BUSINESS RESEARCH METHODS | TEACHING CASE | 2026

Masala Mornings: Do We Really Need More Research?

Choosing a cost-effective path to qualitative insight after the primary-research budget is spent

This case is fictitious. Annapurna Kitchens, its people and all data are invented for classroom discussion. The case is not intended to serve as an endorsement, a source of primary data, or an illustration of effective or ineffective management.

On a humid Monday morning in July 2026, Meera Iyer, Head of Consumer Insights at Annapurna Kitchens, stared at two numbers that refused to agree. A 2,400-respondent survey said 78% of trial buyers liked the company's new ready-to-cook breakfast range, *Masala Mornings*. Retail scan data said only 11% of them ever bought it again.

Her inbox held two more numbers that agreed with each other perfectly, and that was the problem. The first was a proposal from a well-regarded research agency: **₹58 lakh and ten weeks** for a five-method qualitative programme to explain the gap. The second was an email from the CFO, Anil Bhatia, reminding her that the company had already spent **₹1.15 crore** on primary research for this brand in the past year.

> *We have bought a great many answers already. I am not funding more questions until someone shows me we have read the ones we paid for.* — Anil Bhatia, CFO

The CEO, Rajiv Malhotra, had set the deadline. A ₹40 crore national rollout was pencilled in for the Diwali quarter. He wanted a recommendation in six weeks: scale, fix, or pull the plug. Meera had to decide not only *what* to learn, but *how much it was worth paying to learn it*.

Annapurna Kitchens and the Breakfast Bet

Annapurna Kitchens is a 34-year-old Pune-based packaged foods company with ₹2,100 crore in revenue, best known for spice blends and pickles sold through 1.2 million kirana outlets. Its median customer, as one marketer put it, "is a 45-year-old woman who has never read the back of a packet because she already knows what's inside."

Growth had flattened as younger urban households cooked less and ordered more on quick-commerce apps. Breakfast looked like white space: Indian households rarely skip it, but weekday mornings are a 20-minute battle between tiffins, school buses and office cabs.

Masala Mornings launched in March 2026 in Pune, Bengaluru and Hyderabad: five ready-to-cook mixes (poha, upma, rava idli, vegetable daliya and besan chilla) promising "maa ke haath ka swaad in 7 minutes." A two-serving pack cost ₹65, about 30% above a do-it-yourself equivalent. Trial was healthy. Repeat was not.

Three internal theories competed. Sales blamed **price** ("too expensive for a daily habit"). R&D blamed **taste** ("it doesn't taste like home, and mothers can tell"). Brand blamed the **occasion** ("we built a weekday product people only remember on Sundays"). Each implied a different and costly fix.

The Money Already Spent

Annapurna had not been shy about research. Over the previous twelve months it had commissioned four pieces of primary data collection (Exhibit 1): a national usage-and-attitude survey, in-store sampling with feedback slips, a sensory taste test, and a syndicated retail scan-data subscription.

The trouble was what happened afterwards. The survey agency delivered a 140-slide deck of charts; the 1,700 open-ended comments sat, uncoded, in an Excel tab named "Others_misc_FINAL2." The 18,000 sampling feedback slips were collected in gunny sacks and stored in the Pune warehouse, where, according to the logistics manager, "the rats have read more of them than marketing has." The taste test showed the poha and upma scored on par with home-made versions in blind tests — a finding that quietly undercut R&D's theory but was never discussed.

Meanwhile, free data piled up without anyone owning it: 3,100 ratings and reviews on quick-commerce apps, 640 recorded customer-care calls, and weekly WhatsApp reports from 120 sales representatives (Exhibit 2).

Kabir Sethi, a 27-year-old insights analyst, had skimmed 200 of the survey open-ends one evening. Several phrases jumped out: "only when the maid is on leave," "for guests who come suddenly," "my mother-in-law doesn't approve" (Exhibit 5). "It's all there," he told Meera. "We just never looked."

The Agency Proposal

Dr. Nandini Rao, a retired agency veteran now advising Annapurna on a short contract, had helped scope a gold-standard programme with her former firm. It sequenced five qualitative methods, each answering a different question (Exhibit 3):

1. **In-depth interviews** — 18 at-home interviews with lapsed buyers across three cities, to observe what actually happens in the kitchen at 7 a.m.
2. **Focus group discussions** — six groups of seven in viewing facilities, to surface shared language and social norms around "packet food."
3. **Card sorting** — an in-person open and closed sort with 50 participants, to map how consumers mentally categorise breakfast.
4. **Five Whys** — follow-up interviews and a cross-functional workshop, to drill from symptoms to root causes of non-repurchase.
5. **Delphi study** — three anonymous rounds with 14 experts, to forecast where the category is heading.

