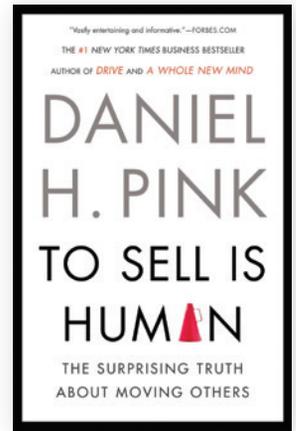




A Conversation with Dan Pink

By Kay Corry Aubrey

- n Usability/UX Researcher
- n Usability Resources Inc.
- n Bedford, MA
- n kay@usabilityresources.net



Dan Pink is one of America's most celebrated and successful authors. His books include *Free Agent Nation*, *A Whole New Mind*, *To Sell Is Human*, and *Drive*. When we spoke he had just published *When: The Scientific Secrets of Perfect Timing*. Dan's books make current social science accessible and show how to leverage this science to improve one's life. In this interview, Dan and I talk about *When* and the qualitative research skills he leverages in his work.

Kay: *In a world where technology produces vast amounts of consumer insights, is there still a place for face-to-face research?*

Dan: My argument has always been that you want to have both. For instance, you could take all of my quantitative data about me like my height, my weight, my cholesterol level, and assemble all of that into a data profile of me. That would absolutely give you some insights about who I am, but you can round off those insights if you actually have a conversation with me. Today we have such great analytic tools for data and a whole array of things. You don't want to abandon those. But you don't want to rely exclusively on the [quantitative] tools because they don't give you the full picture. Qualitative research doesn't give you the full picture either. What you need is both.

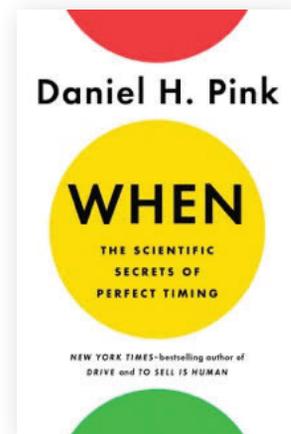
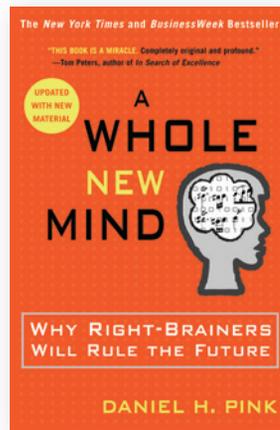
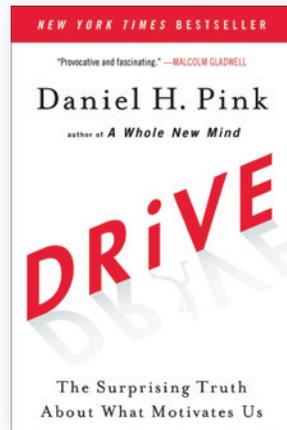
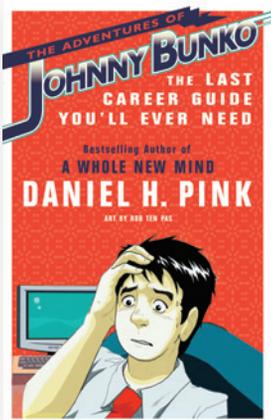
Kay: *How do you feel qualitative research fits into the overall picture?*

Dan: Qualitative research gives something scarce in a world of abundant information, numbers, and analytics. It gives you context. We are, in general, information data rich, but context poor. The only way to understand analytics is to have them in some kind of frame, some kind of context.

Qualitative research is a translator of sorts. You can have quantitative informa-

tion about your customers, et cetera, but ultimately you have to be able to speak to them in some way if you're going to use those insights to try to get them to buy your products or service. The analytics alone won't do that. You have to be able to speak to them in their own language, and that's where qualitative research can bear fruit. So we have context, we have translation.

The third thing qualitative research offers is insights that you weren't looking for. With data analytics you're asking very specific and tightly framed questions designed to elicit certain kinds of responses. I'm a big fan of quantitative research. I think it's extremely important, but it doesn't do as good a job at yielding things that you're not looking for in a way that qualitative research does. In qualitative research, when you talk to the human beings, when you're watching them or doing ethnographic kinds of research where you're watching them behave in certain situations, people do weird idiosyncratic things. They go off on tangents. They do things that are illogical. In many cases those are deep, deep veins of insight. With qualitative research you can often ask more open-ended questions, so those open-ended questions can actually



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lead you to places that you didn't expect to go. Often those places end up being a complete waste of time, but some of them end up being sources of unexpected insight and delight.

Key: *What are some ways to find those places?*

Dan: I ask one particular question, “Is there anybody else you think I should talk to?” When I'm doing a piece of research I'm so in my own head. The person I'm talking to might have a completely fresh take on my topic. When they suggest, “Oh, you should talk to my doctor,” and I would never have even thought to talk to a physician or someone like them, that's part of it. That can lead you.

