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## PACKAGING QUALITATIVE APPROACH



It is well-documented that two thirds of all purchase decisions are made at shelf, a time when consumers spend anywhere from three-five seconds – much of that time on autopilot – making their selections. With an over-proliferation of seemingly identical products to choose from in nearly any retail environment, marketers have come a long way in recognizing the power of packaging to act as a spokesperson for a brand in the “final five seconds” of marketing.



As such, marketers are demanding confirmation of effective package design more than ever. This demand for accountability from design partners has changed the way packaging alternatives are developed and evaluated. Specifically, marketers and designers have come to realize their instincts and knowledge are important, but consumers are the true judges of a package.

What a consumer does at point-of-purchase (often referred to as the “first moment of truth”) and during usage (the “second moment of truth”) is critical to understanding the strengths and limitations of a package. As such, it is imperative to include consumers in the design and development process, rather than make decisions unilaterally from intuition or “gut feel.” The earlier consumers are introduced into the process, the more effective the ultimate package will be.

Accordingly, a rigorous plan for packaging research must be developed, and should incorporate qualitative and quantitative phases. Often marketers, pressed by budget and timing constraints, will forgo qualitative sessions in favor of quantitative testing because it provides numerical evidence of the magnitude of opportunity and risk associated with a packaging change. However, there is much to be learned from observing and speaking with consumers that cannot be uncovered in quantitative research. When qualitative

research is conducted before and during the design process, it maximizes the chance that the ultimate design selections will test well quantitatively (and provides a “breadcrumb trail” of insights and information – minimizing the need to go back to square one – if they don’t).

Two particular qualitative methodologies – Ethnographic Interviews and Equity Research – serve as excellent early-stage tools that can lay the foundation for packaging success:



**Exploratory Ethnographies** with consumers allow us to identify unmet needs and stimulate creative thinking. While focus groups provide invaluable insight and have their place in the evaluation process, to truly understand consumer needs, we need to get out of the “back room” and submerge

ourselves in real-life situations – stores, homes, places of employment to name a few. This allows us to explore how a package exists in consumers everyday lives throughout the lifecycle of a product (acquisition through disposal/reuse/recycling) and gives us context on why it is good/bad or better/worse than expected or desired.

MarketVision has evolved the concept of ethnographic research, often called in-home or on-site research, into Situational Submersions™. Submersions can be conducted in almost any venue, and allow for first-hand observation and discussion rather than relying on consumer self-reporting. Submersion research yields

richer, more meaningful insights and ideas for packaging that might otherwise go uncovered – for example, senses used while interacting with a package; difficulties or distractions encountered; complaints expressed; unspoken compensatory behaviors employed; and other behaviors that are never reported because they are rote, overlooked, or unnoticed by consumers. Only through submersion can we truly understand actual consumer behavior.

Submersion research is particularly critical when developing a new packaging structure (primary or secondary). Think wide-mouth mayonnaise jars, upside-down ketchup bottles, Target’s ClearRx pill bottle, and single-serve water bottles that fit the contours of your hand and the cup holder of your car. Insights for these packaging innovations started with watching and listening to consumers struggle as they used the predecessors in their everyday environments.

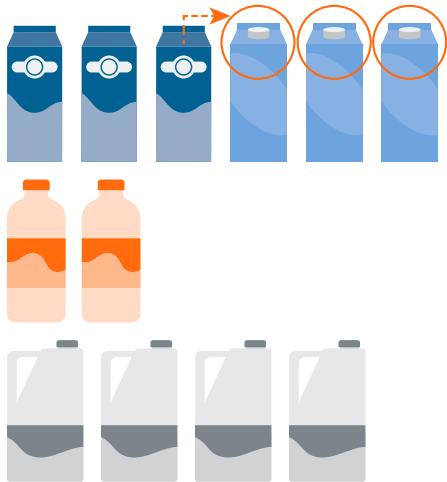
Submersion research can also generate insights that aid the development of effective packaging graphics, particularly when observing consumers as they shop. Situational Submersions™ allow us to secure important information about how consumers approach a shelf (Are they looking for a particular brand? A color they’ve come to recognize as a representation of the brand? A condition or key message?), what they notice first, what other elements get their attention and, importantly, what they overlook. But observation is not enough. Follow-up interviewing is critical, otherwise we may assume a consumer spends extra time with a package because the product is of interest when, in actuality, the product proposition or main benefit is not clearly communicated.

