



white paper



Demystifying Hybrid Research

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Despite its rise in popularity, there is still much confusion that exists in the marketplace as it pertains to hybrid market research. The industry still struggles to come up with a true definition and its applications and benefits are widely unknown.

Our goal is to pull back the curtain on hybrid research. Built on the thoughts and ideas of practitioners, this whitepaper delivers clear insight that sheds some much needed light on one of the biggest trends in research.

Introduction

Hybrid. It's become something of a buzzword in recent years, attached to everything from cars to energy to agriculture to... research?

That's right. Over the past few years, hybrid research (also commonly known as mixed-mode or fused research) has been working its way into the mainstream. In fact, one recent study found that use of hybrid tools nearly doubled from 2008 to 2009.¹

But what does "hybrid" really mean? Numerous studies have revealed a wide range of definitions, applications and benefits, but still the industry lacks a consistent or mutually agreed upon definition for the term.

Given the growth and apparent staying power of hybrid, iModerate, a leading provider of online hybrid research, wanted to give the larger research community some clarity around this term. To that end, we asked hybrid practitioners to weigh in both qualitatively and quantitatively on some key questions, such as:

- What exactly is hybrid research?
- How do they use it?
- What is the benefit?
- What does the future hold for hybrid?

Familiarity with hybrid research

For the most part, the researchers we queried have a solid overall familiarity with hybrid research. 83% said that they were somewhat or very familiar with hybrid research, and 90% recognized the names of leading hybrid research providers. These figures demonstrate that an approach that was considered cutting-edge just a few years ago has quickly become familiar and relied on.

Further illustrating just how integrated hybrid has become into the day-to-day work of today's researchers is the fact that 75% of the researchers we polled have personally used hybrid approaches, and 30% rely on it for some or most of their projects.

Based on these figures, it seems clear that hybrid research has grown beyond its position as a promising but unproven approach and now occupies a solid position in the majority of research toolboxes.

How practitioners define hybrid research

While there is little doubt that hybrid research has gained widespread acceptance, practitioners define and apply the term in two similar but fundamentally divergent ways.

Mixing Methodologies

Just over half (51%) of the researchers we spoke with think about hybrid market research in terms of the data the research yields, and defined the term very generally as a combination of qualitative and quantitative. This broad interpretation suggests that for some, hybrid serves as an umbrella term rather than referring to a specific method, tool or approach.

"Mixed methodology. Qual and quant integration, for example."

"Combining quantitative and qualitative techniques and marrying the data from each for in-depth, informative and actionable results."

¹ Rockhopper Research, Research Industry Trends 2009 Report.

Among those who think of hybrid as a combination of qualitative and quantitative, a projectable quantitative study often serves as the project “anchor,” while the qualitative information is gathered to provide additional insight.

“Quantitative research which incorporates qualitative elements.”

“A quantitative study with a supporting qualitative portion for more depth.”

“Using qualitative feedback to help uncover the meaning and attitudes behind quantitative data.”

Several respondents had a more specific definition, and think the term hybrid research refers to qualitative and quantitative techniques integrated into a single instrument and implemented concurrently rather than in consecutive phases.

“Using a mix of qualitative and quantitative techniques within the same piece of a project. i.e., not qualitative phase followed by quantitative phase, etc.”

“A mix of both qual and quant in a single experience.”

“A combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques, not used sequentially, but in an integrated manner.”

Mixing Approaches

While the leading definition for hybrid research provided by our respondents framed it as a mixture of qualitative and quantitative, 38% of the researchers we queried focused more on the specific methods used to collect the data, rather than the content or type of data gathered. In their minds, hybrid is a mix of approaches, such as phone, Internet or focus groups.

“Using more than one method in data collection. e.g. phone and internet interviewing for one study.”

“Using multiple methodologies for a single study. For example: phone and Internet.”

Interestingly, however, some of these individuals who discussed hybrid in terms of the approaches used did also specify that these approaches are used to conduct a combination of qualitative and quantitative research.

“Studies that involve a mix of qual and quant and often collect data via a mix of online and offline methods. Phone studies mixed with online surveys for example.”

“A mixture of various data collection methodologies; often having separate quantitative and qualitative components.”

The benefits of hybrid

Greater Insight

Researchers were in strong agreement that hybrid research delivers greater insight than single-mode approaches. 65% of those we polled said that more comprehensive insight is the primary benefit of hybrid, and 40% also referenced hybrid’s ability to access the voice of the consumer.

“Over the past 2 years, following the ARF ‘listening initiative,’ we see lots of need from the client perspective to have that extra bit of color. Even in quant there’s more focus on capturing the voice of the consumer.”

“When I hear the term ‘hybrid market research’ I think of a method of research that combines two mediums of communication to test/gather data that will allow a deeper knowledge of the results.”

Researchers further explained the benefit of this approach, noting that studies combining qualitative and quantitative approaches concurrently can yield more than a single-mode study on its own.

“There is added power in the combination [of qual and quant], which provides more than just a sum of its parts.”

“Hybrid adds life to a quant survey. When doing a large quant study, you really don’t need or want 2,000 open ends, but you do want depth.”

Time and Cost Efficiencies

Other key benefits of hybrid research were related to efficiencies in time (31%) and cost (28%), both particularly critical issues in today’s challenging business climate. And while speed and lower cost have long distinguished online and hybrid approaches from more traditional methods, today’s economic pressures have led to an emphasis on greater speed and cost containment.

