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Exploring Sheila Keegan's World of Commercial Qualitative Research

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Abstract

The world of commercial qualitative research reflects an emergent and exciting area of contemporary qualitative research which might not be all that familiar to academic qualitative researchers. Traditionally mentored in an oral and experiential fashion, the next generation of market qualitative researchers are benefiting from new books such as Sheila Keegan's *Qualitative Research: Good Decision Making through Understanding People, Cultures and Markets* to learn how to address their clients' needs for gaining insights into their customers' perspectives. Academic-oriented qualitative researchers can also benefit from Keegan's insights into this similar but different realm of qualitative inquiry

Keywords

Qualitative Research, Market Research, Commercial Research, Analysis and Interpretation

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Exploring Sheila Keegan's World of Commercial Qualitative Research

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*The world of commercial qualitative research reflects an emergent and exciting area of contemporary qualitative research which might not be all that familiar to academic qualitative researchers. Traditionally mentored in an oral and experiential fashion, the next generation of market qualitative researchers are benefiting from new books such as Sheila Keegan's *Qualitative Research: Good Decision Making through Understanding People, Cultures and Markets* to learn how to address their clients' needs for gaining insights into their customers' perspectives. Academic-oriented qualitative researchers can also benefit from Keegan's insights into this similar but different realm of qualitative inquiry. Key Words: *Qualitative Research, Market Research, Commercial Research, and Analysis and Interpretation**

If your world of qualitative research primarily consists of scholarly pursuits contributing to the on-going understanding of a particular phenomenon via the conduct of qualitative research and reporting of results in academic journals, then you might be unaware of a different universe of qualitative researchers who conduct studies designed to benefit clients who need information to make critical decisions regarding solutions for their business and organizational challenges. This latter group of qualitative researchers who carry out work that is commonly called consumer research, business-to-business research, social research, organizational change research, or market research is engaged in an exciting brand of qualitative research that is both similar and different than the type of qualitative inquiry found in academia.

One reason that this commercial or client-focused qualitative research is not better known in the academic qualitative research world is that for many years, practitioners carrying out this important work plied their trade quietly and helped train the next generation of researchers in experiential and oral modes of providing on-the-job mentoring, training, and guidance. This situation is now changing as the pioneers of this approach to qualitative research are reflecting on their practice and writing excellent texts on the nature of the work and sharing their know-how based upon years of experience. Sheila Keegan (2009), a twenty-five-year-plus veteran of conducting commercial qualitative research with companies such as Campbell Keegan Limited (<http://www.campbellkeegan.com/>), makes a significant contribution to helping this world of qualitative research become more accessible to qualitative researchers academic and commercial alike via her insightful new book, *Qualitative Research: Good Decision Making through Understanding People, Cultures and Markets*. Keegan's book, part of the Market Research Society's Market Research in Practice Series, will become a staple text for any introductory course on qualitative market research or an illuminative primer

for anyone wishing to take a behind-the-scenes journey to this exciting and expanding world of qualitative inquiry.

Keegan (2009) readily shares her expertise on all aspects of qualitative market research giving her readers an insider's perspective without losing us in a whirl of jargon and free association anecdotes and war stories. To prevent this undesirable ending, Keegan employs a wonderfully engaging style in which she sketches out the basic distinctions of a qualitative research or marketing concept, highlights the central tendencies of the process or activity, and then brings the ideas to life through the sharing of exemplary accounts of others' and her work. This system quickly brings us from the theoretical to the practical in a clear didactic manner helping us to quickly grasp the essence of this type of qualitative research.

Keegan (2009) begins her presentation by introducing us to the world of market research and explaining how qualitative researchers have found a welcoming home in businesses and organizations. By letting us know that decision-makers in these settings need to know not only market information, but also to identify new opportunities and to discover previously unknown customer needs and desires, we can quickly grasp why qualitative research has proven to be so useful in this environment. Keegan solidifies this insight by walking us through the steps of a typical market research project highlighting the unique client-researcher-customer triadic relationship that forms the core of most of these studies. These qualitative researchers must communicate effectively with their clients to learn about that which the clients are curious and then conceive studies which allow the voices of the customers to be heard clearly by the clients. If successful, the results help clients in their decision-making process, and in some cases, create an avenue for customers to participate in the designing and refining of the product itself.

The more I read Keegan's (2009) book, the more I gained an appreciation for the fit between a qualitative researcher's discovery-oriented, naturalistic, holistic, and context-sensitive pursuit of the other's sense of meaning and experience and the clients' need to learn more about their customers and themselves in pursuit of organizational goals and objectives. Given the particular and specific needs of these clients it became easy to see how the ethnographic, phenomenological, discursive, and case study approaches can be so valuable in the client's need to understanding and to act based upon this knowledge.

