

# U.S. HISPANIC MARKET — Qualitative Research Practices & Suggestions

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**I**t has been over a year since the formation of the QRCA Latino SIG, the first official Special Interest Group of the QRCA. The idea of forming an alliance of Latino qualitative research consultants had been tossed around for years. Part of the motivation came from the desire of U.S. consultants to collaborate with each other on ways to effectively conduct research among U.S. Hispanics.



Conducting research with Latinos in the U.S. entails having competencies that are not generally gained through general market research experience. Not surprisingly, one of the main objectives of the Latino SIG is to educate researchers on how to conduct research with Hispanics in the U.S. This article outlines a series of practices and suggestions that can serve as a guide for any researcher venturing into this complex American market segment.

## Dealing with U.S. Hispanic Idiosyncrasies and Misconceptions

The U.S. Hispanic market is not a homogeneous group of consumers; rather, it is a very fragmented and multifaceted tapestry of Latino backgrounds that include as many as 20 countries of origin, many levels of acculturation, geographic differences, educational and income disparities, language variations and many different ethnic and racial influences. To do research with Latinos, the QRC must have a basic understanding of the Hispanic market and must set aside preconceived notions that may apply only to a particular segment of the Latino community.

Marketers sometimes carry with them many misconceptions regarding the Hispanic market that can greatly affect a research project. These misconceptions are sometimes even present in Latino marketers who know little about Latino cities or segments other than their own. As a result, the job of the QRC often goes beyond moderating and consulting and into the realm of education and sociology.

One question that always pops up is the appropriateness of using the term “Latino” versus the term “Hispanic.” Which one is the correct term? The answer is both. The terms “Latino” and “Hispanic” are used synonymously in business and are both generally accepted when referring to the U.S. Latino community. However, in the Latino consumer’s perspective, the term “Latino” is often preferred, as it is the correct Spanish word to define people who come from Latin America. “Hispanic” as a term is rarely used in Latin America, and it sounds odd in Spanish.

Despite popular belief, Hispanic is not a race. This is probably the single most critical misconception that can significantly affect a research project. The term should never be used in conjunction with race categories like “Black” or “Caucasian.” Not only is it technically incorrect to use the term as a race category, but it also creates confusion among research respondents because some Latinos have come to believe that their race is “Hispanic,” while others vehemently oppose selecting “Hispanic” as their race. Misunderstanding of this issue can lead serious

validity concerns in screening respondents for qualitative research studies.

## Research Design and Methodology

In designing a Latino research study, it is important to select the right markets because market differences can be quite drastic in the Hispanic community. Besides the usual geographic differences, there are often significant differences in acculturation levels, education, number of years in the U.S. and the Latino country of origin. It is therefore generally unadvisable to conduct research in only one market and then use it to infer the opinions of the Hispanic market as a whole.

This is especially the case with a market like Miami, which, while remaining a very important Latino city, is completely different from other cities with large Hispanic populations. The U.S. Census Bureau provides detailed information on all U.S. Hispanic markets through its website: [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov).

Here are some of suggestions that can help at the design and methodology stage:

- In deciding the makeup of focus groups, it is preferable to avoid very disparate levels of education and/or broad age ranges. If participants are not screened accordingly, it is not unusual to end up recruiting a participant with a 4th-grade education and another one with a Ph.D. Mixed-gender groups can also be problematic in certain situations where there are clear Latino social tenets on male versus female behavior.
- It is extremely important to pay attention to language proficiency at the design stage. A group session with “bilingual” participants where some speak very little English and others speak very little Spanish does not work well. Even more difficult is a Spanish-language group that includes some bilingual participants who switch back and forth from English to Spanish and other participants who do not speak English at all.
- In designing the interviewing guide, avoid the tendency to include questions for every possible information need. This tendency is very prevalent in Hispanic research because companies have more limited budgets for Latino research studies or have never conducted Hispanic research before.
- Consider focus groups on Saturdays. Many Latinos have difficulty attending a session during the workweek because of transportation and childcare issues.
- Written exercises can present problems in conducting Hispanic research because of low education levels and illiteracy among Latinos. In addition, some second-generation Latinos

who prefer to speak Spanish cannot read or write appropriately in Spanish because they were never offered the opportunity to learn Spanish in school (as it is not a required part of the curriculum in most U.S. schools).

- Structured homework exercises like diaries or complicated assignments are usually ineffective with Hispanics because Latinos prefer an approach that is more informal/less structured.
- Latino respondents often react better to less structured/less formal methodologies that do not require entering a corporate office building and sitting around a conference table. This is especially important in trying to enlist the opinion of illegal immigrants who fear deportation. If using a traditional facility is necessary, a living-room-style setup can help transcend the corporate boardroom image.
- While conducting research at nontraditional setups can greatly assist in making Latinos feel comfortable, the QRC needs to take into account the importance of having the client

involved in the research process by giving the client the opportunity to effectively observe a live interview. This is especially significant in Latino research where clients are often new to the market and can greatly benefit from firsthand involvement. It is difficult including clients in nontraditional venues, however, because of the need for an interpreter.

