

ON-LINE RESEARCH: TEMPTING BUT DANGEROUS FOR 3-D PACKAGING

BY PETER CLARKE AND JEFF GEORGE

Imagine you're about to invest in a new car, and the only way you've been able to evaluate it is over the Internet. You've picked the color and the upholstery, completed a virtual tour of the interior, and have even taken a simulated test drive. Ready to relinquish your cash? Or do you still prefer to experience the steering wheel in your hand, smell the new car aroma and listen to the sound system while you take it for a spin?

Few people would make such an investment without first-hand observation. The same must be said for packaging. Three-dimensional items must be evaluated in reality—not virtual reality. Certainly, online research is useful for evaluating two-dimensional branding elements like graphics. But when it comes to the 3-D embodiment of a brand, nothing compares to live contextual consumer research. With millions of brand dollars at stake, decisions based on the perception of reality are too great a gamble.

Even the most detailed online packaging representations don't convey the tangible aspects of a 3-D concept. Scale and proportion are often misperceived, in spite of familiar objects that are often provided for size reference. Computer renderings of form, finishes and textures are, at best, idyllic and, at worst, misleading. In such tests, consumers are often shown packages in isolation or outside a real world store setting. These glamour shots don't portray the reality of shelf clutter, bad store lighting and other environmental "noise".

The greatest shortcoming of online testing is most likely its inability to measure functionality and handle-ability. Two-dimensional animations can hint at clever features, and sometimes actually illustrate how to use a package. But can you recall the last time you had an in-store demonstration on how to use a product? Talk about leading the consumer witness!

What about the compensatory behaviors consumers exhibit when using a package? For example, did they

thump the jar on the counter to open it? It's doubtful they'd volunteer this data during an online survey, because these are often reflex actions.

So, why the popularity of online research? One of its greatest lures is its quantitative capacity at a relatively low cost. Because of this, it is used often as an early screening tool. But the danger is that, because these surveys measure perception of use or package presentation, you achieve a quantitative measure that may point to a concept that either can not be manufactured, or won't end up as the preferred consumer choice in actuality.

For example, in a recent online study, consumers were shown concept renderings for a squeezable food product.

Online test participants selected a two-handled package because of its perceived ease of use. However, in subsequent qualitative in-home use tests, consumers rejected the package because it was actually difficult to dispense. In the end, an alternative concept was eventually launched. Yikes—that was close!

A better way to measure 3-D concepts is an incremental qualitative and quantitative evaluation via cost-effective and time-efficient prototyping

techniques. Multiple prototypes of lead concepts can be produced, and these can be tested by large numbers of consumers in retail or home-use environments. These scenarios can be authentic or staged, replicating real world conditions and environmental stimuli.

This results in accurate data based on actual consumer interaction with a real product—from on-shelf selection through disposal. Real consumers, using real packages, yielding real data: that's how you safeguard a packaging investment. **BP**

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Key Packaging Attribute	Performance Metric	How Internet Concept Testing Falls Short	Better 3D Packaging Test Methodology Options
 <p>Shelf Pop</p>	Awareness & Trial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Packaging concepts often illustrated in isolation (vs. in realistic shelf set) • 2D animation doesn't adequately capture package's look/feel (idyllic representation) • Can't match total sensory experience of retail environment which impacts package perception (sight, sound, smell, touch) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leverage fast prototyping • In store consumer ethnographies • Simulated in store & in use qualitative/quantitative • Eye tracking study • Short-duration ("in/out") test market
 <p>Functionality</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • storage • transport • dispense • open/close • protect 	Repeat Purchase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can't handle, touch or simulate use • Not evaluated in realistic usage environment • Unable to observe consumer while evaluating package to understand key drivers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leverage fast prototyping • Simulated in home qualitative • In home ethnographies • In Home Use Test