Meeting people where they are

Research with seldom heard and niche populations – people who have historically not been heard from, misunderstood, or, in the case of niche research, have something uncommon in common – requires creative, flexible approaches and a willingness to immerse. Rob Gray **reports**

Reaching the right people at the right time is a crucial tenet of good research practice. But over the years, the research industry has sometimes struggled, and often come up short, when seeking to understand and include the views of niche and seldom-heard groups.

In this report, we explore various challenges around identifying the right people in the first place and highlight some creative approaches taken by practitioners. Before we get on to that, however, a couple of points regarding terminology.

To begin with, the rise of the phrase 'seldom heard'. Until recently, the sector generally talked about the struggle to engage with 'hard to reach' audiences. Increasingly, the language has been reframed as 'seldom heard', rightly placing the onus for inclusion on the researcher and the research buyer, not the participant.

Second, although seldom-heard and niche participants may share some characteristics and challenges, they are not the same thing. 'Niche' is where a research project specifically wants to speak to people who have something in common, and the thing they have in common is particularly uncommon. For example, this might be high-net-worth individuals, people who have a very specific job title, or people currently attending university. When talking about niche audiences, it normally means that the entire basis of your research project is speaking to these people – so you know that your total sample is made up of people who have an uncommon characteristic in common. The cost of recruiting and interviewing 'niche' participants is often higher.

Seldom heard is different, in that these groups are often not represented, even in a project looking to speak to a representative sample (such as nationally representative – 'nat rep' – research). Examples are people from certain ethnic backgrounds or with disabilities. These people are seldom heard, because even a project that claims to be representative of the nation as a whole is probably not including quotas on ethnicity, physical disability, mental health conditions, etc, meaning these people don't get a voice.

That can be a failing, as Cobalt Sky managing director Rebecca Cole, who chairs the MRS Representation in Research steering group, points out. She highlights a case study from the group that it has called the 'commercial benefits study'. "This took a traditional omnibus survey and ran an A/B test with the same study, but one using 'traditional' or non-inclusive quotas, and one running with fully comprehensive quotas as suggested as best practice," explains Cole. "We were able to demonstrate what insights are being missed by not doing the latter, while also myth-busting a lot of commonly held concerns: it will cost more, take longer, the sample isn't available."

Strangers to research

Shazia Ali, founder of qualitative specialist Mint Research, recalls being approached for a project for which she was told recruitment was proving tricky. The potential participants were an audience for whom research wasn't familiar and English wasn't a first language.

Ali considered this an opportunity to navigate the whole process in a different way. "Before asking someone else to share, we first have to open up ourselves," says Ali. "It's something we are hearing more and more about, particularly when understanding great leadership skills. Recognising and respecting people's vulnerabilities is important to gain trust."

Ali reached out to the potential participants beforehand, to introduce herself. She shared her full name and spoke in the language of their choice where she could. Some asked about her family background

and Ali shared that she is the eldest, where she was born, and where she grew up in the UK. This was enough to establish trust and understanding, and for the participants to agree for her to visit them.

"Qualitative research is about building respect, trust and relationships," expands Ali. "What many may call a challenge or barrier to recruitment is not that at all, but an opportunity to use our skills as experts in connecting with people and to find a different way. For far too long, research has been driven by a fixed-mindset approach. Making participants fit into methodologies when, in fact, we should be creating approaches to fit around who we want to engage with. It's important to apply the growth mindset to the way in which we design and navigate our studies."

Brandspeak managing director Jeremy Braune says that technology can be a barrier when recruitment requires a more personal approach in order to create trust and openness. In the case of certain groups, however, the prospect of taking part in an online interview or community, for example, can be particularly attractive if it provides the opportunity to contribute while remaining anonymous.

"Artificial intelligence [AI] provides the opportunity to anonymise the market research process further – for example, by replacing the moderator with a bot during online research," adds Braune. "However, in the case of the seldom heard, I think that would be largely counterproductive, as it removes the personal touch that is essential if this audience is to have a voice and be heard."

In the case of people with serious health conditions, Brandspeak may approach relevant charities (Mind or Age UK, for example), associations and support groups, to enlist their help in recruiting members of the target audience. If these organisations regard the research as important and non-commercial, they are often keen to lend their support, particularly if there is likely to be an indirect benefit to the people they support.

Fear of offence

Kathryn Hall, director of True Insights, has a hidden disability. She says the insights sector has come a long way in the past few years, with a growing acceptance that 'hard to reach' was a bit of a cop out and that such participants were simply underrepresented in research. Yet some agencies still lag behind the curve, and shy away from seldom-heard audiences through a fear of getting it wrong and embarrassing themselves or offending somebody because they use the wrong language.