The design was rigorous, with verbatim transcription, a shared codebook, and a full audit trail. It was also ₹58 lakh and ten weeks long — four weeks past Rajiv's deadline, which would push the decision beyond the Diwali window.

Nandini defended it without apology. "You are about to bet ₹40 crore. Fifty-eight lakh is less than one and a half percent of that. Cheap research that gives you the wrong answer is the most expensive research there is."

The Lean Counter-Proposal

Farhan Qureshi, a UX researcher borrowed from the company's D2C app team, had a different instinct. His team ran research on two-week sprints and shoestring budgets. Over a weekend he drafted an alternative: the same five methods, scaled down and run mostly remotely, built on top of the existing data rather than beside it (Exhibit 4).

- **Mine before you mine.** Two weeks of in-house coding of the survey open-ends, app reviews and customer-care calls, using a shared codebook, to generate hypotheses at almost no cost.
- **Recontact, don't re-recruit.** 412 survey respondents had consented to follow-up contact. Eight of them would get video interviews, with two home visits in Pune.
- **Go online.** An unmoderated online card sort with 60 respondents using a low-cost tool; two online mini-groups of five instead of six facility-based groups.
- **Ask experts by email.** A two-round e-Delphi with eight experts and modest honoraria.
- **Five Whys last.** An internal workshop, but only after evidence from the steps above was laid out on the table.

Total: about **₹8 lakh and four weeks**. "We don't need a bigger telescope," Farhan said. "We need to take the lens cap off the one we already have."

Nandini was unconvinced. "Video interviews won't show you the cook glaring at the packet. Online card sorts recruit people who like online card sorts. And a two-round Delphi with eight people is a WhatsApp group with a methodology."

Sunk Costs and Sharp Elbows

At a review meeting, Anil's position hardened. "We have already spent ₹1.15 crore. Another ₹58 lakh would take this brand's research bill past ₹1.7 crore before we sell a single extra pack. Use what we have."

Kabir, unexpectedly, sided with Nandini on one point. "With respect, the ₹1.15 crore is gone whether we use it or not. The only question is whether the *next* rupee is worth spending." Anil looked at him the way CFOs look at analysts who are technically right.

The Head of Sales wanted no research at all: "Cut the price to ₹49 and we'll know in a month." R&D pointed out that the taste test had cost ₹14 lakh and had already disproved one theory, "so perhaps we can stop blaming the recipe."

Meera noticed something under the argument. The old research had not failed because it was bad. It had failed because nobody had **documented, coded and connected** it. A lean plan would only work if the team fixed that first: one evidence log, one codebook, every claim traceable to a source. A rich plan run with the same habits would simply produce a more expensive pile of unread data.

The Decision

By Friday, Meera had to put one recommendation to Rajiv. Her options, as she sketched them on the whiteboard:

1. **Full programme** — commission the agency's ₹58 lakh, ten-week design and ask for a delayed rollout.
2. **Lean programme** — run Farhan's ₹8 lakh, four-week design in-house, accepting shallower evidence.
3. **No new research** — analyse existing data only for two weeks, then decide.
4. **Staged hybrid** — mine existing data first, then fund only those methods that answer questions the data cannot, with a stop-go gate at each stage.

She also had to answer two questions the board would certainly ask. How credible would findings from a smaller, cheaper study be, and how would she show it? And how would Annapurna make sure that its next ₹1 crore of research did not end up in a sack in Pune?

She looked at Kabir's sticky note, still on the wall from his evening with the open-ends: *Maybe the real customer isn't the person who cooks.* Then she opened a blank slide and typed: *What we already know, what we still need to learn, and what it's worth.*

Exhibits

Exhibit 1 Primary research already commissioned (April 2025 – June 2026)

Study	Scope	Cost (₹ lakh)	What was used	What was never analysed
Usage & attitude survey	2,400 respondents online, 3 cities	38	Closed-ended charts (140-slide deck)	1,700 open-ended comments; 412 recontact consents
In-store sampling + feedback slips	220 stores, 18,000 slips	42	Trial counts only	All written comments on the slips
Sensory taste test	300 consumers, blind vs home-made	14	Scores filed with R&D	Finding that taste was at parity; never shared with brand team
Retail scan-data subscription	12 months, 3 cities	21	Repeat-rate dashboard	Store-level and pack-size patterns
Total		**115**		

Source: Annapurna Kitchens Consumer Insights team (fictitious data).