“Since the economy is strained right now, businesses have to get it right the first time. Therefore, the more detail you can get straight from the horse’s mouth the better.”

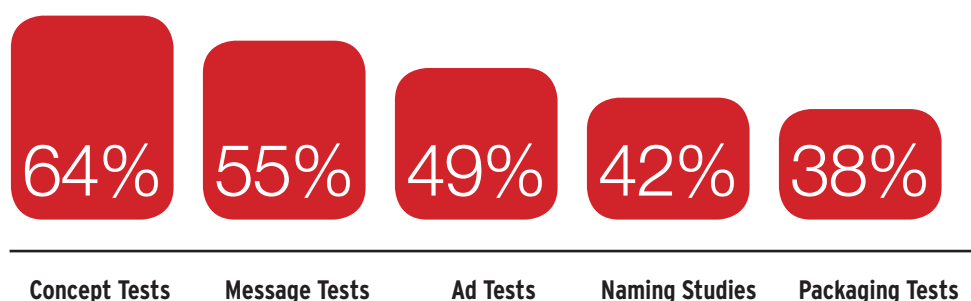
“Hybrid will become more popular as we strive to get more out of each research dollar spent.”

What hybrid is suited for

Because practitioners value hybrid primarily for its ability to provide more comprehensive insight, it is not surprising that they find it particularly well suited for projects that rely heavily on emotion, and which seek to determine how consumers think, feel and react to different situations.

For this reason, respondents consider hybrid methodologies a valuable tool for concept tests (64%), message tests (55%), ad tests (49%), naming studies (42%) and packaging tests (38%).

Best Uses for Hybrid Methodologies



In idea-driven projects such as ad and concept tests, for example, researchers often struggle to make sense of quantitative data. While the numbers might tell them that their respondents “like” an ad or that it is “meaningful,” it is difficult to know what consumers really mean. Why do they like what they like about it, why is that meaningful and what message is it sending?

“We didn’t understand why a certain concept had won in the quant—it was not a good fit for the brand. Follow up qual revealed that consumers liked the ad, but that it didn’t send the message we were after.”

However, when researchers are able to use a hybrid qualitative/quantitative approach, they often feel more confident in the reliability of their quantitative data because they can base their decision making on a big picture view that takes into account the emotional drivers behind the statistics. This lets them speak with authority not just on what consumers said, but why they said it.

“We use it for segmentation research, product development, brand research– the voice of the consumer explains and brings in the real world.”

“Clients want more than numbers–the information presented to them needs to not have such a sterile feel. [Hybrid] adds color/texture to inform decision making at the higher levels.”

What the future holds for hybrid

Hybrid research shows no signs of slowing down or losing favor, and in fact seems likely to increase its forward momentum as researchers continue to find value in the added emotion and insight they garner from hybrid approaches. In fact, 39% of those we polled indicate that its future is promising and/or growing and only 5% feel that it is not a valid approach.

“I think hybrid approaches will become more common and accepted as response and cooperation rates make using a single methodology at a time less effective.”

“It’s here to stay. I think it’s vital for obtaining the most useful insights. Rarely will a single methodology provide everything one needs.”

Beyond hybrid’s clearly valuable ability to add greater insight to a study, another key factor in its anticipated growth is related to the fact that it is both time and cost efficient.

This allows researchers to gather meaningful insight without compromising the supremely critical issues of schedule or budget. In a competitive market, researchers (and research vendors in particular) find that the added value of the voice of the consumer will help provide a competitive edge.

“As budgets tighten, I think we are going to have to be creative in how we can get the most bang for the buck. In some cases, hybrid research will be the way to achieve this.”

“It will increase as budgets shrink and we will need to find new and more inventive ways to get consumer insight.”

A few respondents explained that hybrid is becoming so ubiquitous that in the future they envision the term “hybrid” disappearing. What is now thought of as a new and unique approach will become so normalized that there will be no need for the label hybrid, as all research will include some multi-mode element.

“I don’t see the term hybrid research holding on much longer. Soon all market researchers will just assume there is a hybrid component to a project.”

“We’ll stop calling it hybrid research and we’ll just refer to the additional tools we have in our skill set/tool box.”

“I think the term will become a ‘term of art’ important only to practitioners. Customers will be focused on the final output.”

Summary

For the time being, “hybrid” still remains something of a catchall phrase that can describe a number of different approaches, methodologies and technologies. However, feedback from practitioners indicates that the industry has arrived at a working definition.

Our research revealed that “hybrid” most commonly references a combination of online quantitative and qualitative methodologies that are used concurrently as part of a single phase of a study. While other interpretations exist, feedback from practitioners makes it clear that this definition has achieved widespread acceptance.

The greatest strength of the hybrid approach is that it allows researchers to garner deeper and more comprehensive insight and hear the voice of the consumer in a way that no projectable single-mode research approach offers. This benefit is also easily accessible because hybrid research offers significant cost and time efficiencies.

The definitive advantages of hybrid, coupled with its utility for a variety of projects, has many practitioners predicting a bright future for this approach. In fact, some foresee it becoming so entrenched in the research world that the term itself will fade. Until then, hybrid research will continue to foresee, with the spotlight on this trend growing brighter and brighter.