"There are still a lot of small companies I know that will not touch it [seldom-heard groups] because they won't put themselves into what they consider a vulnerable situation," says Hall. "They say they can't afford consultants. They don't realise that you don't have to spend a lot on consultants. You don't have to get them to write the whole thing."

As well as considering the importance of intersectionality, and having somebody on your team who can identify with participants, Hall says it's not expensive to have a consultant cast their eye over the language used. As well as her own network of contacts, Hall sometimes accesses relevant expertise through the Independent Consultants Group of insight professionals (the ICG).

Steven Lacey, founder of The Outsiders, describes himself as an "archetypal outsider", being working-class, physically disabled and neurodiverse. Where researchers can go wrong, he says, is believing they possess the "superpower of empathy" to understand people with whom they have little in common.

Lacey argues that there are more and more groups in the UK that we do not understand. The best approach when researching such audiences, he believes, is to treat it like an international project. "With international, we don't make the same kind of judgements or have the same kind of biases. We

immerse ourselves in a culture we don't understand, which is really vital." For seldom-heard research, that equates to reading "the right literature on the world of the teenage mum or young black males on estates; then consulting with experts who have regular contact with those kinds of people", says Lacey. After conducting the group research and identifying the insights, he recommends running an immersive session with people who understand that audience to "make sure that we've got it right".

Inclusive design

There is growing awareness that if research has historically been designed by and for a certain group of people, researchers may need to revisit the process to make it suitable for seldom-heard audiences.

The best way to do this, says Cobalt Sky's Cole, is to follow the four basic principles of inclusive research:

1. The research is designed by researchers who understand their own bias
2. The research avoids making assumptions about the participants
3. The project is explicitly designed to ensure diversity at all stages
4. The research is designed in consultation with those who have a lived experience.

"You also need to ask yourself, why are they seldom heard?" says Cole. "Do you know how and where to find them? How to engage with them and incentivise them? If they are not used to engaging with research, they may not trust it, and you might need to behave differently to gain their trust. Be transparent and talk like human beings: what is the purpose of the research; how will their information be used; why are you asking them about certain things such as ethnicity?"

C Space has developed an inclusive screener, using a new questionnaire format that makes it easier for everyone to feel included, according to Ella Majava, practice director, innovation, C Space Europe, Middle East and Africa. It also runs tailored campaigns to recruit specific groups.

"Being more inclusive gets us to insights and understanding that working with mainstream, homogenous audiences simply cannot, because their lived experience is often so different," she says. "They can help us understand and explore the innovation, adaptability and resourcefulness – often in the form of 'hacks' – that they are forced to employ. This enables us to design solutions that are better for all audiences.

"Where researchers go wrong is believing they possess the 'superpower of empathy'"

"A diverse sample, by definition, leads to diverse data, and given that it is empirically proven that diversity breeds creativity, it informs and inspires more diverse possibilities. Plus, the scale of the audience means they must not be ignored. For example, one billion people around the world live with some form of disability, making up around 15% of the global population; 20% in the UK."

C Space has worked with Liberty Global (LG) to help it understand where and how to remove barriers to connectivity, entertainment and smart home tech for people with disabilities. Taking an ethnographic approach, C Space pulled apart connectivity, entertainment and smart home 'jobs', enablers and barriers. Coached by inclusive design experts and the Research Institute for Disabled Consumers on the best language to use, it created a more inclusive research 'space'. To overcome the barrier of multiple forms

Elizabeth Webb, head of research, Age UK

"Offering a choice of response method – including phone, paper-based and face-to-face methods alongside an online option, as Age UK does with our own Your Voice survey – is the optimal choice to ensure an unbiased sample, as this enables older people of all abilities to participate. Beyond the steps that need to be taken to ensure a sample is unbiased, it is imperative that researchers also remember that older people are not homogeneous; there are important subgroups of older people who are unlikely to be sufficiently well represented in a random population sample to be analysed separately.

"One key example is older people of minoritised ethnicities, whose experiences systematically differ in many ways from those of the white British majority.

"Census 2021 data shows that one in 10 people aged 65+ in England and Wales – 1.1 million older people – are of a minoritised ethnicity.

"To gain a fuller understanding of the intersecting impacts of ethnicity and age, researchers require sufficiently large numbers of participants of each minority ethnicity, but this is seldom offered by research agencies beyond the few specialist organisations that are doing excellent work in this area.

"Most research agencies offer samples that limit researchers to comparing a 'white' group of older people with a 'BAME' (black, Asian and minority ethnic) group, thus disguising many of the interesting and important differences and inequalities between the UK's minority ethnicities."

