversations with your customers, partners, suppliers, and employees is fundamental to success. You'll be amazed at how much they want to share with you!

