

Stimulus Visuals in Qualitative Research

Best Practices

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Visuals can be an essential element to market research stimuli (also referred to here as ‘concepts’). They can provide an efficient way of communicating information to respondents, and can help bring ideas to life. However, used incorrectly, they can compromise the value and accuracy of your research results. Over my nearly 30 years in marketing, I’ve identified a few best practices that enable marketers to use visuals appropriately and effectively in market research.

First, there are some fundamentals of stimulus exposure to keep in mind:

- 1) *A market research stimulus is a question.* We ask questions in a variety of ways when conducting qualitative research. Direct queries, projective and creative techniques, storytelling exercises, and so on—these are all ways of eliciting information from respondents. And, like any other question we ask in market research, a concept must be clear and focused, so that it will obtain a readable, unambiguous response.
- 2) *A respondent’s reaction to a research stimulus is driven by everything to which he or she has been exposed.* Put another way, you can’t unscramble an egg. When a new product concept is full of 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 tease out specific reactions to individual elements, no matter how skilled your moderator might be.
- 3) *The more information there is in a stimulus, the more information there is likely to be that’s unrelated to the core question.* As noted above, research participants cannot help but react to everything you put in front of them. If you have a lot of stuff in your concept, there’s a very good chance that there will be stuff that’s unrelated to the central question, and therefore stuff you don’t want to talk about. However, if it’s in there, your respondents will react to it, whether you want them to or not.
- 4) *Tone matters.* Successful market research stimuli adopt a tone that encourages a full range of responses, all the way from ‘I love your idea’ to ‘I hate it.’ If anything about your concept suggests to your respondents that you want them to react in a specific way to your idea, it’s likely to bias your research.

So, with these fundamentals in mind, here are a few best practices to consider:

- *Best Practice #1: Don’t include a visual if you don’t need it.*

I frequently find that clients include visuals in stimuli as a matter of course, without questioning their necessity. So, ask yourself this: if a concept is a question, what elements are necessary to ask that question clearly? Do you need an illustration to get your point across fully or to tell your story?

If so, by all means, include it. Similarly, if the methodology demands it, or if you need it for the sake of consistency, go ahead and include a visual. But if it's not essential, if you can make your point without it, consider seriously leaving it out. By including an unnecessary visual, you risk over-complicating your stimulus, thus compromising its clarity.

➤ *Best Practice #2: Pay close attention to level of finish.*

As mentioned above, tone matters. Visuals can play a vital role in creating the appropriate tone for a concept, particularly with their level of finish. Highly finished, slick-looking visuals tend to communicate to respondents that the underlying idea has been validated, and that they are expected to like it. If you're not testing your core idea, and are rather testing positioning and communication, then this is probably appropriate—you don't want to talk about the idea with the respondents, only how it's being served up, so highly finished visuals are warranted. But, if you do want to evaluate the fundamental validity and appeal of the idea, then you don't want the tone of the visual to take that issue off the table. This is where pencil or marker sketches work well. The tone of this type of illustration communicates to the respondents that these ideas are in development, and that their honest input is sought and will be valued.

There's another benefit to keeping your level of finish as low as possible: time and money. It's quicker and cheaper to create lower-finish visuals, and they often can be revised on the spot.

➤ *Best Practice #3: Keep it simple.*

Remember: respondents react to everything you show them, whether you like it or not. So, make sure your visuals contain only what is necessary to get your point across. The more complex the visual, the more likely it is to include ideas that are not part of the question your stimulus seeks to ask. So, if you don't need people in the illustration, leave them out. If you don't need to depict usage occasions, then don't do that. And so forth. Simplicity is probably the greatest virtue of all when it comes to research stimuli.

➤ *Best Practice #4: Consistency is crucial.*

If you're showing multiple stimuli in your research (and you probably are), keeping the visuals as consistent as possible across those stimuli is essential. Maintaining a consistent level of finish, color palette and artistic style will reduce the risk that one concept will be advantaged or disadvantaged by a factor other than what you're testing.

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

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