

Organic Market Research: Avoiding Overly Contrived Data





What is Organic Research?

Honestly, there is no such thing as “organic research.” We’re just trying to make a point. The point is this: market research can produce misleading data when we force participants through an overly contrived process that limits their ability to reveal needs, attitudes, emotions and behaviors.

Many people debate the pros and cons of eating organic foods—foods produced without synthetic pesticides, genetically modified organisms or chemical fertilizers. Regardless of which side of the debate you favor, when you go to the grocery store and look at the organic apples next to the “conventional” fruit, we all notice some differences. The organic apples lack the deep red color, dazzling shine, and flawless appearance we expect.

Still, as the classic Joni Mitchell song (*Big Yellow Taxi*) goes, “Give me spots on my apples, but leave me the birds and the bees. Please!” Many people choose organic produce because they feel it’s more nutritious, safer to eat, and kinder to the earth. Even though it sometimes carries a price premium, many shoppers are happy to make that tradeoff for peace of mind.

Interestingly, market research also has “conventional” and “organic” options.

Our convention is to conduct market research that employs imposed calibration. Research is often designed to capture and measure attitudes and behaviors, as if they could all be packaged into neat categories. We carefully structure our questions, and in the case of survey research, even our answers. We use quotas, we use weighting. We do our best to be scientific. ***But are we creating the functional equivalent of genetically modified food?***

The alternative is to use research methods that are less contrived and don’t force our round-tomato-respondents into square-data-boxes. We can choose

new tool and methodology alternatives that deliver more organic results. These results are less controlled, and more likely to be surprising. They also often create a more open exchange between researcher and participant, as opposed to one controlling the other.

Of course, these results also have more blemishes and need a little extra cleanup to look consistent—and that may turn some people off. But the opportunities are very tasty.

But wait, isn’t this just a new label on the age old quant-versus-qual-debate? Not exactly; some of the methods that are more organic are qual, but some are a mix of quant and qual.

What Are Examples of Organic Market Research Options?

What are we talking about? We're talking about cool, new methods and platforms that are currently available. Let's look at four:

1. **Mobile ethnography.** While there are only a couple of tools available so far, this area is ripe for innovation. Imagine being able to ask people to basically research themselves. They can opt-in to a research experience using their mobile phones, take pictures and videos of where they are, capture sound bites as they're happening, scan barcodes or QR codes of interest, and so forth. Cool? Yes. But perfectly controllable? Not at all. Participants will vary in their adherence to instructions, volume of contributions, and time spent. There will be inconsistencies, and surprises. While this is clearly a qualitative methodology, the potential samples sizes give it a more-than-directional aspect—even if not quantitative in the strictest definition.
2. **Webcam surveys.** Options are now available for integrating webcam responses into the data collection process. Some companies have built webcam-specific panels and survey tools:

[Ask Your Target Market](#) and [MindSwarms](#) are two examples. Webcam-equipped research participants provide rich feedback on new products, visual displays, advertisements, product packages, and anything else with a visual component. You can even arrange to mail participants samples ahead of the research event so that you can actually watch them while they use a product.

People vary in the degree of candor and emotion they exhibit via webcam, and there is no ability to precisely enforce the quality or quantity of response per person. So again, there is less consistency than many researchers are used to—but so far, results have been very compelling because of the raw nature of the spontaneous and often shockingly uninhibited feedback. So is this qual or quant? Since the answers are unstructured, it has a qualitative aspect. But the asking of questions in a consistent way and collecting answers from what can be a very large group, gives a distinctly quantitative characteristic. Also, these panels collect demographic information, so we researchers still get the ability to look at some analysis—even if conventional crosstabs would require extensive coding.

