

My Mind is Pure – Research Moderator Bias

Time for Some Clarity

A researcher once told me, ‘my mind is pure’ when moderating research. The claim was that they were completely impartial and objective. The only possible reaction to such an assertion is ‘what a load of bull’. Yet this is a view held, or at least propagated, by many market researchers who believe, presumably, that they are automatons and nobody wants to employ one of those.

Embrace Bias

In research it is important to embrace bias, by participants, you and the client. Bias can be good and the world is made up of biases that prompt decisions to all sorts of things we do, or would like to do. As a researcher your first priority is to embrace your own bias. Unless you can understand your bias you will never be able to sift those of others.

Outing the Devil

At Clarity we do something called ‘outing the devil’ at the beginning of any research project. We sit down and discuss what we think we will find out. It’s about getting our bias out in the open. It makes it quite clear what we have to fight against. What then happens when we do the research is one of three things:

- Most worrying of all, sometimes we find that we are right, which makes us review and check what we have seen
- Almost as worrying, is that sometimes we find that we are completely wrong, which makes us review and check what we have seen
- Most commonly though, we find that it is more complicated than we first thought and that there is a bigger story to unravel

You Are Being Paid for Your Bias

There is an interesting wrinkle in all this. Any client worth their salt actually wants the researcher’s bias. They want you to see clearly what is going on. But they are not interested in simple reportage. They need the researcher to go beyond that.

Clients want insight into what it means and what could be done about what you have found out. That interpretation comes from training, but most importantly it comes from a creative mind and experience of life and business. Inevitably as individuals (however many are involved in a project) that experience is biased and that bias can and should be valuable.

As Edmund Burke, the great Irish / English statesman pointed out, you have to resist a client's bias too:

“Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.”

In research bias is all about holding it close, because as a researcher that is what you are being paid to do, but at the same time you must know what you are holding. If you don't 'out the devil' and expose it to the daylight, you are pretending to be an automaton.

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