

The bottom line? Organizations are using sensorial research to maintain that “positive space in the mind of the consumer” by managing Perceived Design Quality before engaging in marketing communications.

Watching Your PDQ's

Using Sensorial Research to Uncover Perceived Design Quality

Ahhh...that new car smell...the smooth, slightly indented finger grips on the steering wheel...the soft, yet secure “slub bump” door closing sound and the sleek-looking, curved dashboard all say that this car you’re considering as your next new car is quality.

And its no accident that the look, feel, sound and even smell of the car has a high perceived design quality.

For years, car makers have leveraged what other industries are just now coming to understand: consumers evaluate a brand using *all* their five senses. What they found is that the more senses you can “delight,” the greater the ability you have to strike that emotional cord that differentiates your brand in today’s marketplace.

But it’s not intuitive. Consumers themselves are sometimes unaware they are evaluating brands with all of their senses – even ones not necessarily central to the performance of the brand. That new car smell? There is no such thing. It is artificially created in a lab and factory installed with aerosol cans, yet it is what most new car owners say is one of the most gratifying aspects of purchasing a new car.

So what does smell have to do with the main function of a car: the ability to transport the user from place to place? Nothing...but it “delights” consumers and ultimately, sells cars.

“Perfect visuals. Perfect audio. This is where the brand-building process traditionally stops. It stops despite the fact that a total sensory experience would at least double, if not triple, the consumer’s ability to memorize the brand.”

- Martin Lindstrom
Brand Sense, 2005

Sense and Sensibility

Car manufacturers are acutely aware of their perceived design quality. They’ve used audio, visual, tactile and olfactory consumer sensory research input to assist designers in designing brands that are considered high quality – yet are distinct from each other. That is how they have advanced knowledge of their brand beyond traditional sight-sense data. That is how they know about new-car smells.

Perceived design quality is defined as consumer's judgment about a product's overall excellence or superiority. But if we think of consumers judging products by their individual components – moving doors, feeling fabric, gripping knobs, hearing beeps, smelling aromas, seeing light, judging weight – the question becomes not how superior your product is overall, but how superior is each product component.

Finding out that one of your product's components – say door movement – is not superior in quality to competitors might not seem like a deal breaker. After all, your product may be made up of as many as 10-15 main components that all must be evaluated. And that may be true, unless consumers feel moving a door accounts for about 60% of their product evaluation, or purchase intent, while they are at the store.

So if a component hasn't been judged superior by consumers, how does an organization design it to be superior in quality?

The Sound of Silence

Car manufacturers didn't stumble upon the fact that their specific new-car smell was pleasing to consumers or that the "slub bump" of the door closing sound was thought to be a higher quality sound. For years, car manufacturers have conducted sensory research with consumers to determine what door closing sound was considered "quality" and have designed their car doors accordingly. They found consumers think a hollow, tinny, high frequency door closing sound is lower quality than a bumping sound. They also found that adding a low-frequency vibration to the door itself signaled even higher quality.

Some Japanese manufacturers actually formed units whose sole responsibility was to uncover and design a quality, branded car sound. Given today's economic model of tight budgets and even tighter margins, many organizations do not have the resources to establish a dedicated design group to uncover such things as its product sound quality. But it shouldn't exclude forward-thinking organizations from using existing qualitative and quantitative research techniques to uncover consumers' perceived design quality of their product using more than just the sense of sight.

Eyes Wide Shut

We've all sat in traditional focus groups or one-on-one interviews where the moderator has asked consumers to rate a particular product, discuss what they like and dislike about it and whether they would purchase it or not. And almost all of it is done visually.

But evaluating products and providing useful design feedback by sight alone can be misleading.

Case in point: We were involved in a study where a young woman was evaluating a product. To the moderator's chagrin, she insisted on touching the knobs. She felt the texture of the knob, gripped it in her hand and even turned it. She jumped back in fright as it made a slight screeching sound. When finally asked what she thought of

the knobs, she felt they looked stunning, heavy duty and high quality. The moderator could almost hear a collective sigh of relief from the back room.

But before the moderator could move on, she interrupted him; saying that although it looked nice and heavy like a stainless steel knob, she felt “cheated” to find out it was indeed plastic. Not only that, but she felt the turning of the knob was not smooth like it should be. After all, she thought everyone – the backroom included – was able to hear the plastic on metal scraping sound. To her that wasn’t quality...and it wasn’t purchasable either.

In this instance, sight, touch and sound all worked together to provide the consumer with information she used to evaluate the product. And it was this feedback that really helped the observers design a higher-quality product.

“It is estimated that 40 percent of the world’s Fortune 500 brands will include a sensory building strategy in their marketing plan by the end of 2006. Quite simply, their survival will depend on it. If brands want to build and maintain future loyalty, they will have to establish a strategy that appeals to all our senses. This is a fact that no serious brand builder can ignore.”

- Martin Lindstrom
Brand Sense, 2005

A Simple Exercise

How do consumers feel about your brand compared to competitor brands? A well-tuned organization already knows the answer to that and continually monitors it.

But take away the *extrinsic cues* that most marketers think define your brand, such as brand name, price point, point-of-purchase materials, store environment and sales representatives. What are you left with? Your product.

Without any help from marketers, your product is just as alone as the day it was born. Unable to use extrinsic clues as a crutch, consumers turn toward *intrinsic cues* to determine product quality. These are cues that are specific to components of the physical product, such as the feel and sound when turning the knobs, the feel of pressing the buttons, the intuitiveness of the screens, the feel of the shelves, the sound of the doors, etc. And consumers use *all* of their senses to evaluate these cues.

We were involved in a brand-blind sensorial research study where one particular consumer indicated she only bought top of the line products. Throughout the study, she consistently criticized one particular product with words like “cheap looking,” “plasticky,” “boxy,” “not a firm enough grip” and “horrible screeching sounds.” Upon learning at the end of the study that the product she berated was indeed a top-of-the-line brand, she insisted she was “disappointed in the brand’s quality,” and that she “still wouldn’t buy it.”

So, how would consumers feel, using all of their senses, about the quality of your brand and its specific components compared to competitors? How useful would your organization find information regarding how consumers view just the pure quality of your product and its components?

Where do you begin?

Sensorial brand research delivers useful, competitor-aware, quality-based design insights and learning. To become fully aware of their brand, it is essential that organizations:

- Uncover the role senses play in the evaluation of your brand;
- Learn what intrinsic cues lead consumers to view a product as having a high perceived design quality; and
- Obtain measurable parameters that can be used in product development to improve quality perception.