

MARKET RESEARCH

Concept Testing in a World Gone “Faster”



HOLLIS ASHMAN

The U&I Group
Powell, OH



JACQUELINE BECKLEY

The U&I Group
Denville, NJ

James Gleick in his 1999 book *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything* (5) describes a world in which time is measured in nanoseconds—a world in which fast food can be found within 4 min of virtually any location and time and motion studies are interconnected with culinary development. In 2006 we live in a world in which consumers make choices about the products they will buy in a grocery store within 4 sec. This is a world in which time is more important than money, and consumers are not willing to give a product their attention unless it immediately provides an experience. Although money can be acquired, saved, and spent, time can only be shifted to different activities.

New products continue to fail, even when the product team has gone through all the correct steps and used the product development process. The question is why is this happening? In today's busy world, not only are consumers not willing to give a product the attention it requires to understand its concept or idea and inherent benefits, but there are many more products on the shelves competing for consumer attention (the median number of super-market items was 45,000 in 2004) (1). In effect, new products today face even higher hurdles to gain the attention of consumers in the brief time allotted.

Traditionally, creating new products has involved testing ideas or concepts with consumers. This means going through the process of writing narrative statements that describe the product and its reason for being. The primary purpose of concept testing is to estimate consumer reaction to a product idea before committing substantial funds for marketing and product development. In addition, concept tests are used to determine the potential target market and how the concept might be improved.

Concept tests are based on prediction systems like Bases I or ESP and use a concept score as well as estimates of spending and distribution in a regression equation to estimate consumer trial.

Almost always there is a baseline of data from the recent or more distant past. The overall process of developing concepts starts with an idea, creation of a variety of general concept statements, and screening these based on purchase intent, interest or liking, and secondary aspects like uniqueness or believability. The top box score is compared with the secondary criteria to choose the best concepts with which to move forward. These concepts are then moved to concept generation tests (often focus groups), with the primary goal of constructing a statement that tells the purchaser the essence of the product and its benefits. Multiple focus groups may be used to iteratively develop improved (better liked) concept statements. Following this, consumer reaction to the concept or concept and product together is measured quantitatively using large numbers of consumers. Again, purchase intent is typically used to determine the success of the idea. The response is compared with a category-specific norm based on historical responses to similar category ideas or utilized in a predictive model like Bases I, incorporating seasonality, distribution builds, category and brand development indexes, and so forth to estimate trial.

Every 20 years or so someone (2,6) comes along and questions the value of concept testing. Well here we are again—why are we doing this? Because, after years of practice we now know that most new concepts fail to achieve great scores during concept testing. And, those that do succeed often fail to connect with consumers at a very high level. To improve the process, some clarity concerning why this is happening is required. Haley and Gably (2) have raised questions concerning

1. Consumer understanding of what the concept is about.
2. Issues surrounding discontinuous innovation and how concept testing is unable to predict effectively consumer reaction to discontinuous innovation.

In 1981, Sid Hecker (3) suggested, “Fundamentally a verbal concept statement may be adequate for a product with a rational appeal—but a more complex presentation involving at least rough executions of advertisements will be needed when an emotional appeal is involved.” The issue today is not normative history, commonality of understanding, or discontinuous innovation, but the reality that in an economy based on demand, not supply, the consumer has an overabundance of products from which to choose. To create some differentiation, focus is now being placed on creating experiences that involve emotional connections. The result? The key predictive measures of concept testing no longer apply.

Concept testing is based on two predictive measures: 1) purchase intent or liking, and 2) uniqueness or believability. In an increasingly fast-paced world with an overabundance of choices, the idea of concept testing as conceived more than 40 years ago no longer works because evaluation and testing of ideas and concepts become issues (4). In a demand economy in which the goal is to create a product or brand that the consumer becomes emotionally connected with, liking is assumed, so measuring liking tells us almost nothing. (The assumption is that if I am emotionally involved, then I must strongly like or dislike the product or brand. If this idea is confusing, remember the first person you really fell for in high school. It was emotional, and you either liked or hated the person all the time.) Even if we continue to measure liking, concept testing involves consumer reaction to a statement, and the new market requires consumers to provide a reaction to a statement in context with com-

peting statements. In this fast-paced world, consumers only consider ideas in relation to competing ideas; they rarely consider ideas by themselves, which takes more time. If we don't have time, why would the consumers we are selling things to have time? Today's consumers have so many choices. We have gotten very good at writing concepts with great phrases that consumers like. So, what are the implications of writing good concepts that consumers don't have time to react to?

