

# *All About Qual: Perspectives from Across our Partner Network*

WITH

**Laura Nozicka**

Certified LEGO® Serious Play® Facilitator & Qualitative Researcher

Welcome to *All About Qual*, an ongoing interview series in which we highlight some of the unique methodologies, perspectives, and experiences from our partner network that make qualitative research such a flexible and powerful tool for getting to the “why?” behind the “what?”. In this edition, our team interviewed **Laura Nozicka**, Owner of Big Idea Tango, LLC, a qualitative research practice in Chicago, IL.

**Q:** Our experience has definitely been that many market research professionals grow into a career in research rather than becoming a researcher right after college. That’s true of you too, isn’t it? Tell us about that journey.

*A: You’re absolutely right – I did not begin my career as a researcher.*

*My background is in marketing and sales, primarily within large healthcare systems and early on in hospitality – restaurants and hotels. Early in my career, I knew very little about formal market research, especially qualitative research. That changed when I was working on marketing strategy for a suburban hospital in Chicago. We were trying to better understand why cancer patients would travel for surgery, but preferred chemotherapy and radiation close to home.*

*That was the first time I sat behind the glass and observed a professional moderator in action. For 90 minutes, she navigated a room of eight cancer patients with varying diagnoses, stages, and experiences while building rapport, guiding the discussion, and uncovering insights that directly informed our strategy. I was fascinated and I remember thinking, “If that’s a real job, I want to do that someday.”*

*As I progressed on the client side, I commissioned and managed both qualitative and quantitative research projects. I worked closely with agencies, helped design studies, and reviewed the inevitable 100-slide decks. Over time, I became increasingly interested in how qualitative insights, in particular, drive business strategy, service design, and product development.*

*I knew I had the instincts and the presence to moderate, but I also knew I needed formal training. In 2014 and 2016, I invested my own PTO and funds to attend Burke Institute in Cincinnati, one of the most respected research training programs, with a focus on qualitative methodology.*

*In 2016, due to a family situation that required more flexibility, I left corporate America and began building my practice. My first project took me to a facility in Philadelphia, where I conducted in-depth interviews with patients and physicians treating idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis.*

*From there, the work continued to grow. What started as curiosity behind the glass evolved into a career centered on facilitating meaningful conversations and translating them into strategic insight.*

**Q: When our paths first crossed, we were very interested in learning about your work as a LEGO® Serious Play® facilitator, as it was totally new to us. How would you explain it to our readers?**

*A: I love introducing people to LEGO® Serious Play® because most assume it's "just" adults playing with bricks, and it's absolutely not that at all.*

*It's a structured facilitation methodology grounded in psychology, communication, and the power of metaphor and play. My certification required an intensive week of immersive training where we didn't just build but we learned how leverage a stack of techniques that build off each other, guide reflection, surface hidden thinking, and translate physical models into strategic insight.*

*What makes it powerful is that people build before they discuss what their build means to them and what it's meant to communicate. Instead of allowing the loudest voice in the room to take over (which an experienced moderator would never allow to happen) or the safest answer to dominate, every participant constructs a model that represents their perspective. The model becomes the center of conversation. Suddenly, abstract ideas like trust, risk, growth, and friction are sitting on the table in a visual and tactile way.*

*It's purposeful, disciplined, and surprisingly deep. I use it to help teams solve complex problems, identify blind spots, innovate, and co-create solutions that actually stick.*

*The magic is in what people reveal when their hands are moving, and their guard is down. We don't play anymore and getting away from the routine and mundane gets people talking, shakes things up, and makes truly innovation real!*

**Q: Do you see LEGO® Serious Play® as primarily an "alternative" to traditional qualitative techniques or as something that you have incorporated into your Burke Institute training?**

*A: I don't see LEGO® Serious Play® as an alternative to traditional qualitative research. I see it as an enhancement.*

*In its purest form, it's often used in half-day or full-day workshops focused on problem-solving and innovation. That's where it really shines from a team and strategy perspective.*

*But I've also found it to be a powerful addition to more traditional qualitative formats whether that's one-on-one interviews or focus groups. It's simply another technique in the toolkit. Instead of relying only on discussion, flip charts, sticky notes, or projectives, participants build their thinking. And that shift can unlock insights that might not surface through conversation alone.*

*I've seen it work particularly well in product development settings especially when engineers, product teams, and end users are in the room together and co-creating in real time. It helps move abstract ideas into something tangible and shared with some real prototyping emerging on the fly.*

*So, for me, it's not either/or. It's about knowing when the method will deepen the conversation and drive better insight.*

**Q: One of the things we really pride ourselves in at Beyond the Table Research is trying to let the research question determine the methodology rather than starting with a method and looking for a project. What are some use cases/situations in which you've found that LEGO® Serious Play® really shines?**

*A: I love that philosophy. The question should absolutely drive the method.*

*For me, LEGO® Serious Play® really shines when the topic is complex, emotional, or difficult to articulate quickly. Because participants build first and talk second, it gives them a few quiet minutes to think through their ideas instead of reacting instantly. It's enough time to reflect but not overthink, and that alone changes the quality of insight.*

*It also creates a really balanced dynamic in the room. Everyone builds and everyone shares. Each person speaks for roughly the same amount of time because the model becomes their voice. No one can monopolize the conversation, and participants aren't influenced by the loudest person in the room because the meaning of their build has already been formed during that independent thinking time. There may absolutely be agreement in the group, but it's authentic agreement, not group think.*

