New Product Concepts

Best Practices

Much market research is designed to test new product ideas. The input to these studies often takes the form of what we call concepts—descriptions of the products or services being evaluated. It's well known that failure rates for new products are high (although there's quite a bit of debate about exactly how high). My personal belief is that many new product and service failures can be traced to flawed research, at the heart of which often lies poorly written concepts. With that in mind, here are some best practices I've identified for writing concepts that will yield research results in which you can be confident.

- *Remember the purpose of a concept.*

  It's not the job of a concept to 'sell' an idea. Rather, a concept exists to gain clear, honest, unambiguous responses to that idea. In addition, if you're testing concepts qualitatively, they also must be able to drive productive consumer dialogue.

- *Know what kind of concept you're writing.*

  There are three types of concepts I use when testing new product and service ideas, each one appropriate for a specific stage of development.

  - ✓ <u>Platform concepts</u> are strategic documents designed to gain feedback on consumer values and needs. They may describe multiple product lines and near-, medium- and long-term opportunities. They are also valuable for surfacing, validating and refining insights, and for obtaining consumer language related to those insights. These concepts have a relatively low level of finish.

  - ✓ <u>Product concepts</u> are strategic documents with tactical elements, their purpose being to assess the consumer appeal and positioning of a specific product or product line. They tend to minimize tactical marketing elements, and have a low to moderate level of finish.

  - ✓ <u>Marketing concepts</u> are entirely tactical documents designed to refine the positioning of a product and understand the language and graphical elements that can best communicate that positioning. They are best employed once the platform has been validated and the product idea optimized. These concepts often have a high level of finish.

  It's essential to create concepts appropriate to where you are in the evolution of your idea. The most common mistake I encounter is the use of marketing concepts before the underlying product idea has been validated.

- *Know what question the concept is asking.*

  At its heart, every concept is a question. Specifically, it's asking a question you have about your business. These questions take many forms. They might relate the extendibility of a brand, or to the

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applicability of a new technology, or how to create compelling advertising. Everybody involved in the research, when reading a concept, should be able immediately to identify the underlying question. If not, that's a big red flag.

- *Be focused*.

    In order to get clear, unambiguous feedback, a concept must be tightly focused. This generally means it contains one benefit and one supporting attribute (often called the reason to believe). Remember—a respondent's reaction to a stimulus is going to be driven by everything contained in that stimulus. You can't unscramble an egg. If a concept is loaded with information, such as multiple benefits and supporting attributes, persuasive language, pricing, retail location information, detailed illustrations, etc., all of those elements will shape the respondents' reactions. And it's impossible to identify the role each individual element plays in driving those reactions. So, it's crucial to make sure that there's nothing in the concept that isn't necessary to answering the underlying business question.

- *Be brief*.

    Just as brevity is the soul of wit, it's also the soul of good concepts. Concepts that are brief are more likely to be focused and are also less likely to contain language and other elements that are not relevant to the research objectives. The longer a concept is, the greater the chance it contains unnecessary information that will muddy respondent reactions, and the greater the chance respondents will get confused or bored. So, edit ruthlessly.

- *Mind your tone*.

    A concept is a question. When you ask a question, your attitude matters. If your tone makes it clear that you want the person being asked to answer in a certain way, that's going to influence the response. On the other hand, if your tone communicates openness to any reaction, you're more likely to get an honest answer. That being the case, it's important for concepts (particularly platform and product concepts) to take a neutral tone—one that encourages a full range of responses, all the way from 'I hate it' to 'I love it.'

Want to learn more about writing effective market research concepts? Contact us! Get in touch with Tom Rich at:

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