

Qual's Place in the Mix

What it does, where it shines, and how to use it well

CRIC Webinar



Llisa Morrow
Vice President and Moderator
Leger



Charles Leech, PhD
Senior Vice President & Resident Semiotician
Ipsos

Why this conversation matters

Qual is valued — but it is also often judged by the wrong standards.

Underused

Qual is sometimes brought in too late, after the big strategic choices have already hardened.

Misapplied

It gets asked to behave like a small survey, instead of a method built for depth and meaning.

Misread

Findings are sometimes evaluated as if their job was statistical projection, not explanation.

“The issue is not whether qual is useful. It is whether we are using it where it creates the most leverage.”

What we want people to leave with

Four practical learning objectives for the hour.

1. Locate qual in the journey

Where it adds value across customer, brand, innovation, and communications work.

2. Clarify qual vs. quant

How the two methods answer different business questions — and why that distinction matters.

3. Show what qual uniquely surfaces

Meaning, context, language, emotion, tensions, and the human story behind behaviour.

4. Challenge persistent myths

The assumptions that reduce the perceived rigor and usefulness of qualitative work.

Practical promise: better research design, sharper interpretation, fewer “why didn’t we ask that earlier?” moments.

First, a useful distinction

Qual and quant are not competitors. They are different instruments.

Quant is excellent for...

- estimating size
- comparing groups
- measuring movement
- testing scale and prevalence

Qual is excellent for...

- explaining meaning
- revealing language
- exploring emotion
- understanding context and contradiction

Different instruments, same orchestra.

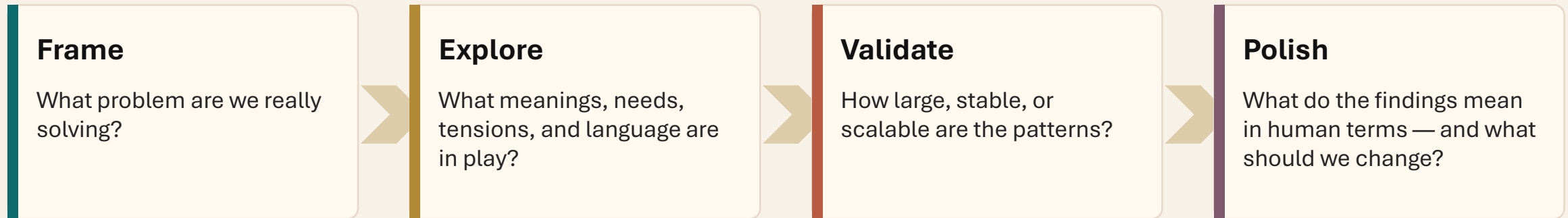
PART 1

The role of qual in the marketing mix

If time and budget were unlimited, where would qualitative research appear across the full cycle?

The ideal path is not linear — it is iterative

Qual can shape the questions before quant and explain the numbers after quant.



“Qual is most valuable upstream when it shapes the right questions — and downstream when it interprets what the numbers mean.”

Upstream: qual helps frame the issue

Before we ask people questions, we need to know what question the business is really asking.

Issue framing

Clarifies the real decision, the stakeholder assumptions, and the strategic risk.

Exploratory discovery

Surfaces motivations, unmet needs, tensions, decision journeys, and category language.

Hypothesis generation

Creates sharper hypotheses for quant, instead of asking quant to find every needle in every haystack.

Practical implication: the discussion guide is not a survey in disguise — it is a *guide* for a conversation.

Before consumers: culture, context, and meaning

Some questions can be explored before we ever put stimulus in front of consumers.

Semiotics / cultural analysis

What is this idea already communicating at a cultural or symbolic level?

Ethno / immersion

How does the product, brand, or experience show up in real life — not just in recalled opinion?

Creative logic check

Are there narrative gaps, category codes, or unintended meanings we can correct early?



Consumer-facing qual: where “why” gets interesting

The point is not just what people say; it is how they make sense of it.



Qual can reveal:

- the language people naturally use
- where the story breaks down
- emotional drivers and barriers
- tensions between ideals and behaviour
- what people notice, ignore, or reinterpret

The gold is often in the follow-up: “When you say that, what do you mean?”

Quant validation: when size and scale matter

Once qual has sharpened the territory, quant can test what is scalable.

From possibility to prevalence

Qual suggests what may be going on.
Quant helps estimate how widespread it is.

From language to measurement

Qual-refined language helps surveys
ask the right questions in the right way.

From options to prioritization

Quant helps compare which
interpretations, benefits, or barriers are
most motivating.

This is the handoff, not the hierarchy.

Downstream: qual helps interpret and polish

After quant, qual can explain what the numbers mean and what to do next.

Post-quant interpretation

What is behind the movement, preference, segment difference, or surprising result?

Optimization

What needs to be sharpened, toned down, clarified, or amplified?

Segment enrichment

Now that we know this segment exists, how do they actually live, choose, and talk?

“Numbers can tell us where to look. Qual can help us understand what we are looking at.”

