

***The bottom line?*** Organizations are using perceived quality research to learn what quality means in the minds of their target consumers. Why? To measure whether their products have achieved a positive quality perception in the marketplace. And if the products don't have a positive perception, organizations are using that information to design products that hit their quality targets.

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## Perception is Everything

### Defining and Measuring Quality through Perceived Design Quality Research

It is often said that “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” What may be beautiful to one individual may be, well, just plain ugly to another. This can be especially true in the art world where different art styles and mediums often segment people into true genre lovers. For example, one individual might love the boxy look of cubism paintings, but hate the look of blended-dot impressionist paintings. And it is this perceived look that determines, in the end, what art pieces consumers end up purchasing.

Consumers think of the quality of a product in exactly the same way. Like it or not, product quality can be considered “in the mind of the beholder.” Every product has a certain level of quality – how it looks, how it feels, how it smells, how it sounds and even how it tastes. And because this level of quality is inherent in consumers’ minds, it really isn’t *true* product quality per se. It is *perceived* product quality. So how does an organization know if their product is high quality or low quality in the minds of consumers? They do more than just ask them ... they watch them and ask them ... very, very carefully.

#### **Difficult to Put into Words**

Think about it. What is quality? How would you define it?

Quality is highly subjective. Ask 10 different consumers what the word quality means and you will more than likely get 10 different answers. Everything that falls within a consumer’s senses contributes to their perception of quality: sight, sound, smell, hearing, taste. And it’s different for everyone. How do you measure how much quality a product has when consumers “know quality when they see it?”

As it turns out, consumers are actually very good at judging whether something is of good quality or bad quality, or deciding that one product is of higher quality than another. However, explaining why one product is higher quality than another presents somewhat of a challenge. Investigative methods that not only ask consumers what they are thinking but actually observe their actions help organizations understand how consumers make quality judgments.

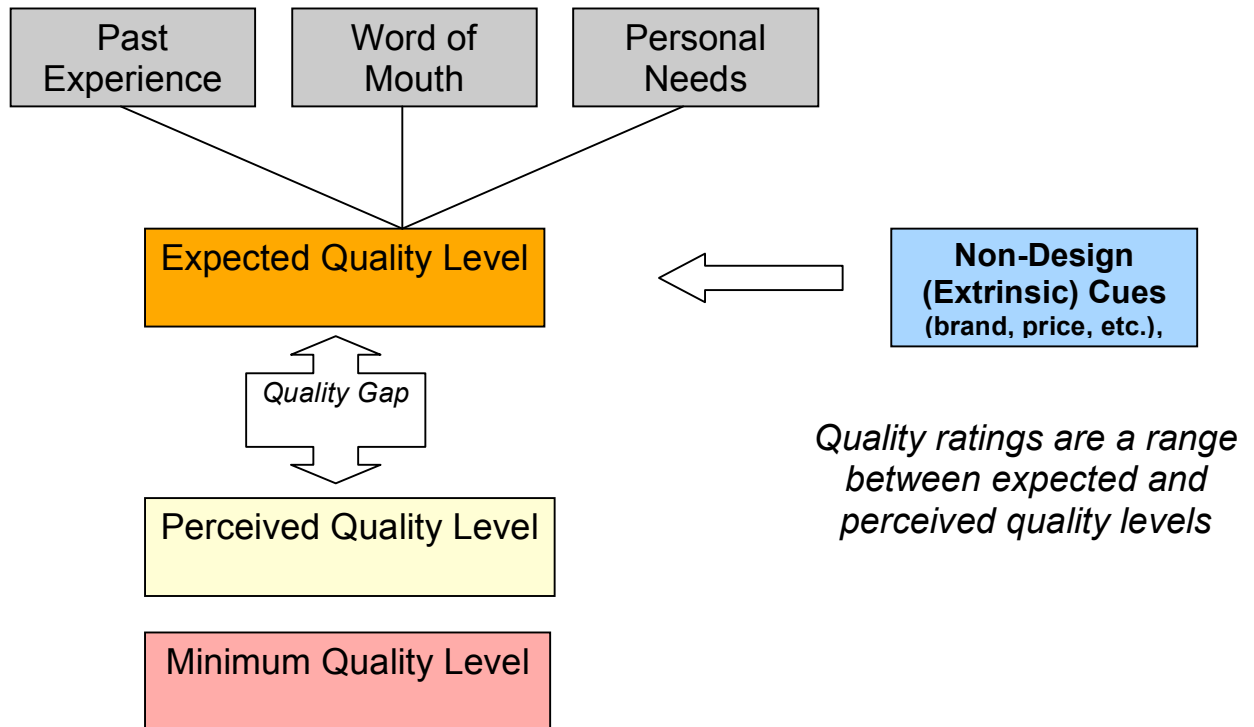
*“Quality has to be caused, not controlled.”*

**- Phil Crosby**

## Great Expectations

Organizations have taken different approaches to understanding and defining quality over the years. Most have taken a value-based viewpoint of quality. They design products with price in mind – specifically how much product “excellence” a consumer can expect to get for a specific cost level. And that viewpoint is driven, in the end, by the consumer. Consumers have a different set of expectations for a quality dishwasher that costs \$300 versus one that costs \$2,200. For \$2,200 one might expect the appliance to be larger in size, be made of stainless steel material and offer a wide range of wash cycles. For \$300, consumers would probably expect a wash n’ go appliance – small interior, plastic materials and “on,” “wash” and “off” buttons. They expect this regardless of the brand name.

