



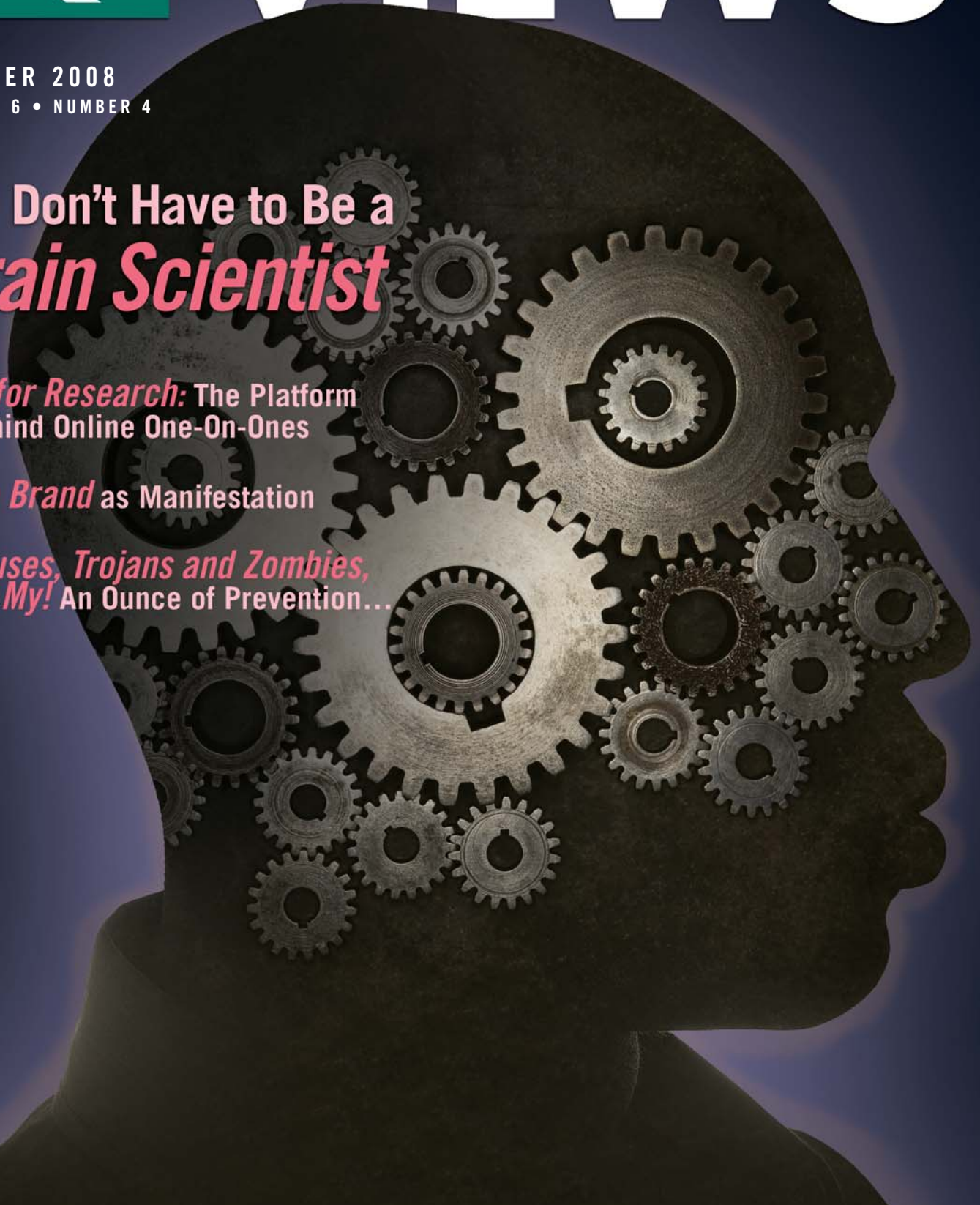
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VIEWS

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Its Own Reward: *The Learning Benefits* of Conducting *Non-Client Research*

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Whether you are a senior researcher, new to the profession or a research buyer, there is always something new to learn, skills to be refined or ways to advance the scholarship of the qualitative research. Internally funded projects offer a low-risk, safe learning environment with limitless possibilities for gaining knowledge and skills.

Learning is what qualitative researchers do. Armed with clients' research objectives, qualitative research consultants (QRCs) acquire knowledge from expert respondents in order to draw conclusions and generate recommendations.

One could argue that the work of the QRC is to learn: to devise ways to learn about specific topics, to learn deeper insights and then to report on what is learned.