Exhibit 2 Existing data available at little or no cost

Data source	Volume	Owner	Cost to analyse	Possible use
Survey open-ended comments	1,700 comments	Insights (orphaned)	Team time, ~2 weeks	Thematic coding; early hypotheses
Quick-commerce ratings and reviews	3,100 reviews	E-commerce	Team time; export free	Usage occasions; complaints
Customer-care call recordings	640 calls	Customer service	~₹1 lakh transcription	Repeat-purchase barriers in consumers' own words
Sales rep WhatsApp reports	~1,500 messages	Sales	Team time	Retailer view on price and shelf placement
Survey recontact panel	412 consenting respondents	Insights	Incentives only	Recruit interviews, card sort, groups

Source: Annapurna Kitchens internal records (fictitious data).

Exhibit 3 Agency proposal: full five-method programme

Method	Scope	Weeks	Cost (₹ lakh)	Main strength
In-depth interviews	18 at-home, 3 cities, 60–90 min	1–3	14	Observed behaviour in real context
Focus group discussions	6 groups × 7, viewing facilities	3–4	18	Social norms and shared vocabulary
Card sorting	In-person, 30 open + 20 closed	4–5	4	Consumers' mental categories
Five Whys	8 follow-ups + internal workshop	6	2	Root causes, evidence-tagged
Delphi study	14 experts, 3 anonymous rounds	3–8	6	Structured expert forecast
Transcription, coding, reporting	Verbatim, codebook, audit trail	1–10	14	Rigour and traceability
Total		**10 weeks**	**58**	

Source: Agency proposal to Annapurna Kitchens, July 2026 (fictitious).

Exhibit 4 Lean counter-proposal (Farhan Qureshi)

Method (lean version)	Scope	Weeks	Cost (₹ lakh)	What is lost vs full plan
Secondary mining of existing data	Open-ends, reviews, calls, sales reports	1–2	1.0	Data not designed for this question
In-depth interviews	8 video interviews + 2 home visits (Pune)	2–3	2.4	Little kitchen observation; one city
Online mini-groups	2 groups × 5, video	3	1.6	Less group dynamic; digital-savvy skew
Card sorting	Unmoderated online, 60 respondents	2–3	0.8	No think-aloud; card wording untested
e-Delphi	8 experts, 2 rounds by email	2–4	1.6	Narrower panel; weaker consensus
Five Whys	Internal workshop on assembled evidence	4	0.2	No consumer follow-ups
Documentation set-up	Codebook, evidence log, free tools	1	0.4	—
Total		**4 weeks**	**8.0**	

Source: Internal memo, July 2026 (fictitious).

Exhibit 5 Sample verbatims from data already in hand

Source	Verbatim (translated where needed)
Survey open-end, Bengaluru	Good taste. I keep it for when the maid is on leave.
Survey open-end, Pune	My mother-in-law doesn't approve of packet food, so I make it when she visits my sister.
App review, 4 stars	Life-saver when guests come suddenly. Not for daily.
App review, 3 stars	₹65 to save ten minutes? Only on Mondays.
Customer-care call, Hyderabad	Kids liked the chilla. But my cook says she will make it fresh, so why buy?
Sales rep WhatsApp, Tier-2 town	Retailers say price is high for small towns. Want a single-serve pack at ₹25.
Sampling slip, Pune	Tasty. Feels like a shortcut though.

Source: Kabir Sethi's informal review of 200 comments plus selected reviews and calls (fictitious).