- Methodologies that allow interviewing Latinos in their own environment, like in-home interviews and ethnographies, work very well because they help avoid the feeling of inadequacy that is often experienced by Latinos in the more structured corporate (institutional, in their mind) research facility.

### Latino Recruitment

Recruiters hired to field Hispanic market studies should be experienced in recruiting Latinos. They need to understand how to relate to the respondents and how to employ Latino communication skills.

These skills often include a more informal/personal recruitment approach. Experienced Latino recruiters understand the importance of being



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respectful, kind and reassuring. They allow respondents to be honest, and their recruitment approach minimizes the Latino tendency to say (just to “be nice”) that they can come to the interview and then fail to show up.

Just having one Spanish-speaking recruiter does not make a facility capable of recruiting Latinos: the recruiter must be qualified in Hispanic recruitment. Here are some suggestions in the area of recruitment:

- Respondents recruited to participate in Spanish-language interviews should be recruited in Spanish.
- The screener should be developed by taking into account the cultural nuances of the Latino community. It is generally agreed, for example, that asking the respondents to identify their race is problematic at best because there is a lot of confusion regarding race. Instead, it is better to have the respondents identify themselves as Latino and to then ask other questions to determine their acculturation level, number of years in the U.S., language preference, etc. Income is usually problematic because many

have difficulty understanding the concept of household income. It is also not a good measure of social status because many highly educated new immigrants have disproportionately low income levels, and others with very low education may earn high incomes in demanding blue-collar jobs.

- If writing exercises cannot be avoided, the screener should inform the prospective participants that reading and writing in the language of the group will be required. This gives people who have difficulty with reading and writing the opportunity to opt out without embarrassment.
- Latinos are notorious for being late, and some of that reputation is well deserved. The practice of holding a raffle for an additional cash incentive among people arriving on time (usually 15-30 minutes before the group) works very well with Latinos and helps improve show rate.

**Facility and Other Fieldwork Issues**

Using an experienced Hispanic market recruiter and understanding the cultural issues that can

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affect recruitment are crucial. Many qualitative research facilities understand the importance of using a professional Latino recruiter, and they handle their Hispanic recruitment needs by subcontracting their Latino recruitment services.

Offering Hispanic qualitative field services, however, goes beyond recruitment; there are many other facility and fieldwork issues that must be taken into account. Here are some suggestions:

- When working with Hispanic mothers, it is sometimes advisable to provide childcare service at the facility. The facility should be prepared to handle participants who show up with their children.

Methodologies that allow interviewing Latinos in their own environment, like in-home interviews and ethnographies, work very well because they help avoid the feeling of inadequacy that is often experienced by Latinos in the more structured corporate (institutional, in their mind) research facility.

- Providing transportation to and from the facility significantly increases the show rate and helps include participants that would be otherwise unable to attend.
- It is extremely advisable to insist on a bilingual host for welcoming and re-screening Spanish-dominant participants. A friendly and talkative Hispanic host or hostess can also make participants feel comfortable from the get-go by making them feel welcomed and by treating them as houseguests.
- Latino participants are often not familiar with the office layouts in corporate-type buildings and find themselves intimidated when trying to find the research facility. In these cases, it helps tremendously to have a bilingual host or hostess in the lobby area and to post signs in both languages directing the respondents to the facility.

### Language and Interpreter

While people from different Latino countries speak with different accents and sometimes use different words when referring to familiar things, there is primarily one Spanish language, and the

differences are not dialects of the language. This is another common misconception. While the use of the Spanish language can vary from country to country, it all follows the regulations of the Spanish Royal Academy and is taught uniformly in all Spanish-speaking countries.

There are, however, a few other languages spoken in Latin America (e.g., the native Maya languages spoken in parts of Guatemala), and the people who speak these languages are not generally included in U.S. Hispanic research. One very important segment that is generally excluded are the people from Brazil because they speak Portuguese. Research with Portuguese speakers in the U.S. is always conducted separately from that of the Hispanic segment and necessitates a QRC who is fluent in the language.

Conducting research with Hispanics “in language” results in yet another set of issues that a researcher must take into account:

- The researcher should plan on having all materials translated (concept statements, pre-group exercises, storyboards, etc.) if the methodology includes Spanish-dominant interviews. The moderator or interpreter should not be expected to translate materials before the groups or on the fly.
- For in-language groups, hire a qualified/experienced simultaneous interpreter. The job of the QRC is often dependent on the competency of the interpreter because the client grasps only what the interpreter is able to translate. Interpreters must be capable of translating continuous conversation streams. Professional interpreters with experience in other fields that allow for a pause for translation (e.g., court interpreters) may have difficulty handling continuous conversation. Good qualitative research interpreters know how to read nonverbal cues and use nuances and emotions as they interpret the language. This is extremely important in conveying Latino opinions that very often include more meaning than what is simply being verbalized. Being able to catch the emotions and feelings behind a statement can make an enormous difference.
- Strongly advise against the client tendency to invite a Spanish-speaking company employee to serve as a back-room translator. Just speaking the language does not mean that you are able to translate a conversation.
- Interpreters that are excellent translating from English to Spanish may not be competent translating from Spanish to English. The reverse is also true. Check that the interpreter is competent working in the desired flow of the translation.

