The positive impact of utilizing qualitative consumer interface throughout development

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Situation

The recognition of sensory science as a key tool in guiding the product design and development has resulted in the broad acceptance of a consumer centric approach. The next level of the consumer centric model is consumer integrated development. Consumer integrated design and development incorporates the direct interface between product developer/consumer. Integrating the consumer throughout the development process allows learning to be brought into real time and higher levels in the technical communities' understanding of the product/consumer interaction.

Through qualitative interface, interpretation of product or concept elements can be questioned, clarified, modified and/or confirmed without traditional filters. This integrated understanding allows the next phase of work to be initiated with a greater level of holistic insight resulting in a better alignment of the development path and further research activities.



Key Elements of Consumer Interface

The methods and approaches for creating the interface between product developers and consumers is rooted in historical methods of qualitative research yet brings the consumer in as an active participant. Like any research, the objective and knowledge to be gained should guide the selection of approach. Product Dynamics has identified additional factors important for success with an active consumer.

• Clearly articulated the questions and gaps in knowledge to be explored. Generate with team to provide ability to organize and structure session. Obtain team agreement on all aspects.

• Recruit consumers that are engaged and passionate about the territory. This allows for ability to relate experiences, articulate observations and form perspective and opinions.

• Recognize consumer limitations exist and design exercises to maximize ability to move beyond their limitations – short, energized activities; diversity in areas of exploration; allow for reaction and relating an experience.

• Assure stimulus covers exploration space without overwhelming participants. Technically developed yet guided by sensory experts.

• Listen with a holistic ear. Actions, expressions and words can clue in the literal and non-literal translation.

Areas of Applications

Product Dynamics has been developing and utilizing integrated techniques to expand developers' involvement with consumers at all stages of the development process. Three of stages exhibiting high levels of success with integrated consumer work have been product definition, product design/early formulation and quality attribute definition.

• Product Definition

Active interface with consumers on interpretation of concept elements and descriptors.
Example: Define "a healthful combination", "powerful", "balanced" snack.
Approach: Presentation of protocepts representing a range of interpretations of concept elements. Engagement of consumers to segment, transform with developers' help and align terms.
Benefit: Consumer and team alignment on element definition allowing reduced time to initial prototypes.

• Product Design

Exploring and forming acceptable ranges within the product space. Checking manifestations of product element definitions. Answering what is enough, what is too much and why.
Example: Institutional breakfast alternatives
Approaches: Exposure to prototypes and key ingredient elements and allow consumers to build acceptable alternatives. Pairing consumer with developer to complete product. Reaction to a range of a single attribute.
Benefit: Confidence in permissible space for targeted product development; narrowing of areas critical to product optimization study.



• Quality Attribute Definition

Involvement of the consumer to establish and/or confirm priorities in quality attributes or defects.
Example: Yogurt – what are the defining defects
Approach: Using a combination of conjoint principles and "thin slicing" cognitive abilities to narrow down those defects affecting the initial consumer response.
Benefit: Greater understanding of defects which can influence initial impression and within what range impression is impacted. Focuses quantitative testing.

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