But what happens when these expectations do not match perception? What happens when consumers expect an appliance to have a certain quality level, based on experience or word of mouth, but they experience a different quality level? If you’ve exceeded those expectations, you have achieved “customer delight.” If you have a product that rates below a consumer’s expectations of quality, you have one dissatisfied customer – a customer that recognizes a gap in product quality – a gap of what should be, but isn’t. Measuring whether there is gap in quality between expectations and perceptions is an important step in determining whether your product has delighted or dissatisfied its target audience. The next step is to find a methodology that uncovers specific consumer-directed design element changes – changes that help design products that lessen that quality gap.



\* A. Parasuraman, Reflections on Gaining Competitive Advantage through Customer Value; Journal of Academy of Marketing Science, 2002

## **Other Approaches to Defining Quality**

Although the value-based viewpoint of quality has served organizations well, it only provides a piece of the puzzle. Some organizations define quality with a product-based viewpoint. This viewpoint suggests that quality is based on the amount of some desirable product component or attribute – the more the better. For example, appliances made of the greatest amount of stainless steel components are thought of as higher quality than those made mostly of plastic.

Some organizations take a manufacturing-based viewpoint. This is a very traditional approach that considers the extent to which a product conforms to established design requirements and specifications. For example, organizations often look at defect rates and such to determine overall product quality.

Because many organization's product development goals insist that consumer attitudes toward quality be gathered to inform the design and development of products, organizations are adopting a more consumer-centric quality viewpoint. A user-based definition considers a product's quality in terms of its suitability or fitness for use. For example, is a product's entire user experience consistent, appropriate and positive whether they are purchasing it, pressing buttons, opening doors or grasping handles? While the other quality viewpoints are important to consider, integrating the user-based and value-based quality viewpoints allows designers to obtain the maximum amount of information they need to design quality products.

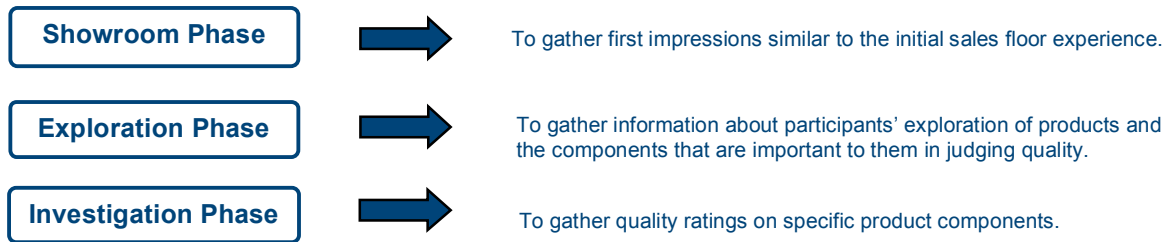
## **Perceived Design Quality: A Leading Research Concept**

Perceived Design Quality Method (PDQ) is one methodology that forward-thinking organizations are using to investigate and identify useful, competitor-aware insights about consumers' quality perceptions. PDQ, adapted from SEQUAM (Sensorial Quality Assessment Method), is a sensorial research approach that combines interviewing, ratings and observational research methodologies to obtain useful, measurable design input to aid in the development and marketing of products.

The very power of this methodology comes in the combination of the triad of methodologies. The interviewing component of the methodology tells product designers what consumers are thinking. The rating component of the methodology gives statistical validation of what consumers are thinking. The observational component confirms the other two in that it actually shows what consumers are doing with the product, not just what they think about it.

PDQ studies seek to understand consumers' perceptions and judgments of quality and how they develop through the senses of sight, touch and sound. But as we well know, perceptions are not static. These studies also seek to understand how perceptions may change as a result of continued and more in-depth product interaction. The methodology calls for walking participants through three distinct phases of product introduction, from a purely visual inspection to unstructured product exploration to directed product interaction. All of this is done without the consumer's knowledge of the product's price, brand or channel distribution to truly get at the products *innate*

quality level. As discussed earlier, those extrinsic cues can only add or detract from the already established intrinsic quality level.



The central questions answered by the research design method include:

- How does each product appeal to consumers when they are able to view the products?
- What is the perceived quality level for the product and competitor products?
  - When consumers are only able to view the products?
  - After consumers are able to freely interact with the products?
  - After consumers are guided component-by-component through an interaction with the products?
- What product components influence consumers' perceptions of quality?
- What are the perceived quality ratings for each product component?
- What comments did participants offer for rating the product components as they did and what are the related physical design parameters?

Consumers *are* able to verbalize their perceptions of innate quality of a product and its specific components – regardless of brand name knowledge. In fact, brand names either add to the quality perception if the experience is positive, or can end up destroying it if the experience is negative. Leading research methodologies such as those in the PDQ toolbox allow organizations to measure a product's innate quality based on consumer use and feedback. And measuring a product's excellence and fitness for use enables product design teams to create new quality products and redesign existing products that exceed consumer quality perceptions. After all, in the marketplace, consumer perceptions are everything.

## About the Author

Andrew Zernia is a research consultant at Marketing Partners, Inc. His areas of interest and experience include product research, user-centered design and usability testing. He also has developed and executed both quantitative and qualitative product satisfaction, customer loyalty, association, health care, information technology and manufacturing industry studies. Methods for conducting research include in-depth, one-on-one interviews, web, mail, e-mail, fax and telephone. Andy holds a master's degree in business administration from DeVry University's Keller Graduate School of Management.

Marketing Partners, Inc., is a research, strategy and business services organization serving consumer packaged goods, consumer durables, associations and health care clients across the United States. The firm's focus is on business improvement, especially in the areas of:

- Product Value Creation, which includes using research to create market-driven products and processes designed to brand organizations and sustain customer and member loyalty; and
- Organizational Advancement, which views the organization itself as the product and focuses on developing both strategy and organizational capabilities including custom-designed strategic and breakthrough planning processes.

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