Avoidable Mistakes in New Product Exploration

by Phil Glowatz

Many new products fail because avoidable mistakes are made back in the concept evaluation stage, when they are being shown to consumers in focus groups. This results in some ideas proceeding to development when they should be dropped, and in others moving forward without a full assessment and fine-tuning of their benefits and features.

Here are three common mistakes:

Mistake 1: Biasing respondents before they react to your concepts.

This is perhaps the most common mistake we have seen in qualitative new product work.

In the typical scenario, the moderator leads a 20 – 40 minute discussion of product category usage, problems and needs. Then, after that "warm up" time, the moderator introduces new product concepts to the group.

Conducting the discussion in this order can bias respondents in two significant ways:

1) **Respondents become pre-sold to certain concepts** through the general category discussion, when they commit themselves, in effect, to "their" problems. Then, when concepts that address those problems are shown, respondents almost cannot help but like them.

2) **Respondents become "educated" to the category** as they listen to others. Thus, when the concepts are shown, they are thinking about the product category in ways, and to a depth, they normally would not.

In both cases, reactions to the concepts are influenced. You would never proceed in this manner in a quantitative test, and it is no less flawed in a qualitative forum.

Avoid biasing your audience; discuss the product category as part of, or after, the concept exploration.

Mistake 2: Counting all "votes" the same.

The moderator shows a new product concept to the group, asks who wants to buy it, and six of the eight hands go up.

The mistake is in believing each hand expresses the same degree of purchase interest. They do not!

In a qualitative research setting it is important to differentiate the degree of enthusiasm that consumers have for your ideas by looking beyond the mere fact they raise their hands. For instance, the ways in which hands are raised are telling indicators of respondents' true levels of interest:

> **The Slow Hand** takes its time going up, or goes up only after several others have been raised. This usually means commitment to the product is minimal, or has been affected by other participants ("I see other hands going up, so I'll raise mine, too.").
>
> **The Twitchy Hand** rotates back and forth at the wrist as it is being raised--often slowly--so chances are this consumer really means, "I'm not sure."
>
> **The Fast Hand** shoots up quickly, which can indicate a degree of enthusiasm for the product. Fast Hands are one of the types of positive responses you have to see across several groups before you can judge a concept truly well-received.

Rather than just counting the votes, focus on assessing the level of enthusiasm that exists for your concept.

Mistake 3: Taking "yes" for an answer.

When most or all of the respondents in a group say they want your new product, do not stop there and assume that you have a winner. Near-unanimous purchase interest simply doesn't exist in the real world. Indeed, respondents can be promiscuous in "voting" for concepts, because no money is changing hands, thus no real commitment is necessary.

So, probe beyond the positive reaction. Ask if respondents are sure they want your product, and listen for a convincing reason why. If the product is somewhat similar to others, why do they need it, and what is its key benefit relative to other choices?

Reasons for purchase interest must be challenged. This may make the marketing and research managers feel uneasy in the viewing room, but they would feel even worse if a so-so product flopped in the marketplace.