A mixed-methods lifecycle: the baton pass

Pre-consumer qual

Semiotics, cultural analysis, immersion

What meanings and contexts are already in play?

Exploratory consumer qual

Groups, interviews, communities,
ethnography

How do people understand, use, and feel about this?

Quant validation

Survey, sizing, segmentation, modelling

How big, stable, and scalable are the patterns?

Polishing qual

Post-quant qual, creative refinement,
segment enrichment

What do the numbers mean — and how should we act?

Part 1 takeaway

The best role for qual is not “small survey.” It is strategic sense-making.

Use qual when you need to:

- frame the right business question
- understand people in context
- surface language and meaning
- explain motivations and tensions
- interpret and sharpen quantitative findings

**Upstream: ask better questions. Downstream:
make better sense of the answers**



PART 2

What qual contributes to brand research

Brand is where emotion, meaning, category codes, and lived experience collide.

Brands are emotional constructions

People do not simply store brand facts. They carry meanings, memories, shortcuts, and feelings.

“A brand is not only what it says. It is what people understand, feel, repeat, and remember.”

Meaning

What does this brand stand for in people's minds?

Emotion

What needs, anxieties, aspirations, or identities does it connect to?

Context

Where does the brand fit in category culture and people's lives?

Tracking shows movement. Qual explains movement.

Knowing that something shifted is not the same as understanding why it shifted.

Brand health tracking can tell us...

Awareness is down.
Consideration is up.
Trust has softened.
A segment is moving differently.

Qual can help explain...

What changed in meaning.
What language people are using.
Where the brand story is disconnecting.
What emotional need is being met or missed.

“Movement” is the signal. The human story is the strategy.

Five things qual contributes to brand work

These are the ingredients that make brand strategy usable.

Brand meaning

What people believe the brand really represents.

Emotional territory

The feelings, needs, anxieties, and aspirations the brand evokes.

Category language

The words people use before we impose ours.

Lived experience

How the brand shows up in routines, rituals, and decisions.

White space

The unmet meanings or needs a brand can credibly own.

Questions qual answers well in brand research

If the question depends on meaning, language, emotion, or context, qual is probably in the frame.

What does this brand stand for?

Where is the disconnect between intended and received meaning?

What emotional needs are being met or missed?

Why do people feel that way, and where does it come from?

What language will sharpen the strategy, not just decorate it?

Where qual helps most in brand work

The practical applications are broader than positioning alone.

Positioning exploration

Equity diagnosis

**Segmentation
enrichment**

Journey work

**Communications
development**

**Reputation
understanding**

A useful test: does the decision require interpretation, not just measurement?

The Power of Qual – A Brief Story



The Power of Qual – A Brief Story

The Story According to Quant

Memorable? Yes – without question! Viral, in fact.

Believable? Not according to quant.

What was the message? Nobody knew.

How was it connected to the brand? Nobody could say.

The Story According to Qual

Emotion

Emotional Relevance

Experience

Pure Brand

Part 2 takeaway

In brand work, qual gives strategy its human language.



Brand quant can tell us what moved.

**Brand qual can tell us what it means,
why it moved, and how to respond.**

Strategic value

Qual provides depth, interpretation, and language that can sharpen positioning, communications, and the usefulness of quant findings.

PART 3

Debunking qualitative myths

A friendly myth-busting session — no methods will be harmed.



Myth 1: “Qual is just small-sample quant”

Reality: qual and quant are designed for different purposes.

Myth

“Can’t we just ask 20 people the survey questions?”

Reality

Qual is built for depth, meaning, exploration, and explanation — not statistical projection.

“A discussion guide is not a questionnaire that took off its tie.”

Myth 2: “More groups automatically mean better research”

Reality: quality of design matters more than volume alone.

Early groups

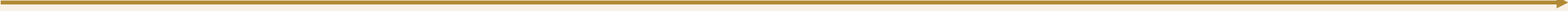
Rapid learning
new language
new hypotheses

Later groups

Themes stabilize
patterns repeat
nuance deepens

More only helps when...

segments differ
objectives differ
or the design needs it



Go deeper, not just broader.

Myth 3: “Qual is too subjective to be rigorous”

Reality: subjectivity is managed through design, discipline, and transparency.

Focused objectives

Know what decisions the research must inform.

Disciplined sampling

Recruit intentionally against the learning objective.

Thoughtful guide design

Create structure without choking the conversation.

Analytic transparency

Show how themes were developed and what evidence supports them.

Triangulation

Connect qual to other evidence where appropriate.

Myth 4: “Qual is best at the end”

Reality: disaster-check qual is usually... a sign we should have done qual earlier.

Late-only qual often asks:

“Can consumers please confirm this thing we have already built, named, priced, packaged, and emotionally committed to?”

Earlier qual can ask:

“What should we understand before we make the big decisions?”

“The more grounded the beginning, the fewer emergencies at the end.”

Myth 5: “Everyone interprets words the same way”

Reality: language is slippery — and qual is where we catch the slips.