*At its core, it's about communicating through metaphor. The model becomes the explanation. That's when you start hearing things people wouldn't necessarily say in a straight Q&A.*

*I've found it especially powerful in co-creation and early-stage product work. For example, I might ask participants to build what their current experience feels like whether that's making dinner on a weeknight or using a piece of tech in their daily routine. What surfaces are the emotional pressures, workarounds, friction points, and identity tensions that rarely come out in a traditional guide.*

*Then, we shift to building the ideal solution. Instead of reacting too early to a concept, they show us what they want both functionally and emotionally. When you introduce a prototype later, you can literally see where it fits or doesn't in their world.*

*I don't see it as replacing traditional qualitative techniques. It's another tool in the toolkit. But when the goal is depth, innovation, or leveling the playing field in the room, that's when it really shines.*

**Q: You're also the host of a podcast, *Desperate for a Diagnosis*. As researchers, our role is of course to collect data, but we're also humans talking to other humans about challenging and sometimes very serious topics. How do you balance information gathering with empathy?**

*A: I really love this question.*

*To me, qualitative research is never transactional. It's not a verbal survey. It's a human conversation. Whether we're talking about something as serious as breast cancer screening or something as ordinary as an electric can opener, there are always human truths underneath the surface.*

*Take mammography, for example. It's not just about hitting a screening milestone at a certain age. That machine can represent physical pain, fear of a bad outcome, or memories of a mother who went through cancer treatment. Those emotional layers can become real barriers, and if we don't acknowledge them as product or experience designers, we miss the story behind the behavior.*

*Even something as simple as a can opener carries human impact. Its design could determine whether an elderly person on a fixed income is able to eat the food they can afford that week. If it's too difficult to use, that's frustration, loss of independence, and potentially even nutrition challenges which go well beyond the functionality of the appliance.*

*Balancing information gathering and empathy go hand in hand. Empathy actually strengthens the data. When people feel understood and safe, they go deeper. They share more honestly. And that's when the insights become meaningful. I always preface research and facilitated sessions saying that "this is a judgement-free zone." And it is important for moderators to hold themselves to that with how follow up questions are positioned and right down to facial expressions and body language. (I have done a lot of practicing my poker face.)*

*That's where the real story lives beyond the layers, those that can only be revealed by skilled listening.*

**Q: Something that keeps research fresh and exciting is that no two projects are the same. Can you tell us about a time when you were genuinely surprised by something you learned?**

*A: Qualitative research really does fall into the "box of chocolates" category...you never quite know what you're going to get.*

*What continues to surprise me, though, is how much participants genuinely want to help. Whether it's a B2C or B2B study, most people truly care about improving the products, services, or experiences they interact with. They show up with thoughtful opinions and lived experience that they're willing to share.*

*I'm always aware that it's both an honor and a privilege. I'm a complete stranger asking people to open up -- sometimes about deeply personal experiences. That requires building trust and rapport quickly, which can make all the difference in the quality and depth of the insights.*

*And what I've learned over the years is that regardless of the category, we're all driven by similar human needs be it safety, ease, dignity, joy, contentment. The product might change, the industry might change, but the humanity underneath it doesn't. That's what keeps the work fresh for me.*

**Q: Finally, we have to ask – do you tango, or is your firm's name just a metaphor for research?**

*A: I love this question. And yes, I do tango.*

*I've been an amateur competitive and performance ballroom dancer since 2011. It's my joy, my creative outlet, and one of my favorite styles of dance.*

*Big Idea Tango is absolutely a metaphor but it's also deeply personal. I believe solving complex challenges is a lot like a great dance. It requires rhythm, awareness, responsiveness, and the right partnership.*

*In tango, you're constantly attuned to subtle shifts, reading cues, adjusting in real time, and moving together toward something cohesive. That's how I approach research and facilitation. There's a dynamic back-and-forth between a brand and its customers. Often, it's the customers who are leading and signaling when direction needs to shift based on their lived experience and evolving priorities.*

*Whether I'm moderating qualitative research, leading strategic workshops, or facilitating innovation sessions, my role is to help organizations listen closely, move thoughtfully, and uncover the insights that truly move people, consumers, employees, and stakeholders alike.*

*In the end, it's about connection, communication, and creating momentum that lead meaningful experiences, just like dancing.*

**Thank you, Laura – we really appreciate you covering so much ground with us and are looking forward to our next opportunity to work together!**

## About Us

***Beyond the Table Research**, a premier market research facility in Pittsburgh, is proud to serve as a crossroads where distinguished researchers, carefully vetted respondents, a modern, thoughtfully designed venue, and hands-on, experienced project management converge to create exceptional insights. To learn more about our capabilities as a resource partner, please visit our website at [bttrfocus.com](http://bttrfocus.com), or take a [virtual tour of our research facility](#).*

***Laura Nozicka, MBA** has over three decades of experience in marketing strategy, market research, facilitation, and uncovering insights that drive meaningful change in customer-centric industries. To learn more about her rich, multi-industry background and additional credentials as a Certified LEGO® Serious Play® facilitator, please visit her website at [bigideatango.com](http://bigideatango.com)*