



Projectives set the stage for fresher consumer insights

As marketers, we are well aware of the power of perception. But, as market researchers, how do we tap into these perceptions? How do we accurately assess them so that we can leverage future management decisions? One way to uncover consumer perceptions - the real emotions that shape brand relationships and drive purchase behavior - is the use of projective techniques in focus groups.

Our left-brains control logic, analysis, science, mathematics and language. Our right-brains control intuition, creativity, imagination, art and music. Dialogue is left-brained and therefore controlled by logic, while perceptions are governed by our right-brains. Therefore, to tap perceptions of importance to marketers, we must use right-brained techniques like projectives.

Skilled moderators are adept at interpreting consumer behavior, understanding group dynamics, leading active discussions and using projective techniques. In a group that relies solely on structured dialogue,

respondents can become too analytical or they may be unable to articulate their deep-seated opinions and feelings. One very effective method of helping respondents verbalize their subconscious is projective exercises.

Projective exercises can elicit in-depth feedback, well above and beyond rational, top-of-mind answers. These techniques reveal respondent attitudes and better engage their thinking and concentration. Involving respondents in such projective exercises will bring forth issues and opinions that they may not otherwise be able to express or be aware of. Projectives allow market researchers to effectively garner input from all the senses, thus painting rich consumer profiles.

Virtually all focus groups can benefit from at least one projective exercise. Depending upon research objectives, many focus groups can successfully employ more. Projectives can be designed as individual, group or team exercises.

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Projective techniques must be relevant to the research topic and objectives, as well as the respondent base. Since exercises most often need to be issue-centric, some degree of customization is usually necessary.

A seasoned focus group moderator has dozens of projective techniques in her toolkit. Here are three of my favorites:

- *Picture this, picture that*

"Picture this picture that" is valuable for revealing imagery and emotional associations. This technique involves pre-selecting about 50 different images that represent a wide range of possible emotions. Moderators should choose rich graphics and avoid including any that are directly related to the category (e.g., don't include engagement ring advertisements if researching

online dating). Respondents are asked to select a picture that best says how they feel when buying Brand X, how they feel when using Brand Y, etc.

Pictures become metaphors respondents can use to describe their perceptions. These picture metaphors allow them to think more broadly, frame their ideas and overcome their reticence.

- *Sort me up*

“Sort me up” is especially useful in consumer packaged good research to better understand product segmentation and the purchase decision hierarchy. This exercise involves respondents being presented with a representative sample of products from within the study category and asked to work together as a team to sort the products into groups that make sense to them. Respondents are encouraged to create as many product groups as they see fit and asked to give each group a name that

describes why those items have been placed together.

The visual stimulation, combined with the physical activity of moving products, generates more thorough thinking. Additionally, the active discussion among respondents provides key insights into the segmentation process, thus increasing understanding of what consumers consider while reviewing products in a specific category.

- *Once upon a story*

“Once upon a story” is especially valuable for gathering and understanding attitudes and imagery cues. The moderator describes a setting or situation and then asks respondents to tell a story related to the scenario. For example, if a research goal is to better understand the perceived image of a specific brand, the moderator could present the following: “Let’s pretend you’re in the supermarket. The woman next to you has Brand X in her cart. Tell me about

that woman. What else does she have in her cart? How is she dressed? Where does she live? What does her house look like – inside and outside? What kind of car does she drive?”

The process of creating a story around a brand, in this example revealing perceived personality cues, encourages respondents to think about the brand in a different way, thus expressing images and biases which their left-brains may be unaware of.

Deeper understanding

If you would like to garner fresher insights and increased learning from your next focus group project, add projective exercises to your discussion guide. You’ll be sure to achieve a deeper understanding about your target. While it is more work to prepare and analyze the results, the richness of emotions, perceptions, imagery and biases uncovered are definitely worth the extra effort. | [Q](#)