- Instruct the client on the importance of not interrupting the interpreter or asking questions that can disrupt the communication flow.
- Ensure that the facility can provide the interpreter equipment if an interpreter is needed. The equipment should include, at the very minimum, a headset for the interpreter and a way of recording the language translation. Optimal equipment includes headsets for everyone in the viewing room and the ability to choose the language (room language versus interpreter's voice). Check that someone in the facility knows how to use the equipment and can fix unexpected equipment problems before and during the interviews.

### Moderating Latinos

The language, country of origin and accent of the QRC usually do not pose a problem in moderating Latinos with different background characteristics. As long as the QRC can speak Spanish correctly and is somewhat familiar with the most common colloquial words used in Mexico and the Caribbean Latino countries, he or she can effectively facilitate a Latino interview. However, in moderating Latino groups, it is important for the QRC to be an experienced research professional who is able to establish an “emotional Latino connection.”



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Hispanics generally interact at an emotional level. In order to open up and share, they need to feel connected with the interviewer. This connection is not always easy to achieve with traditional qualitative research approaches. Many Latino QRCs find themselves sharing their own personal stories in order to establish a strong emotional connection. Many also work very hard to bring themselves to the level of the respondent in order to deal with cultural class barriers.

Here are some suggestions in moderating Latinos:

- Treat the respondents as if they were guests in your house. Every QRC has his or her own style of making respondents feel comfortable, but it is important to relate “in culture,” which (for Latinos) is at a more emotional level. It may be helpful to allow them to eat during the groups or to offer drinks and/or snacks as if you were entertaining. Some experienced Latino QRCs like to greet participants by shaking hands at the door and thanking them for coming.
- Some Latinos have a tendency to be overly respectful when communicating with individuals who are perceived to have a higher socioeconomic status. In moderating Latino groups,

it is crucial for the moderator to avoid being perceived as having a higher status or authority. High-fashion clothing, expensive jewelry, a bigger chair or other status symbols should be avoided if at all possible.

- Latinos are generally less familiar than non-Hispanics with marketing and opinion research. It is beneficial to briefly educate the respondents on the value of their opinions. This gives participants permission to be honest and to think more broadly when providing their feedback.
- Interviewing techniques that require a lot of in-depth probing like laddering can be difficult with Latinos who are not accustomed to communicating in such a structured linear fashion. Free association, mind mapping and other less linear techniques are more in line with the Latino tendency to communicate through tangents and storytelling.
- Simple projective techniques like describing a brand as if it were a car or an animal can be effective in drawing opinions from the less educated Latinos who have difficulty articulating. However, more complicated projectives that involve visualization can be very difficult

to conduct among Latinos. Hispanics often have difficulty “playing the game” and cannot visualize beyond the physical attributes of the product or brand.

- Moderating Latinos invariably involves allowing for tangents and storytelling. The client must be aware of the need for the QRC to allow the communication to flow in a Latino style. The guide in a Latino group rarely flows in the linear/structured fashion in which it was designed.
- Experienced Latino QRCs are also adept in reading body language/nonverbal and emotional cues from the participants and at translating this learning by repeating what was heard for confirmation or through the analysis and report.
- Latino communication often involves informal joking and poking fun. An experienced QRC can use humor and “chispa” (Latino wit) to his or her advantage as a way of warming up a group.

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## Summary

In closing, it is important to emphasize that these practices and suggestions are not rigid tenets to follow in conducting U.S. Hispanic qualitative research, and they are not intended as an industry code of conduct. Every QRC has his or her own style and approach, and there are many ways of achieving the same excellent results. The information contained in this article came largely from an online discussion with many members of the QRCA Latino SIG. The goal of the QRCA Latino SIG is to ensure that the issues covered in this article are taken into account when conducting research with U.S. Latinos.

*Thanks to the all members of the QRCA Latino SIG: Jennifer Abad; Isabel Aneyba, MBA; Guy C. Antonioli II; Farnaz Badie; Cris A. Bain-Borrego; Elisabeth Beristan-Moreiras; Marta F. Bethart; Marco Cabrera Medaglia, MA; Enrique F. Castillo, Ph.D.; Enrique Domingo MBA; Gloria Dupre; Ricardo Escobedo V; Jackeline Fernandez, MBA; Rose Marie G. Fontana, Ph.D.; Linda Greenberg, Ph.D.; Eve Halterman, MBA; Felipe Korzeny, Ph.D., MA; Nancy H. Lang, MBA; Louise A. Lhullier, Ph.D.; Claudia M. Liemann; Ricardo A López; James M. Loretta; Maritza E. Mathews; Julie A. Medalis; Francesca Moscatelli, MA; Nhora B. Murphy; Beatriz Noriega Antonioli; Diva Maria T. Oliveira; Belkist Padilla; Lilian Pagan; Maria L. Parra; Angela Paura; Charlene R. Perea; Patricia Perea; Horacio Segal; Dana B. Slaughter; Timm R. Sweeney; Elba Valle; Astrid Velazquez; Adriana Waterston; Iris Yim; Martha G. Zipper.* 



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