Applying anonymity

Technology can play a pivotal role in breaking down barriers that often make it difficult to connect with niche groups. François Leprêtre, chief executive at Smart Connect Research, says digital platforms and social media networks allow for a broader, yet more targeted, reach than traditional methods, tapping into communities and groups that were previously inaccessible.

Advanced search algorithms and data analytics tools aid in identifying potential participants, while secure and user-friendly interfaces ensure that these audiences are more comfortable engaging in research activities.

"One notable example from our own practice involved using a specialised app to engage with high-level executives," says Leprêtre. "This app provided real-time updates, and allowed for anonymous, but traceable, data collection. The technology eased apprehensions about data security while ensuring a high response rate."

For a healthcare consultancy client, Smart Connect conducted research among health policymakers. Given the intricacy and sensitivity of the topic, it was essential to approach it with a level of sophistication and rigour that would yield actionable insights while maintaining utmost confidentiality.

Smart Connect took a blended approach of in-depth interviews and AI-based sentiment analysis on policy documents. Secure video conferencing tools were used for virtual face-to-face interactions, and blockchain technology assured participants that their inputs were anonymous and secure. This approach yielded actionable insights that Leprêtre says were instrumental in shaping the client's advisory strategies.

of disability, participants were given freedom to choose the mode of expression (video, voice memo, photos). A checklist was created, with 15 ways to overcome physical, sensory and cognitive barriers, and 26 'all-inclusive' solutions were mapped to pain-points. The work shifted how LG thinks about inclusive design, from a tick-box accessibility requirement to a way to create better product experiences for all.

Darren Horne, senior user researcher at Made Tech, which works with public sector clients on modernising technology and accelerating digital delivery, has conducted user research with people who have experienced crime, from 'severe' to 'lesser' offences. "When discussing user groups who have been impacted by crime, a project team with which I have worked made assumptions that the victim of the crime would be harder to speak to. I believe their own biases and wider social stereotypes led them to think that this group may not want to talk about an emotionally distressing time. However, the team hadn't considered that it would also be challenging to get representation from those accused of a crime, because the stigma attached to being 'accused' meant people would not want to come forward and research with us."

Horne found that the best way to overcome this issue is by encouraging open-minded thinking in kick-off sessions. Removing all biases is impossible, but certain tools can help with these issues. For example, visual work platform Mural's 'private' mode, which hides each person's contribution from the group, can help reduce groupthink. It is also imperative to be careful with language. For example, someone who has suffered a sexual assault might not want to be sent a 'consent form' because of the connotation the word 'consent' has with sexual assault. In previous work, this was changed to 'permission form'.

"A diverse sample leads to diverse data... and informs and inspires more diverse possibilities "

Going the extra mile

While technology is increasingly to the fore, good old-fashioned legwork still has its place, and can yield great results. When looking to recruit owners of high-end luxury cars, for example, market research fieldwork specialist Indiefield will sometimes do 'car park walks', leaving little notes on the windscreens of Bentleys or whichever marques or vehicles are in line with the brief. One hour's car park trudging might generate three or four responses. "It's a low response rate, but it doesn't matter," says Indiefield managing director Tara Lyons. "Once you've got one, you have a chat with them and they'll know someone else who fits the bill. They'll belong to a club, or they'll put you in touch with an Instagram page. It just mushrooms from there, and that's how you end up recruiting them all."

The DVLA also publishes a list of vehicle-owners clubs and Indiefield has used this as a starting point for automotive research. "You'll get some Maserati fan who just happens to be a multimillionaire with a fleet

of seven luxury vehicles – and he gets a new one every couple of years, which is perfect. We'll get to him and he is delighted to take part, because no one in his family wants to hear him talk about his passion. Then you snowball through him.

"It's about having a grasp of how to get people – where they go, what magazines they read, where they live."

For some niche groups, such as high-net-worth individuals, a financial incentive is unlikely to be particularly motivating. Instead, the researcher needs to find something that person will value more than money. Brandspeak's Braune suggests a private dinner, theatre tickets or a track day may have far more appeal. Or perhaps the subject being researched is of particular interest to them.