Exhibit 6 Primer: five qualitative elicitation methods

Method	Best for eliciting	Typical documentation	Common pitfalls
In-depth interviews	Individual behaviour, context, motives	Recording, verbatim transcript, contact summary sheet, reflexive memo	Leading questions; talking in generalities rather than recent episodes
Focus group discussions	Shared language, norms, social reactions	Video, observer grid, moderator notes	Dominant participants; social desirability; groupthink
Card sorting	Mental models and categories	Photos or exports of sorts, assignment sheet, similarity matrix	Card wording bias; small samples; open vs closed confusion
Five Whys	Root causes behind a symptom	Chain template with evidence and confidence at each step	Stopping early; blaming people; one-anecdote chains

Method	Best for eliciting	Typical documentation	Common pitfalls
Delphi study	Expert judgement and forecasts	Archived questionnaires, round summaries, recorded dissent	Panel selection bias; forced consensus; drop-outs

Discussion Questions

1. Why did the survey and the scan data disagree? What can closed-ended "liking" measures not tell us?
2. Anil argues that ₹1.15 crore already spent is a reason to avoid new research. Kabir calls it a sunk cost. Who is right, and what is the correct way to think about the value of the next rupee of research?
3. Using Exhibits 1, 2 and 5, what can Meera already conclude without any new data collection? How confident can she be?
4. For each of the five methods, compare the full and lean versions (Exhibits 3 and 4). Where does the lean version lose something essential, and where does it lose little?
5. Which questions genuinely require new primary data? Which methods could be dropped altogether?
6. Nandini says cheap research that gives the wrong answer is the most expensive research. With a ₹40 crore decision at stake and a Diwali deadline, how would you weigh cost, time and confidence?
7. Why did Annapurna's earlier research go unused? Design a one-page documentation protocol (evidence log, codebook, traceability rules) that would make a lean study credible to the board.
8. **Decision:** Which of the four options should Meera recommend? Specify the methods, sequence, budget and the stop-go criteria you would use.
9. *(Lighter note)* Somewhere in your own organisation or college, there is a sack of unread feedback forms. Where is it, and what is it trying to tell you?

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Teaching Note

Learning objectives

1. Match qualitative elicitation methods (interviews, FGDs, card sorting, Five Whys, Delphi) to the research questions they answer best.
2. Evaluate trade-offs between rigour, cost and time, including lean and remote versions of each method.
3. Recognise the sunk-cost fallacy and reason about the value of additional information.
4. Appreciate that documentation (coding, evidence logs, audit trails) is what turns data, old or new, into usable insight.

Suggested 90-minute session plan

Time	Activity	Focus
0–10 min	Cold call: "Why did 78% like it and 11% repeat?"	Say–do gap
10–25 min	Debate: Anil vs Kabir on the ₹1.15 crore	Sunk cost; value of information
25–45 min	Board grid: full vs lean for each method (Exhibits 3, 4, 6)	What each method elicits; what is lost
45–60 min	Pair exercise: code the Exhibit 5 verbatims into 3–4 themes	Secondary mining; codebook basics
60–80 min	Vote on options 1–4; groups defend a plan with budget and gates	Decision-making under constraints
80–90 min	Wrap-up: "What we know, what we need, what it's worth"	Documentation as the enabler

Key teaching points

- **Sunk cost:** The ₹1.15 crore is irrelevant to the decision about the next spend, but the *data* it bought is a real asset. Students often conflate the two.
- **Value of information:** ₹58 lakh is about 1.5% of the rollout budget, so cost alone does not rule it out. The binding constraint is time: ten weeks misses the Diwali window.
- **Existing data already points somewhere:** Exhibit 5 suggests emergency-only usage and role threat (cook, mother-in-law), with taste at parity (Exhibit 1) and price mattering mainly in Tier-2 towns. New research should test these hypotheses, not start from zero.
- **Method-by-method:** Home interviews are hardest to replace (observation of the cook's role); FGDs are the most expendable here; online card sorting is a reasonable substitute; the Five Whys costs almost nothing once evidence exists; a small e-Delphi is adequate for direction, not precision.
- **Documentation:** Unused research is a documentation failure, not a data-collection failure. A lean plan is credible only with a codebook, evidence log and traceable claims.

Possible resolution

Stronger answers usually favour the **staged hybrid**: two weeks of coding existing data (≈₹1 lakh) to form hypotheses; then six to eight targeted interviews including home visits with recontacted respondents, an online card sort and a short e-Delphi (≈₹6–8 lakh); FGDs dropped; Five Whys run as an internal synthesis workshop. Add a stop-go gate after stage one: if existing data converges strongly, spend less. Total roughly ₹7–9 lakh within the six-week deadline, paired with a two-city repositioning pilot rather than an immediate ₹40 crore rollout. Reward students who tie each element to specific exhibits and state the evidence gaps they are accepting.