

The clipboard jungle

Almost every product needs market research, but it doesn't have to be done in the street. Zenab Short on the world of the focus group

They loom at you from out of the blue, grins fixed, clipboard in fist, asking if you have a moment to answer a few questions about town traffic flows or the latest revolutionary bottom-hugging tights. Their hunting ground is shopping centres, and their prey is you - the consumer. "That's the public image of market research," admits Andy Jameson, MD of Basis Research. "It's seen as a two-afternoons-a-week pin-money job, asking a question and ticking a box. That public face impacts on the industry as a whole, but it's only one aspect of a thriving sector worth around £950m a year."

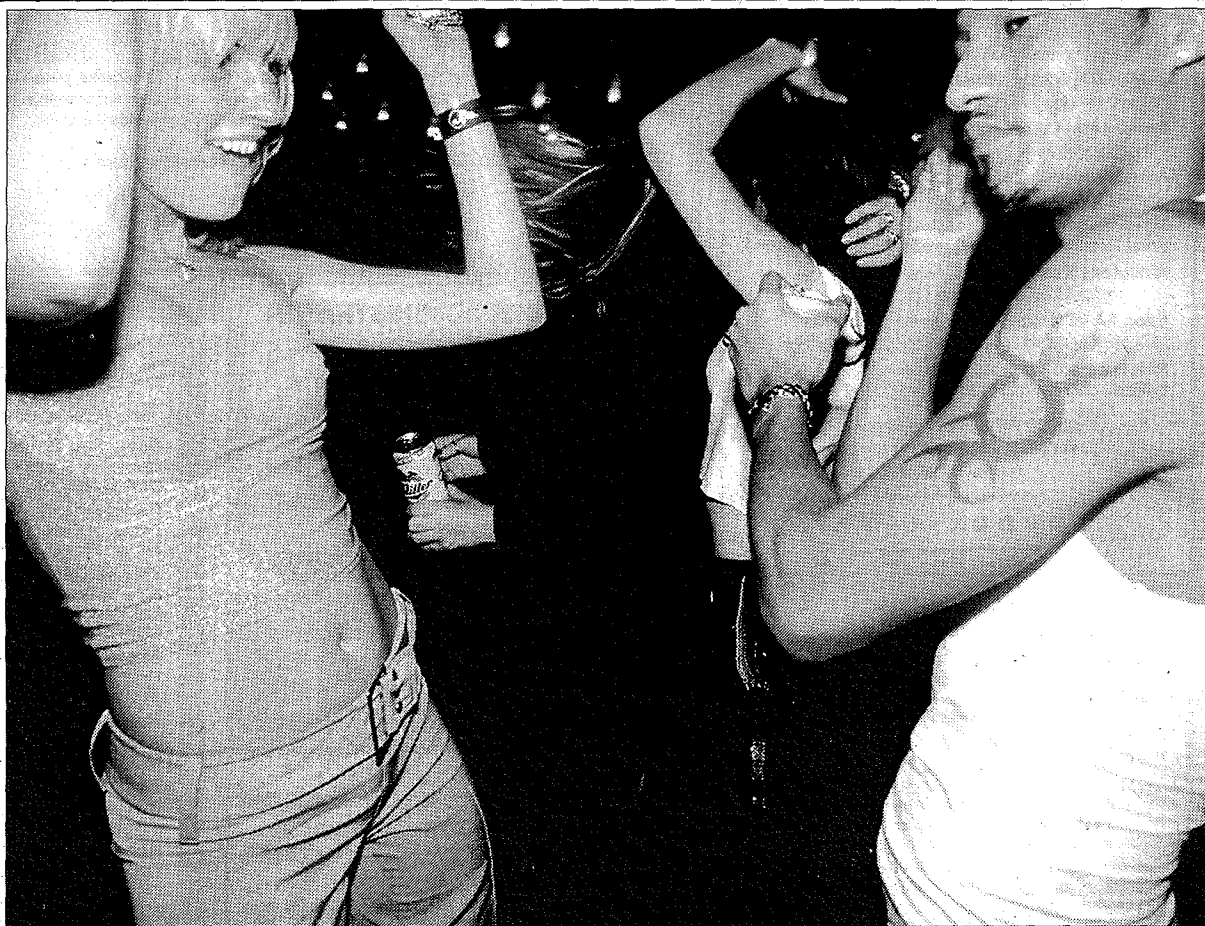
The clipboard queens who gather on street corners are field workers, garnering raw data for quantitative research executives. Quantitative research is about the who and the what. Qualitative research, on the other hand, focuses on the why and the how. "We used to eye each other with suspicion," says Peter Lovett, MD of the Consumer Profile group. "The 'quants' image was of being nerdy backroom boys, all dry and numbers-driven; the 'quals' were seen as fly-by-night creative flimflammers. But that uneasy relationship has changed, as we recognise that both research methods complement one another."