In Chapter Five, Keegan (2009) really brings this qualitative research and business connection into clear focus when she walks us through the types of research questions business leaders have and explains how qualitative approaches can help deliver the goods. Types of these questions and issues include (a) exploratory studies; (b) understanding a particular market, brand, or issue; (c) developing consumer typologies; (d) developing communication campaigns; (e) advertising development; (f) changing organizational culture; and (g) exploring global/cultural issues (Keegan, p. 37). As she briefly describes each of the issue areas, Keegan crystallizes the essence of each question area by presenting real-world examples of these questions and the corresponding studies researchers carried out.

Being able to recognize the familiar in Keegan's (2009) account of commercial qualitative research also helped me to ease into those areas of the practice which were more exotic and distant from the types of academic qualitative inquiry with which I have more experience. Along these lines I especially liked the chapters on the business of

qualitative research (Chapter Four); designing, managing, and presenting commercial qualitative research (Chapters Eleven, Twelve, and Fourteen); and the “hidden” processes of the analysis and interpretation of the results (Chapter Thirteen).

In each of these chapters, Keegan uses a simple and lucid presentation style, breaking down the processes into distinct steps, and offering useful illustrations. I also like Keegan’s humility in that she is always adamant in letting us know she is only presenting one way to carry out any of these activities and that there are countless ways others have accomplished these same objectives utilizing different methods and procedures. In each of these chapters I gained a sense of how Keegan has trained her staff and colleagues by giving us a glimpse of the complex, but then focusing our attention on first gaining a solid grasp of one way the job can be accomplished. This complexity-simplicity strategy worked very well for me as I found myself reading a section, recounting the steps entailed in the process, and then putting the book down to reflect on other ways I could imagine the work being done in a variety of settings.

In this reflective mode I also began to see many ways I could incorporate these commercial qualitative research ways into the academic work I regularly conduct. For example, I was fascinated by the different strategies Keegan (2009) described when these researchers make their presentations to their clients. I also found myself considering new ways I would present my work at conferences and novel approaches I would suggest students take when presenting their dissertation results. Keegan’s three key areas—content, method, and style—helped me to consider not only what to present, but also how to share my results. Her emphasis on meeting the clients’ needs also opened my mind to different engagement strategies I could use to captivate my audiences and also to aid in their participation in the process. Lastly, I came away with a greater appreciation for the use of graphical displays to complement the narrative in any presentation.

Another area of commercial qualitative research that has great potential to inform academic qualitative research is the participatory nature of product development as described by Keegan (2009) in Chapter Ten. In this approach, the consumer is not simply a source of information on the product’s design and usability, but also a partner sharing feedback and guidance on ways in which the product can be improved and enhanced. This relationship between the client-researcher-and-customer is similar to that pattern seen in action research, but also different in that the interaction is more triadic in nature. I also thought envisioning research in this way would have great potential in clinical qualitative research design. For example, a design in which the client or patient is now included as an informing customer or consumer who can help the physician or therapist discover ways to improve the care and treatment provided seems quite doable following the approaches found in these commercial qualitative research participatory designs.

In addition to the ways in which I thought commercial qualitative research could inform my academic work, I also contemplated how my academic ways could help enhance the work being done in the client-focused realm of qualitative research. For example, I think some of this research could benefit from some of the “designer” analytical approaches such as phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994), ethnography (Fetterman, 2009), grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), and narrative analysis (Riessman, 2007) that can help researchers transform their results in different ways than can be accomplished with the generic approaches such as basic content analysis or qualitative description (Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003; Constanas, 1992; Gibb, 2008; Sandelowski, 1992).

I wholeheartedly recommend Keegan's (2009) *Qualitative Research: Good Decision Making through Understanding People, Cultures and Markets* for anyone wanting to learn the fascinating world of commercial qualitative research. Her book serves as a great introduction and would be an excellent choice for a qualitative research course in degree programs such as marketing research. Her inviting work would also serve as a fruitful bank of ideas academic qualitative researchers could draw upon to bring innovative methods and procedures to their own style of qualitative research. Hopefully, we will see more books like Keegan's to help others discover this intriguing world of qualitative research and find more academic treatments of qualitative research incorporating ideas from the commercial world. I think in this way we can benefit from the best of both of these connected, yet different worlds of qualitative research.

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