3. **Idea Voting Platforms.** Research Rockstar students know that this is a favorite topic in our [online methods class](#). These platforms are used to gather and/or vote on ideas such as product features, taglines, new customer service offerings, and so on. A fantastic example of this is the [MyStarbucksIdea.com](#) website; try it out, if for no other reason than to see what an idea voting platform can look like (tip: be sure to read the comments). This type of method gives us the best of both quant and qual: we get measurements (ideas sorted in order by number of net votes), plus rich comments that bring data to life. In the case of idea voting platforms, the “blemishes” typically come in the form of irrelevant comments or duplicative idea submissions—so cleaning and moderation are required.



4. **Innovative Projective Techniques.** [Revelation](#) and [Buzzback](#) are two companies that have created online tools that allow research participants to reveal a lot about themselves—without the restrictions of traditional quant. Techniques that avoid asking people, “what is important to you?” (often a problematic approach), and instead create opportunities for people to *show us* using images and storytelling. Projective techniques, once exclusive to in-person focus groups, are now available online—meaning we can conduct them with many more people (even from geographically dispersed areas), and do so quickly. It’s a qualitative method, but can be implementing with far larger sample sizes than is typical for qualitative research.

In addition to these four specific methods, some researchers are using market research online communities (MROCs) to facilitate more unstructured, 2-way communication between companies and their customers. For a fresh look at MROCs as a way to engage with customers, see the eBook from [Insites Consulting](#), “[The Consumer Consulting Board](#).”

So what makes these methods “organic”?

- **The lack of absolute researcher control.** To some extent the participants dictate the quantity and quality of information gathered—sort of “free range” data.
- **The gathering of unstructured data—whether text or video.** These methods don’t restrict the data collection to a researcher’s preconceived answer options.

Organic Research: Watch Out for Worms

Organic research has disadvantages as well—somewhat parallel to the “disadvantages” of organic produce:

- **Your results may not fit neatly on the shelf.** Remember the square watermelon from Japan, designed for more efficient storage? Well, organic research is not going to fit neatly into your standard results box. So analysis and reporting will take more time.
- **Your results will be inconsistent in quality and texture.** It may have some cosmetic imperfections, and you’ll probably have more rejects—thus requiring a more rigorous data cleaning process.
- **You are sometimes going to sacrifice the demographic profiling of conventional research.** When employing methods that do not require a pre-registration or screening processes (which can sometimes be the case), you will make a trade-off. The degree of trade-off will depend on how you use such methods (with a known panel or online community that captures participant profiles, versus with a broader population from social networking sites).

On balance, organic methods can deliver three important benefits:

1. **Keeping participants engaged**, especially these days when nobody wants to take yet-another-boring survey. And more importantly, better engagement can mean better research accuracy.
2. **Delivering new insights**, which often get clients (internal or external ones) the most excited about research and the return in their research investments.
3. **Creating memorable results**, since photos, audio, and video clips make for more engaging deliverables than charts and graphs (though they take more time to mold into client-ready deliverables).

Choosing the Best Data Fruit

As always, the choice of research methods for any project should be driven by specific objectives. Traditional surveys and focus groups will be around for a long, long time—and still serve important purposes. Today, we simply have more choices—choices that challenge the traditional delineations between qualitative and quantitative methods.

Bottom Line: Eat Healthy

For some research needs, new options offer superior accuracy, respondent engagement and ultimately insights. We need to raise awareness with our clients, be they internal or external, that the flaws of some new methods are really cosmetic; that at the heart of new methods, we're getting something that's more nutritional and potentially a lot tastier.

The result is often research that isn't as uniform or predictable as the industry standard, and we can consider this the market research equivalent of "organic." But, unlike organic produce, it is not necessarily more expensive than its conventional cousin. In fact, it is often less so.



Suggested Reading:

- [Advanced Webcam Research Tips from an Expert](#), New Qualitative Research (blog)/Greenbook.
- [Crowdsourcing Throughout the Research Process](#), Research Access.
- [Marketing VPs vs. Aliens: Gamification Phones Home](#), Research Access.
- [Multi-sited and Mobile Ethnography](#), Sage Publications.
- [Think Outside the Survey](#), Research Rockstar LLC.

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