

TOP OF MIND

Free Advice

What Do Consumers Think? Don't Even Bother Asking

Most people can't really tell you what effect advertising has on them. So why on earth do we expect them to?

By Ron Sellers

Why do we consistently ask consumers for answers they can't give us?

Marketing research is the art and science of exploration. Simply put, we ask people questions and they give us answers. Sounds easy enough—until you consider the inherent problem. Can *you*, marketer or brand manager, reasonably answer every question you're asked? Can you really say whether, for example, Apple's new advertising will make people more likely to buy a Mac? Or whether a brand's new spokesperson really makes that brand more memorable to the public? Unfortunately, you probably cannot give accurate answers to those questions.

And neither can consumers. The truth is that everyday people don't watch an ad and consciously think, "Gee, that Hyundai ad really positioned the brand as more upscale in my mind. I have more positive feelings about Hyundai now." But wait, you'll say, advertising's effect on consumers is supposed to operate on an indirect or subconscious level. Indeed it is—which is all the more reason why it often makes no sense to ask them for their conscious impressions.

I was struck by a story that appeared in these pages back in February. It reported the results of a Harris Poll that asked consumers whether they'd be more or less likely to purchase a brand if it were an Olympics sponsor. I thought: If only finding out were as easy as asking. The problem is that most consumers don't consciously react to a sponsorship deal by intentionally buying an Omega watch instead of a Timex just because the Swiss brand underwrites the games. Yes, sponsorships can help position the Omega brand in consumers' minds, bring tremendous visibility and provide a platform for the brand message, all of which (hopefully) will foster increased sales. But consumers don't directly perceive all of these steps, so whatever answer they give to this question is nothing more than guesswork. (In fairness, the Brandweek

story did note that "respondents may underestimate the effect Olympics-related marketing has on them.")

A separate story that appeared late last year featured the results of another Harris Poll that asked: "When they endorse a product in an ad, which type of celebrity do you



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find most persuasive: business leaders, athletes, TV/movie stars, singers/musicians or former political figures?" How is a consumer really supposed to answer that question? If the business leader is Steve Jobs and the athlete is Peyton Manning that would probably be one answer; if it were Lloyd Blankfein and Tiger Woods, it would be quite another.

The bottom line is that many marketing research questions might be great for party games, but they produce far less useful material for business. Part of the problem lies with the disparities inherent in how consumers view themselves. Take the crowd favorite: "Would you rather marry an ugly rich person or a good-looking poor person?" Invariably, in a group of friends, someone will flippantly provide an off-the-cuff answer, gleefully claiming he'd go for the looker—only to later fall in love with a plain-Jane with a trust fund. Well, it's the same with consumers. Sure, they'll give you an answer (because you asked), but that doesn't mean it is a true reflection of their perceptions and behavior.

In at least a third of the advertising-related focus groups I've moderated, the client has insisted we ask a question such as: "What would be the best media to advertise our

product?" The inevitable answer is television. But that's just because TV is what people tend to envision when they think of advertising. It's not because consumers actually have deep insight that a TV buy would suit the marketplace goals of the brand in question.

Another question clients often demand we ask consumers: "Will this advertising make you more likely to buy our product?" The answer we typically get is, "Do you really think I'm stupid enough to switch banks because Chase has a great ad and my bank doesn't?" Sometimes, consumers will tell us flat-out that advertising has no effect on what they buy. If only they realized how much it really does.

While consumers can give you direct feedback on what message they received from an ad (what they remembered about it, whether they liked it, etc.), they simply cannot tell you—much less as a response to one question—whether your new ad (or new brand strategy, packaging, logo or tagline) will make them more likely to buy your product.

Some marketers understand this. The best way to approach the issue is to ask consumers how they perceive brands, what emotional value those brands hold for them, whether they understood the intended message of the advertising and what perceptual impact a prospective logo or tagline carries. The value, in other words, lies in the interpretation of consumers' responses far more than from the raw responses themselves. Smart marketers know the danger of relying on the responses given to the broad, blunt and, indeed, unanswerable questions I mention above.

But since so many marketers are fond of stuffing their research with questions like these, here's a final one: If consumers don't even know all the reasons for their own behavior, why do we continue to treat them as if they do, ask them questions they cannot hope to answer accurately and rely on the results for critical decisions? ■

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