Opinion polls are compiled by

quantitative researchers such as Mori or Gallup. Call centre workers, those people who ring at inconvenient times to ask if you are happy with the service their client provides, also work in quantitative research, which represents 80% of the overall market. Qualitative research, the touchy feely end, uses focus groups and personal interviewing to gather insights.

Informal discussions with small groups of people are organised and interpreted by highly experienced qualitative researchers who do not produce scores and tables, but analysis and recommendations for further action. According to Andy Jameson from the Association for Qualitative Research (AQR), there are very few areas of business or government which are not dependent on some enquiry into people's views, feelings and attitudes. "Almost everything you see around you - breakfast cereals, a government campaign on sexually transmitted diseases, the shape of a wing mirror on a new car - will have been market researched," he says.

It sounds easy - just ask the punters what they want. "But people don't always say that they mean, or mean what they say," claims Fiona Jack, chair of AQR. "And if you ask them a direct question, you might make them feel uncomfortable. So we use



Research party... some studies take place in nightclubs

PHOTOGRAPH: MATT SMITH/PYMCA

enabling techniques to get closer to the truth."

She gives an example of a project carried out for a car manufacturer on why people drive MPVs, those great big people carriers. "When asked, they replied: 'Because I have got kids and dogs and I need the space,'" she recalls. "When we got them to do drawings around the idea of MPVs, a middle-aged man drew a cat in an armchair with a bowl of cream next to it. He smilingly admitted that he felt like the 'cat that'd got the cream' in his MPV, because people envied his status. He would not have said that straight out; drawing it helped him to articulate it."

"Bricolage" is the word of the moment, according to Caroline Whitehill, co-founder of Acacia Avenue Research. "That's loosely translated as 'weaving together,'" she

says. "It means looking at an issue through different lenses. Our toolkit of approaches includes applied ethnography, where we spend a long period of time with a person in their own environment."

Whitehill has also been out clubbing with young people to understand how they use credit cards, and used semiotics (the study of visual signs, symbols and cues) to help banks choose cheque book typefaces. "95% of what goes on in our minds is below the level of consciousness," she says, "so qualitative researchers use neuroscience to dig deeper. If you know something about how neural pathways work, it helps to understand which branding messages stick in the brain, and which don't."

By common consent, the downside to the job is that most focus groups

and interviews take place in the evening, because people are at work during the day. "On the plus side, you get huge variety in the role," comments Vinciane Droumaguet of Greenlight Research. "I was researching into pizza last week, and now I'm doing finance. We have a 'trends lab' here, and I'm also investigating people's attitudes to obesity, plastic surgery and body image."

"It's great - I get paid to come up with ideas and insights," says Peter Lovett. "It satisfies intellectual curiosity, while being commercially-minded and analytical. What we do - talking to people for a living - may be frustrating at times, funny and challenging but it's never, ever boring."

Association for Qualitative Research:
www.aqr.org.uk