Undertaking to be a qualitative researcher, or a better qualitative researcher, is its own breed of learning: learning that benefits from an environment that is supportive and accommodating, yet demanding and focused. Qualitative researchers learn the skills of their trade incrementally, acquiring degrees of mastery as they practice and grow. To create an environment for this learning, Observant LLC, a strategic market research partner to the pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries, undertakes internally (non-client) funded qualitative research projects as part of its commitment to ongoing training and development.

Weighing the desire for knowledge and the opportunity to train staff against the cost of conducting the research can sometimes yield time and cost efficiencies, important for any research project. Investing in this type of initiative, however, may be out of reach for individual QRCs. Partnering with companies like Observant LLC on such an initiative can give the sole proprietor an opportunity to actively acquire or improve competencies in various components of qualitative research — observation skills, moderation and analytic abilities — in a unique environment that is both structured, yet low risk.

Desire for imaginative new methods of moderation, current industry events and topical interests of staff and management can yield ideas for these projects. Among others, Observant LLC funded projects to explore the following: the public's



perceptions of pharmaceutical companies; primary-care physicians' views on the level of prescribing data that pharmaceutical representatives can access and the implications of the Prescribing Data Restriction Program (an American Medical Association initiative to restrict this access); and, most recently, oncologists' perceptions of current and future cancer treatment. Findings from self-funded studies have been published in trade journals, such as *Pharmaceutical Executive*, and presented to audiences of trade conferences, such as the PBIRG Research Excellence series at their annual conference.

The temptation to place moneymaking projects first and foremost is strong, such that internally funded projects can easily slip to the back burner and languish from inattention. Therefore, internal projects should be given the same precedence as client work.

The following article outlines the steps involved in undertaking a self-funded project, specifically addressing where the process diverges from client-initiated research. Observant LLC's most current independent study with oncologists serves as a backdrop to general considerations inherent in such a project.

Getting Started

Initiating an internally funded research project may start with the company stepping back to examine its interests. "In what areas of research do we want to increase our expertise?" "What training will benefit our consultants and enhance their qualitative research skills?" "What topics are of interest to the staff and upper management?" "What topic or method, meaningful to the field and our clients, will advance the scholarship of qualitative research or our industry?" Inclusion of a number of strategic objectives and professional interests can encourage and enhance full participant involvement and commitment.

Once the strategic objectives are decided and the topic is chosen, it is time to refine research objectives to allow for targeted learning. This can be challenging without the framework of specific client

business objectives. Collecting input from various members of the company, and several cycles of revision, may be necessary to ensure that the learning needs of the company and individual QRCs are addressed. Ultimately, research objectives should be broad enough to capture an overarching theme, but focused enough to gain in-depth insight into key questions of interest that are relevant to end-users of the research (both internal and external).

In Observant LLC's study with oncologists, the overarching theme encompassed current and future treatment in oncology, but with a focus on prevalent cancers such as breast, colorectal and lung cancer. Specifically, the research sought to understand, in part, how oncologists' current experience with cancer treatment drives their expectations of drugs in the development pipeline.

Setting the Groundwork

Depending on the project's strategic and research objectives, it may be necessary to develop a foundation of knowledge prior to project launch. Inviting outside speakers, utilizing in-house expertise and assigning desk research are ways to bring staff up to speed on the study topics. As with any effort to acquire information about a new subject prior to fieldwork, identifying unbiased information is critical. Accessing information from a variety of sources builds confidence that the team is armed with a broad and even-handed perspective.

Observant LLC's internal projects typically kick off with in-house specialists and outside experts presenting at company-wide meetings. To establish the current state of the ever-changing and complex area of cancer treatment, a leading oncologist presented cutting-edge treatment of breast cancer and how it differs from the treatment of colon and lung cancers. An in-house expert on vaccines also contributed a perspective on the relevance of vaccines to cancer treatments. Secondary research rounded out everyone's knowledge about cancer and cancer treatment.

Securing Commitment

All qualitative research projects require dedicated and focused energy in order to maintain the progress necessary to meet deadlines. Internally funded projects need particular single-mindedness because they are vulnerable to the very real demands of client work that can encroach or "override" time set aside for the internal project. To successfully accomplish an internal project, management commitment to training and development overall and to the project at hand is essential to secure the necessary investments of time, money and internal resources. While some

cost efficiencies are inherent in internal projects, at the end of the day, unlike client-initiated projects, the research firm bears the responsibility for paying all of the bills.

Good research takes time, and individual contributors may need ongoing motivation to carve time from their busy schedules. The temptation to place moneymaking projects first and foremost is strong, such that internally funded projects can easily slip to the back burner and languish from inattention. Therefore, internal projects should be given the same precedence as client work. The company is the client, and clearly stated expectations about both timeframes and expected levels of commitment help to keep the projects moving forward.