To be most effective, ethnographic research should be attended only by a moderator and one or two key project leaders. The intention is to avoid overwhelming participants and/or minimizing the realism of the situation.

However, learning should be shared with all stakeholders, including the manufacturer and all design and research partners. Learning should be incorporated into the design



process so a broad range of relevant potential alternatives can be evaluated in the next phase of research – typically qualitative sessions with consumers.



**Equity research** is an effective methodology to explore all aspects of existing brands and products, as well as the market forces that affect their performance. It should be used to identify opportunities for differentiation, as well as to uncover patterns of similarity that exist in a given product category. Successful equity research first identifies visual assets of a brand that resonate with consumers (since, again, they are the people who know what your brand really is). It then serves to understand how consumers view the brand and how it “stacks up” against competition.

To understand consumer interpretation of future package designs, we must first understand their current relationship with the Sbut to ask “What do consumers perceive to be the packaging equities of our brand?” Sometimes it is obvious – Kodak yellow, the Kellogg’s “K” brand mark, The Pillsbury Doughboy, the red and white Campbell’s Soup label. These visual elements are strongly entrenched in consumers minds and, if changed, will impact brand recognition and may create concern about a change in product formulation. However, other packaging elements may not be recalled as accurately, signifying opportunity to evolve the look of a package by focusing efforts on these less proprietary elements.

Because consumers often have difficulty fully and systematically verbalizing their visual associations with a brand, one of the most successful tools for understanding visual equities is a Visual Equity Drawing Technique. This top-of-mind drawing exercise seeks to understand which iconic elements of a package are “ingrained” in consumers minds. These elements likely hold specific communication/recognition cues and, therefore, must be protected (and possibly leveraged) during redesign to avoid creating consumer confusion.

Typically, consumers are provided a box of crayons or markers and unlined paper, and are asked to draw (unaided) the current product package as they recall it. They are instructed to consider colors, shapes, images, icons or any text that may exist on the package, and reflect as much detail as possible in their drawings. Consumers work independently, and once all drawings are complete, the group compares and discusses commonalities and differences. The conversation may stimulate debate or discussion that can be particularly insightful. Of course, Coca-Cola is always drawn in a red can and the Nike “swoosh” is executed almost perfectly; however, you’d be surprised at consumer interpretation of most other design elements, as well as how few are actually retained.

Equity sessions should also include exposure of a brand’s current packaging (after the drawing exercise is completed) to gauge consumer reaction to visual appeal, imagery conveyed, and communication effectiveness. If applicable, the entire product line should be presented to evaluate the design system’s ability to aid consumers with differentiation between SKUS, as well as to harmonize or unify the brand’s line. It is also logical to use Equity sessions to evaluate the packaging of several key competitive brands. This allows the brand and design teams to gain greater insight into the strengths and limitations of each, as well as explore key claims, images, and design elements used in the category.

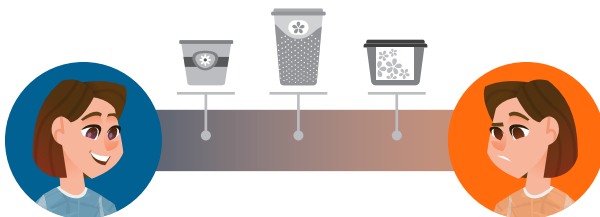
Ideally, consumers should be exposed to the current and competitive packaging in the



context of a shelf set since purchase decisions are typically made relative to the options available. This approach helps keep consumers in a shopping mindset – when consumers compare options on a side-by-side basis, they tend to over-think or focus overly on aesthetic elements.

If conducted correctly, the end-result of successful equity research should be a collection of drawings, language, and imagery that links to the brand (as well as the category). This information can serve as a roadmap, which should be referenced throughout the design process as creative solutions and recommendations are proposed.

The pre-design research outlined above lays the groundwork for effective design and development efforts. However, qualitative research can also serve as a diagnostic tool when used during the design process. Once the design team has leveraged the learning from the pre-design sessions to create a range of proposed packaging alternatives, those alternatives can be exposed to consumers for initial reaction to appeal and communication effectiveness. Qualitative research at this stage also serves to confirm marketers have not confused or offended consumers in any way, and it can yield directional information about the strongest alternatives, helping marketers narrow the number of packages they will eventually test quantitatively.



**In-Design or During Design:** Whether conducted one-on-one or in groups, qualitative research is an ideal forum for gathering reactions to various design elements and executions.