The same word can carry different meanings by:

- category
- region
- age cohort
- cultural context
- usage occasion
- stakeholder lens

In qual, “what does that mean to you?” is not filler. It is method.



what does “concessions” mean?

A small example of why language needs checking.

What is the first meaning that comes to mind:

At a stadium

Food and drinks

In a negotiation

Something given up

In public policy

An allowance or compromise

In business

A pricing or contract term

Same word. Different mental doors.

What rigor looks like in qualitative work

The answer to weak qual is not less qual. It is better qual.

Clear objectives: What decision will this inform?

Purposeful sample: Who must we learn from, and why?

Focused guide: What do we need to explore deeply?

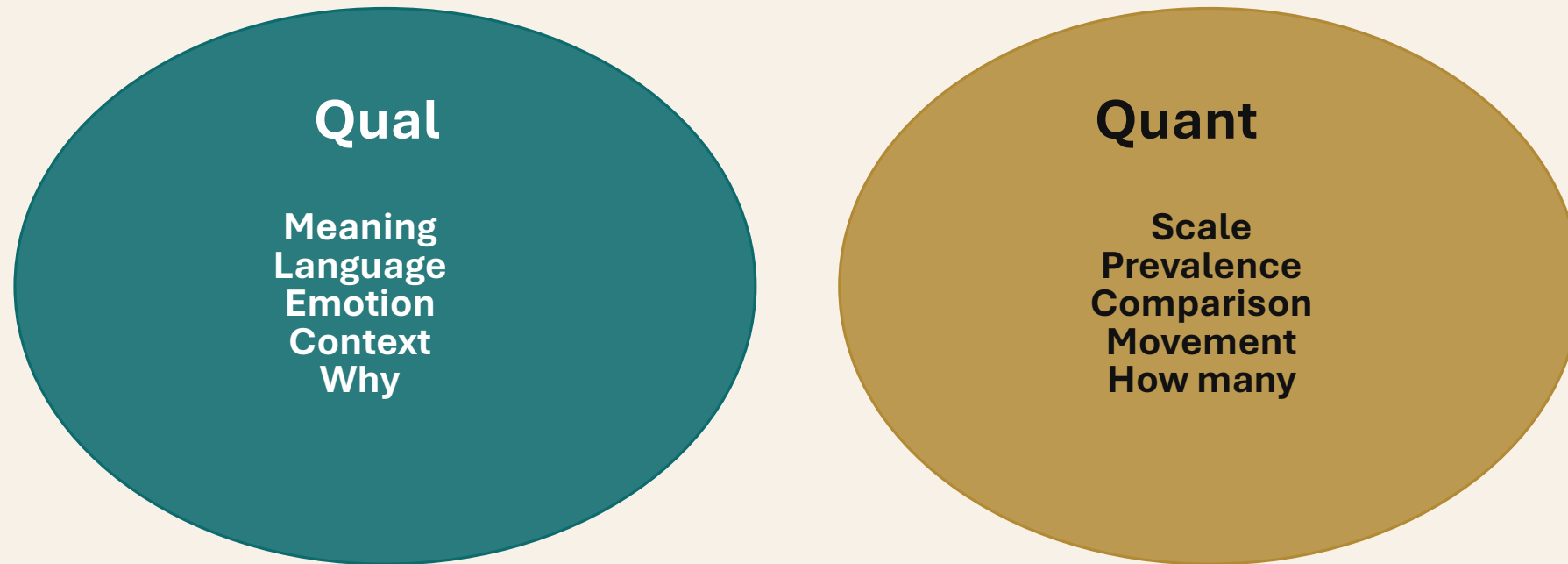
Skilled moderation: How do we probe without leading?

Transparent analysis: What evidence supports the interpretation?

Method integration: How does this connect to other evidence?

No turf war: qual + quant should mesh

The strongest decisions usually come from respecting the distinct role of each method.



Better decisions

Three guidelines for commissioning qual

A practical checklist for better briefs and better outcomes.

1. Start with the decision

Brief the business decision first, not the method mechanics first.

2. Protect depth

Do not overload the guide. Depth requires room for probing and follow-up.

3. Design for interpretation

Ask how qual will connect to other evidence, sharpen strategy, or explain movement.

Good qual is designed, not just scheduled.

Key takeaways

The short version you can take back to your next research plan.

1. Qual is not a substitute for quant

And quant is not a substitute for qual. They answer different questions.

2. Qual creates leverage at multiple points

Upstream to shape the right questions; downstream to interpret the numbers.

3. Brand work needs human meaning

Qual brings depth, emotional context, language, and lived experience to brand strategy.

4. Rigor is designed into the work

Strong objectives, sampling, moderation, analysis, and transparency make qual credible.

Better method thinking leads to better research — and better decisions.

CRIC

CANADIAN
RESEARCH
INSIGHTS
COUNCIL

Thank you

Questions, comments, politely skeptical challenges?



Llisa Morrow
Vice President and Moderator,
Leger



Charles Leech, PhD
Senior Vice President & Resident
Semiotician, Ipsos

Leger



CRIC Webinar