Uniqueness is no longer a viable measurement either, because it measures a perceived level of familiarity. If I am familiar with an idea, I may consider using it, but it may not be unique. If I am not familiar with an idea, I may be unsure of it, of what is expected of my interaction with the idea or product, and of how to integrate it into my life. In a world in which there is a shortage of time, I just move on; there are always more choices, many more (e.g., 30+ choices of toothpaste). This means that the predictors of consumer reaction no longer apply.

Many researchers have followed the precept that showing concepts with images enables consumers to more clearly understand the idea. This is not necessarily true, however. In the timeframe required to make a decision, the consumer may miss many elements of the idea. In defining what new products they want, consumers describe them in terms of familiar products. One option, not necessarily utilizing the Internet, which has become the standard concept screening tool, is to provide actual product attribute stimuli with the concept. This approach makes it clear to consumers that a specific product attribute stimulus is what they are responding positively to, while another attribute stimulus is not. The consumer is able to decide which product attribute stimuli are familiar and which ones are not. A scientist can then follow the decision pathway.

The real question in our fast-paced world is will consumers integrate a new concept into their lives? This might mean buying one concept instead of another or considering whether this concept will better support present behaviors or even change them: are the concept and benefits offered strong enough? All of this happens within a constantly changing continuum of new product ideas, faster judgments, and complex lives. Given this situation, can consumers truly understand the concept and benefits that a product offers? How can we begin to better understand this issue? One approach is to better understand an experience and what components of the experience we are trying to create or leverage and what components we are trying to replace.

Product or brand attributes can enable behaviors. For instance, think of the differences between Reddi-Wip whipped topping in a spray-nozzle can and Cool Whip in a tub. Reddi-Wip allows playful behavior by squirting product from the can, listening to the sound it makes, and creating designs with the product—it is basically a toy with food inside. Cool Whip, on the other hand, allows indulgent behavior by controlling how big a “dollop” of topping is used. Different attributes enable different behaviors, which in turn create different experiences. However, within this set of different experiences, what are the specific behaviors and expected additional products that are needed to enable specific behaviors? Reddi-Wip allows squirting behavior, whereas Cool Whip requires a spoon and more controlled behavior. What are the alternative products that would extend these experiences? Add chocolate flavor to Reddi-Wip and it is a chocolate bar in a can; add French vanilla flavor to Cool Whip and it competes directly with dairy toppings. When testing ideas like this with consumers, there is a need to incorporate testing in terms of ease of integration within the consumer's life and the ease of integration of alternative products. We are trying to determine how the choice is made, not likeability.

What is familiarity and how can it be leveraged? Looking across a variety of product categories using decision-based conjoint analysis provides researchers with an opportunity to see how strongly specific elements of a concept connect with consumers. An example is the use of multiple conjoint studies linked together to measure and understand the idea of creamy, smooth texture. In this example, the idea of creamy, smooth texture is independent of product form and plays well across multiple food and beverage categories, e.g., cheesecake is a highly craved food that has this key element and

can move across multiple product forms. The question becomes what product form is easier to integrate into consumer lives? Is it cheesecake in its sliced form, cheesecake as candy, or cheesecake as a beverage? This expands the testing of ideas, which complicates the process but enables the researcher to better understand the choices consumers make when they determine how to obtain the smooth, creamy texture they crave: buy hard candies, a latte, or a slice of cheesecake. Hard candies are available at convenience stores and can be purchased quickly and carried around easily all day. A latte can be purchased from specialty vendors at the drive-thru or counter and may provide a statement due to badge quality. A slice of cheesecake at a restaurant requires sitting down, ordering, eating off a plate, and paying the bill. Each of these is a viable option to obtain a creamy, smooth texture, but some are easier to access during a busy day than others.

The fundamental issue we face in today's sped-up experience-driven world of abundant choices is that the measures we have used in the past no longer apply. The world has changed and so must concept testing to keep up with it. The metrics for success are still evolving, and the processes we use to measure them must evolve as well.

References

1. FMI. Supermarket Facts: Industry Overview 2004. Published online at www.fmi.org/facts_figures/superfact.htm. Food Marketing Institute, Washington, DC, 2004.
2. Haley, R. I., and Gably, R., The trouble with concept testing. *J. Advertis. Res.* 8:23, June, 1968.
3. Heckler, S. A brain hemisphere orientation toward concept testing. *J. Advertis. Res.* 21(Sect. 2):55, August, 1981.
4. Hopf, R. Time to put concept testing aside. Paper 20th Annual Conference of the Market Research Society of Australia, Leura, 1991.
5. Gleick, J. *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything*. Pantheon, New York, 1999.
6. Moore, W. Concept testing. *J. Bus. Res.* 10:279, 1982.

An advertisement appeared here in the printed version of the journal.