While less effective at measuring behavioral concerns associated with package development (Will it be impactful on shelf? Will it generate purchase interest?), qualitative research should be used for exploring attitudinal

concerns (Does the package change how consumers perceive the brand?, Is there any evidence of confusion, frustration or irritation?). Following are several “best practices” to keep in mind when evaluating packaging in a qualitative environment:

**1 | Test a broad range of potential designs to maximize learning.** Incorporate different graphical elements (i.e., colors, fonts, images, icons, etc.), copy messages, and, in the case of structural research, different shapes, sizes, and materials, as appropriate. Presenting consumers with unique and varying elements to react to enhances learning about what works, what doesn't work, and why. Additionally, this secures more precise direction for designers, who are charged with optimizing the lead alternatives. Further, consumers may surprise you with the degree of change they are willing to accept. We only know we've pushed them too far when we've pushed them too far. And consumers are vocal – they will express their concerns, often loudly! Research is intended to help you uncover these boundaries and limitations, defining the acceptable latitude for change. So go wild – you might find your consumers are more open to innovative thinking than you expect!

**2 | Be visual!** Consumers spend only a short time at shelf. Information is acquired through color, shape, icons, symbols, and pictures to a much greater degree than from text-based messages. And studies have shown more messages aren't necessarily better – in fact, the more “visual noise” there is on a package, the less likely any single message is getting through. This isn't to say that messaging is not important, of course it is. But it must be quick, clear, and immediately intuitive. The overall look and feel of the package is much more important to closing the sale.

**3 | Evaluate in the context of a package.** Reviewing elements in isolation will generate response, but the accuracy of this response is questionable. Reactions to these elements may change significantly once viewed in context with the rest of the package – and with competitive packaging. White is a good example. When reviewing color palettes in isolation, white may generate associations with purity, cleanliness, and



freshness. These attributes may be in line with your brand strategy, and may seem to be an effective basis for design work. However, new proposed packages that incorporate this “whiteness may take on a stark, bland look that denigrates perceptions of product quality. Additionally, when placed next to competitive product, the white in your package may be associated with lower-end store brands, reinforcing negative quality perceptions. Or it may be the predominate color in the category making you a “me too” brand. What was intended to look clean and crisp may, in the big picture, fail to achieve your objectives and possibly set you behind in time, budget, and resources.

**4** **Show proposed packaging among competition.** While a qualitative environment will not accurately gauge shelf impact (a quantitative study is required), it can provide directional information on the visual distinctiveness of a proposed design, as well as elicit insight into the strengths and limitations of other packaging in the category. By introducing a new package in the context of a shelf set, we can observe how people react to it (Do they notice it? Does it influence their perceptions? Do they exhibit purchase interest?). Additionally, by keeping consumers focused on the product and the way they shop, they are more likely to provide insights that allow us to create positive change for their shopping experience. Otherwise, we risk eliciting “art director” critiques of the use of a sans-serif font or the amount of white space on a label, or leading consumers to focus overly on aesthetics and/or “over-think” their meaning.

**5** It’s not about picking a favorite. While appeal is important to the success of any package, appeal should not be the sole criteria on which a package is evaluated. Not surprisingly, new, modern, more attractive designs are often preferred over current packaging. However, attractive and preferred does not necessarily equate to effective. Packaging is a vehicle through which you communicate your message to consumers. Its design must create the desired brand imagery (i.e., what message does it suggest about my product/about the brand?), as well as communicate relevant and intended messages. A package also serves

a functional role of differentiating products in a product line, and helping your brand stand apart from competition. For a package to be truly effective, it must be in line with brand strategy and its key elements must work together to convey the brand’s positioning. However, in today’s cluttered environment, it must do so telegraphically, while encouraging interest and appeal. Therefore, the goal of your qualitative research should not be to find the preferred design; rather it should be to eliminate any designs that fail to meet a brand’s communication objectives so only the strongest alternatives will be optimized for further quantitative testing. Package design (or re-design) represents a potentially significant investment of time and resources and a potential risk, especially for the re-design of successful and well-established brands. While a new packaging system can enhance shelf visibility and shop-ability, and may directly increase purchases, a misguided change may jeopardize sales by confusing shoppers and/or detracting from brand imagery and product perceptions. Given the detrimental effects a “packaging change gone wrong” can have on a brand and product, not to mention timelines and budgets, companies that plan ahead and invest in a disciplined multi-phased research approach will reap the benefits.

