

RULES FOR NON-DIRECTIVE INTERVIEWING

Non-directive interviewing gets my vote as *the* most important marketing research technique. Furthermore, it can be mastered in a few hours.

With the following rules *and some practice*, you could become a fairly good non-directive interviewer. The examples here are put in the context of marketing research, but the method is applicable to many other situations – understanding people who are “upset” over some issue, dealing with employees, the employment interview, or dealing with a consulting client whose needs are not clear.

Start the interview by explaining what you would like to learn about – e.g., “find out how you feel about our services and whether there are things that might be done to improve them.” The initial part of the interview is often the most difficult. If the general type opener does not draw a response, try something a little more specific – e.g., “perhaps you could tell me about the things you found most useful about product x.”

1. *Don't evaluate what the interviewee says.* If he feels he is being judged, he will be careful about what he says.
2. *Do let the interviewee know that you're interested in what he says and that you understand.* To find out more about a particular subject that is mentioned by the interviewee, ask for an elaboration – e.g., “that's interesting, tell me more” or “I'm interested in why you felt that way.” Or you may use a reflection of the interviewee's comments – “you felt upset by ...” or “You seem concerned by ...,” often picking up the last few words used by the interviewee. These requests help to provide more information and they also let the interviewee know that you are interested in what he/she is saying. Also, you should take notes, unless the replies are highly sensitive.
3. *Don't interrupt.* Let the interviewee carry the conversation once he gets going. He'll talk about what he thinks is important.
4. *Don't bring in your own ideas* during the interview.
5. *Don't worry about pauses in the conversation.* People may get a bit uncomfortable during pauses. Don't pressure the interviewee – e.g., you can look out the window – but don't be in a hurry to talk if it is likely that the interviewee is thinking.

Practice these rules. Start with a friend. A tape recorder is also useful as you will be able to pick out the problems with your procedure.

A note of caution: Although marketing research poses few problems, non-directive interviewing can lead people to tell you more than you have any right to know. So you should be selective when you use it and you should not use the information you obtain in a way that could harm someone.