



engage research

POINTS OF VIEW

Product testing

1. When is blind product testing a good idea?

There is considerable evidence that awareness of the brand will impact on the product experience. The same product tested under different brands or even under different positionings with the same brand may, and often is, rated differently by the respondent. This is because the consumers are in effect responding to the whole package of brand, positioning and product. The brand and product sets up a number of expectations that may or may not be met.

This would argue that it is better to test products in their appropriate brand and positioning context. However, there are situations when blind testing is more relevant - precisely because the objective is to isolate the product experience from other elements of the mix. For example, the client company may want to make a product superiority claim. In this case the test design might involve monadic testing of different blind products followed by blind testing of an alternative product and a forced preference. Analysis then compares the monadic ratings and the forced preference (taking into account order effects). This is particularly useful in establishing product superiority for a challenger brand to support a communication claim (assuming it wins of course!) The same test conducted branded may give a different result due to the influence of the brand and this dilutes a potential strong product based claim.

2. How many products can respondents reasonably test (food or drink)?

In most consumption situations respondents would be eating or drinking a single variant of a product (e.g. brand of drink, snack, food). Therefore the purest test design replicates this, i.e. they only test one product. Indeed, you may get the respondent to test the same product over an extended period e.g. an extended beer drinking test, to see how test delivery alters over time.

However, where there are multiple products to research there may be a strong efficiency / cost argument for testing more than one product with the same person. There may also be situations where a preference between products is required.

As a guide, it may be acceptable to test two or even three products with consumers (N.B. expert tasting panels are not being considered here). However, there are a number of issues to consider;

Order effects i.e. the ratings of one product being influenced by the preceding product(s). These potentially become more extreme with increased variation between the tested products e.g. testing a spicy product and a un-spiced product

Quantities tested. If two or three products are tested, how much of each is it realistic for each respondent to consume? Is this enough to give to provide a decent rating?

Time elapsed between products tested. A longer gap (and appropriate palate cleansing) between products tested is likely to improve the quality of ratings on each product. However, it may make preference questions less accurate and increase the overall length of the interview (and thus cost)

All these issues need to be considered in the context of the objectives and the budget.

3. Can "ordinary" respondents give useful feedback on taste criteria?

There is a school of thought that says consumers can tell you what they like or don't like but are poor at telling you why. We don't believe this is entirely true. We believe

that "ordinary" consumers can provide useful feedback on taste criteria provided the correct questions are asked and analysed!

It is usually possible to identify individual areas that are problems (e.g. a poor rating combined with a clear skew, such as a poor rating on strength of chilli and a strong skew toward "too much chilli"). This becomes more tricky when a number of taste elements are acting in combination e.g. stronger tastes needing to be counter-balanced by more sweetness, alcohol...etc.

The key thing here is to be smart in how you put together your product evaluation questions and how you analyse them from a statistical point of view. You need to try to understand the extent to which individual elements impact overall liking and equally, how individual elements impact other elements of product composition so that R&D know that from a consumer perspective a) where to put their focus i.e. on this things that have more of an impact on overall liking and b) inter-relationship of product elements e.g. changing the intensity of 'orangey' will impact on perceptions of sweetness. In order to achieve this, you need input from R&D very early on in the process.

The bottom line is that consumers can feedback very well providing you are asking the right things and giving the right words/phrases to let them feedback accurately and usefully to you! R&D can be invaluable in sense checking that what you are asking respondents to do will yield the feedback they need to optimise products.

4. Can 2 or 3 markets give a representative picture of Europe?!

The simple answer is no of course not!

However, there are situations where the budget will only allow research to be conducted in a limited number of countries. Also there be some cultural or political pressures to spread research outside the 'big 3 or 4' markets.

So which countries should you choose?

Population coverage should be a factor. Between them, Germany, France, UK and Italy account for c. 260m people. The next largest countries in population terms are Spain (42m) and then a big drop down to the Netherlands

(16m). In fact, the big 4 account for c. 65% of the total 'western' Europe population. So if general coverage is the issue, the logic suggests it is better to focus on the big markets and extrapolate if necessary. Of course, the relative size of different categories and brands will not follow population size closely in many cases.

Another way of looking at this is whether certain countries are culturally similar to each other. Thus, we could hypothesise that there would be sufficient behavioural overlap to assume that responses in one market could be reasonably extrapolated to another. There is also the consideration of how people respond to research questions such as scales (e.g. polarising responses, high scoring, low scoring).

Very broadly, there are some natural groupings of countries that are similar in behavioural or attitudinal terms, and different to other groupings. In western Europe there is a Southern group (e.g. Italy, Spain, Portugal) and a Northern group (e.g. Germany, Netherlands, UK, Denmark). Interestingly, France seems to be somewhere between the two! So, for example, a 3 country strategy might involve Germany or UK, France and Italy or Spain. Again of course, this does not take account of category and brand history.

Our experience suggests that a single country is not a particularly good proxy for Scandinavia as a whole (e.g. extrapolating from say Sweden).

In Central & Eastern Europe the situation is changing fast. Certainly in population terms Poland is the biggest player in Central Europe, so applying the logic above it would be the simple choice if only one country could be researched.