The other thing with qualitative research—really, really listening is extremely important. I know that sounds simplistic and perhaps self-evident. With qualitative research or narrative journalism, if you listen you can ask questions that you didn't come prepared to ask. I think that's much harder. It's not impossible in quantitative research, but it's harder in the moment in quantitative research, so it's being able to listen and follow up or even say, “What do you mean by that?” or “What's an example of

that?” that can open these other veins. As a journalist you can't plan for serendipity, but I think there's a way to design your process to allow for it.

Key: *How would you suggest helping participants stay emotionally engaged on a long-term project? Do you think some of the principles you explore in Drive, which deals with human motivation, can be applied to working with research participants?*

Dan: Letting people know why you're doing something or why they're participating is extraordinarily important. So people go, “Oh, I understand that,” which can be very motivating. “Oh, that's why you're asking me about whether I have a cat or not.”

Sometimes you can't reveal what it is you're searching for, but the extent to which you can give people context for what you're doing. This helps them understand how they are helping you make progress. If they learn something from the process as well, that's reinforcing. Inviting them to ask their own questions, within the boundaries of the research, is also valuable. In this way you make them full participants rather than vending machines for answers. As much as the situation allows, offer them any kind of insights on what you have found out.

Key: *Have you noticed trends in social science research that might be of interest to the market research world?*

Dan: One of the biggest trends, obviously, is Big Data. But I actually think that the biggest trend I'm seeing out there, the most powerful one, is A/B testing. A/B testing can give us some really, really, really great input. It's obviously easier to do online. If I make the button blue or I make the button red, what happens to the propensity of people to click on it? The concept of A/B testing is really powerful. To me it's another tool we can use to learn and discover stuff, and it's not limited to purely online work.

Key: *How would A/B testing work in a qualitative situation?*

Dan: Let's say you have 200 participants, and one of the things you're trying to find out is what kind of jackets they wear in the winter. Or how they choose which jacket to wear in the winter. You could do an A/B test where you ask 100 of them one way and 100 of them another way and compare the results. You can ask 100 people how do you choose what jacket to wear, and then you ask another 100 people how do you choose what coat to wear just changing the word jacket and coat,

and seeing if that elicits any kind of difference. Or you could do it like this. Let's say you have 200 participants. You can do 50 asking Question A, 50 asking Question B, look at your results and saying, "Oh, wait a second. Question B is a more powerful question," and then you ask Question B to the remaining 100.

Kay: *That's a pretty cool approach. You've just published a new book. Would you please tell us a little about it?*

Dan: Sure thing. It's called *When* and it's about the science of timing. My argument is that timing is much more of a science than we realize. There is a huge amount of research out there that allows us to make systematically smarter, more evidence-based decisions about when to do things. If we use that science, we can actually improve our mood and improve our performance. While many of us believe that timing is everything, we tend to make our timing decisions in a haphazard way. We tend to focus on what we're doing, how we're doing it, who we're doing it with. We take this question of when we're doing stuff and put it to the side. There's a lot of research showing that the "when" question is often as important as the how, who, or what questions.

Kay: *What are some of the factors involved in making the right timing decision?*

Dan: The whole book is devoted to the many different timing decisions in the course of the day. Time accounts for about 20% of the variance in performance on most work tasks. So, the extent to

which we can rearrange our schedules to put certain kinds of work in certain kinds of periods of the day will allow us to perform at a higher level. So that's an enormously important thing. There is a lot of good evidence about breaks. The science of breaks is where the science of sleep was 15 years ago. We didn't start realizing until about 10 years ago just how important sleep is to our overall well-being, and I think we're at the similar point now with breaks during the day.

There's good research showing that we have to have breaks. Taking breaks is part of our performance. It's not a deviation from our performance; it's part of it. There's other evidence showing how certain kinds of breaks are much more restorative than others. You're better off taking a break when you're moving rather than when you're stationary. You're better off going outside to be near nature rather than staying indoors. You should be fully detached rather than semi-detached. You can use some of that evidence to take better breaks.

There's all kinds of great stuff on how beginnings affect our behavior, how the midpoints affect our behavior, how the endings affect our behavior, and how groups synchronize in time. The goal of the book really is two-fold. One goal is to have people take questions of "when" more seriously because researchers really have solid material set on our health, our well-being, on our performance. The other goal is to offer people a few very specific practical things that they can do to improve their own lives.

Kay: *That's pretty neat. What have you learned about how groups of people synchronize?*

Dan: There are certain kinds of groups that need to synchronize in time with each other. A choir has to do separate acts, but in time with other people. A rowing team or even certain kinds of delivery services are coordinated in that same way. So how human beings synchronize with each other ends up being pretty interesting, reasonably complex, but also, I think, opens up some broader insights about who we are. For instance, one of the things that synchronized activities like choir singing shows is that it actually is a huge mood booster. It makes people feel better. Choral singing has a physiological effect. If you take somebody's blood work before they sing in a group, and then take it afterwards, their immunoglobulin levels, their ability to fight infection, have improved. In coordinated activities people will have a higher pain threshold. They're more likely to do good—so there's something very powerful about human beings synchronizing with other human beings.

Kay: *The message of *When* sounds simple but profound.*

Dan: Sure. I hope so.

Kay: *Well, this has been a great conversation! On behalf of QRCA VIEWS magazine, we really appreciate the time that you've taken. Thank you so much.*

Dan: Of course, my pleasure, Kay. 🙌

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