Practical advice on effective data collection

Effective data collection means collecting the amount of data you need, at the quality level you need and through the people you need it from. To make this clearer, what would ineffective data collection look like? Well it could, of course, take many forms so here are some examples:

1. A study seeks to statistically measure the relationship between the level of service offered by an Internet provider and customers' intention to move to an alternative provider. The study design plans for a minimum of 1000 responses to give the analysis a chance to achieve statistical significance. In the event, only 300 online questionnaires are returned, of which only 200 are fully completed. So what's the answer? Particularly when distributing surveys to a widely dispersed sample, you always need a plan B in terms of the sampling frame (all those who potentially could respond). For one of my own projects, the list of names we bought from a reputable database proved inadequate, with many of the emails containing the survey hitting company firewalls, or the firm having ceased to trade. Fortunately, I had a plan B which was to contact local Chambers of Commerce and pay them to distribute the survey to their members. This worked and we hit our own target of 1000 responses just in time.

2. But of course not all data collection makes use of surveys. Focus groups, for example, can be a highly effective way of eliciting data. Here, the key is meticulous planning and then skillful orchestration of the session. Let's look at planning first. Having carefully constructed your research questions, you can flesh these out into the interview schedule for the focus group session. Construct this schedule over a few days, returning to it, critically evaluating each question and improving each of them. Then pilot the schedule with a subject matter expert, a supervisor or critical friend. Amend it again. So by the time you come to the session, you will be confident that the schedule will work. Plan the logistics of the session well in advance: dates/time/location/room – and make sure that the room is fit for purpose i.e. it's of the right size, contains sufficient chairs, and is comfortable. During the session itself, introduce yourself to participants as they arrive. This helps to build trust. Once everyone is sat down (usually in a circle), start the session by:

    - Thanking everyone for giving up their time to attend
    - Introducing yourself and your role
    - Briefly outline the aim of the session
    - Then, start with an ice-breaker. I usually say: 'Shall we start off by introducing ourselves. Just give your name, your role in the organization and something interesting about yourself. For example, my name is David Gray, I'm the researcher on this project, and when I was 18 I drove my car into a river but got out alive'. You'll be amazed about what kinds of stories people say about themselves. It really kicks off the session!