As part of the kickoff for the independent study with oncologists, management at Observant LLC identified project team members and explicitly instructed them to commit the same levels of attention, prioritization and commitment as they would to client-based projects. In this way, team

members knew that choices made on behalf of the internal project were fully supported and their investment of energy and time in the project recognized.

Staffing and Scheduling

Strategic and training objectives should drive staff choices for internally funded projects. Trying out an experimental technique or a new-to-them qualitative method (such as projective exercise, in-home interview or on-line bulletin board) create opportunities for mid- to senior-level researchers during learning-based projects. Junior researchers with limited or no moderating experience can practice the art of design, moderation and analysis necessary to advance in their profession.

The number of interviews and/or focus groups must be sufficient to meet the needs of the research objectives, as well give each staff member enough experience to gain confidence, to make mistakes and corrections, and to ideally achieve a degree of competency.

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A project champion — someone invested in both the training aspects of the project and to one or more of its final deliverables — can benefit the internally funded project. This team member can also serve as the project manager who coordinates staffing, design and recruiting.

Further, the project timeline should be as short as possible to achieve the desired results. With excess time in the schedule, researchers may experience inertia and, hence, a lack of excitement about the learning, the study findings and its deliverables. When each phase of the project follows closely on the heels of the previous phase and when there is a final deliverable date that lends a sense of urgency to the project's completion, momentum is available to carry the project through to completion.

Observant LLC's oncology study was staffed with mid- to senior-level researchers who benefited from the opportunity to broadly explore the interesting and complex topic of cancer treatment. Unfettered by client oversight, these team members enjoyed the unique opportunity to try out different moderating styles, discussion guide organizations and distinctive ways to elicit responses. In the process, they acquired significant knowledge about leading-edge cancer treatment and how oncologists feel about the state of the armamentarium, information that is critical for understanding future clients' research objectives.

Analyzing and Reporting the Data

A key component of any research project is the analysis of data to uncover insights and generate recommendations. Often times, analysis is overlooked with greater focus on data collection, but it is the "digging" into the data that yields the richest results. Internal projects, like all qualitative studies, benefit from an analytic strategy designed to address the stated research objectives and provide deliverables that advance the field, as well as supplement the knowledge base internally and externally. Analysis can focus on language or key words used by respondents, tap into emotional undercurrents or explore heterogeneity of respondents, to name a few. As with any qualitative research project, the review of audiotapes, interview notes and transcripts supports the analytic process.

Gathering findings from a number of team members is a necessary and challenging aspect of internal projects. Each researcher is a repository for the tremendous amount of information gleaned from his or her interviews. Bringing the entire team together for an internal debrief provides a forum for synthesizing various perspectives, as well as for exploring findings that were unplanned in the original design of the study. Junior members can gain experience in expressing their perspectives in an insightful manner during the internal debrief

and gain a broader appreciation of the research by listening to other views.

A formal debrief session provided Observant LLC's team the opportunity to exchange insights collected during the interviews. Team members discussed findings on current drug treatments and differences in treatment regimens for breast, lung and colorectal cancers, as well as which technologies are expected to deliver the most promising cancer drugs in the future. Discourse analysis of the respondents' language revealed the emotional needs of physicians in finding new cancer treatments. As with most of its qualitative research studies, the Observant LLC team leveraged QUESTRILL® (the company's proprietary and patent-pending qualitative research data collection and analysis software platform), which facilitated their ability to synthesize and analyze data rapidly and which eliminated the need for transcripts. Finally, summary reports captured the rich insight of the individual team members.

Wrapping Up

Study findings are valuable in so many ways.

Among other possibilities, study findings can be used to: schedule a general assembly presentation that affords all employees an educational opportunity; offer one or two project members practice in presentation skills; or orient new hires to the company and its work, as well as to the presentation's content. Further, if an outside audience exists for the findings, team members can acquire practice and experience in public speaking. Substantial insight and information are available to prepare articles for publication in trade journals or popular magazines, supporting the acquisition of critical thinking and writing skills.

Newly obtained insights from Observant LLC's study about oncologists' perceptions of current drug cancer treatment and their expectations of potential new cancer drugs will serve as an ongoing resource for the company, serving such diverse roles as support for understanding a future client's research needs or as education for new hires about the complex topic of cancer treatment. Insights that emerged from the research will be shared with others in the industry through journal articles and presentations. Finally, the findings may fuel another learning-based project to explore a different method or aspect of qualitative research.

Whether you are a senior researcher, new to the profession or a research buyer, there is always something new to learn, skills to be refined or ways to advance the scholarship of the qualitative research. Internally funded projects offer a low-risk, safe learning environment with limitless possibilities for gaining knowledge and skills. ■