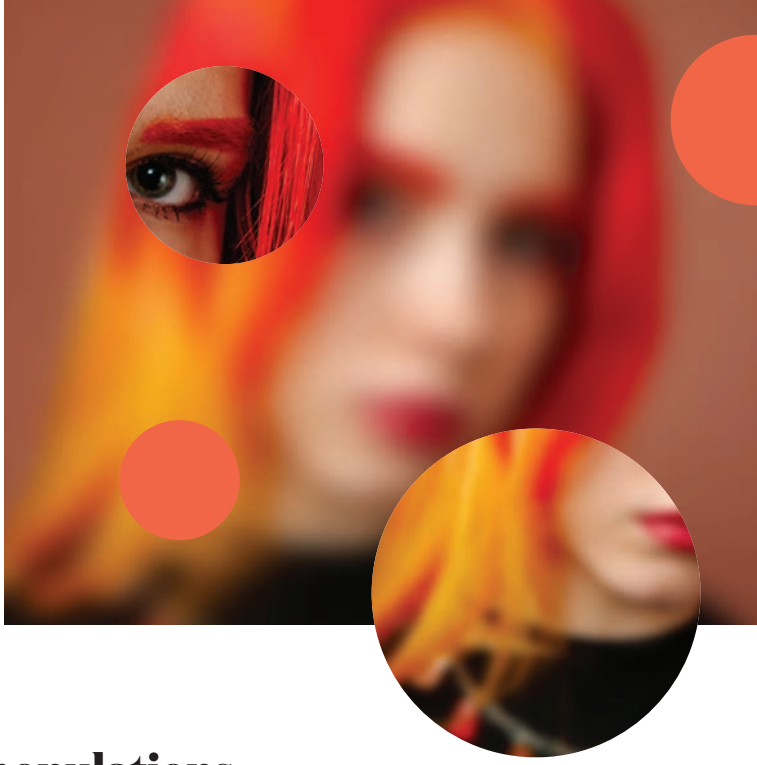
In another challenge for niche research, there can be instances when the population size falls short of meeting the client's specific needs.

Kelli Hammock, strategic communications director at L&E Research, which has offices in seven US cities, cites a hypothetical example of aspiring to interview a

low-incidence patient group comprising 50 individuals across the US, where budget constraints might limit the research to just two US markets.

"In such a scenario, finding 25 niche or low-incidence patients in a single market could pose a significant challenge, whereas spreading the effort across five markets could prove more feasible," says Hammock.

Reaching niche and seldom-heard audiences usually requires extra effort, and often highlights some of the extremes found in our society. But the process is aided by considering the needs of participants first and foremost, thinking creatively, and taking the time to truly understand how best to engage.



Accessing seldom-heard populations

Whether it is because of vulnerability or their living situation, or simply a lack of desire to participate, there are many reasons why some people are seldom heard in research. It may be that the population of interest may not wish to disclose they are members of a specific group – perhaps because their behaviour is illegal; or it may be that an investigation of a group with relatively low numbers is perceived as too expensive to research.

Obvious recruitment solutions involve invoking the saying 'where you go I will go', in order to find the participants, which means searching in the right places for the people you need. This may require engaging voluntary services, including clubs, food banks, churches, asylum services, and community groups – in person and online – to maximise access.

Of course, you must allow enough time for the recruitment to take place, because building pathways into niche communities takes time. By their very nature, hidden populations can be hard to find. Such studies either require some previous knowledge of the target sample to identify initial respondents or sheer hard thinking on the part of the fieldwork agency to develop a strategy.

It goes without saying that relevancy and incentivisation matter. The incentive must be appropriate and timely – most people have a 'here and now' bias, and prefer their reward for participating sooner rather than later. The subject matter must also be tailored to pique the interest of the respondent – without engagement, any chance of participation is lost, so rapport is critical and establishing trust is essential. This requires igniting an enthusiasm in your potential respondent and having robust privacy assurances in place.

Having identified one eligible respondent, we can build upon our original saying and add 'your people will be my people'.

Snowball sampling from a base respondent allows researchers to access seemingly impenetrable social groupings and take advantage of identified respondents to provide an expanding set of potential contacts. The premise is that a bond exists between the original recruit and others within the same population, allowing referrals to be made.

Of course, there are limits, especially if the respondents you are looking for are isolated, with a poor social network. However, working with respondents as informal recruiters serves as an aid to accessing vulnerable, socially stigmatised, or other groups.

It is easy to trivialise this method and argue that a 'refer a friend' approach only applies to qualitative research and brings with it selection bias that means extrapolation is not possible. But this respondent-driven sampling can be carefully tracked by limiting referrals from one base respondent. Each referee is treated as a new base respondent (again, limiting the number of referrals each time) and you can turn your snowballing efforts into multiple snowballs, thereby increasing confidence levels through weighting.

Such a bottom-up approach to fieldwork and recruitment is a far more efficient way to uncover hidden populations (as opposed to top down, and hoping they appear in your large samples) and by mathematically limiting – and, subsequently, tracking – referrals, it is possible to build robustness into the final data.

Tara Lyons is managing director at Indiefield