

The seven golden rules of styling/design research

By John S. Gongos

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After seeing tremendous quality improvements in many products during the 1980s and 1990s, companies are finding it increasingly difficult to differentiate their offerings. Unable to do so through superior quality, many companies have turned to styling and design. Not only do you see a tremendous focus on styling/design in automobiles, boats and athletic shoes, but traditionally functional products such as personal computers, office products, appliances and golf clubs are now also turning to

styling to set themselves apart.

Marketing research has played a critical role in developing more creative and expressive designs in many of these industries. When conducted effectively, marketing research can provide valuable feedback that allows designers to maximize their creative talents for their customers. When not conducted effectively, it can stifle the designers' creativity and create conflict between designers and marketing management.

Knowing that marketing research can make or break the design process, we recommend that you follow our seven golden rules of styling research.

1. Front-load the research.

Many companies wait until they

have designs formulated, and then rely on research to sort out the good from the bad. Under this scenario, designers have little or no information to aid them when creating a new design and, as a result, have a much lower probability of connecting with the customer.

A more logical approach is to give the designer as much information about customers and their tastes prior to even beginning the design process. The following research steps can give the designers valuable insight early in the process and greatly increase the probability of connecting with the target market.

- Segmentation — determine the target market that the design is intended for.
- Gather product needs — under-

stand the target market's functional requirements.

- Gather emotional needs — understand the emotional connections consumers have with the product and what excites them.

- Study their reactions to parallel products — understand what shapes and images in other products connect with their tastes

2. Avoid using research as a scorecard to pick the winner.

When research is used as a scorecard to critique a set of designs in order to pick a winner, designers quickly become defensive and many times ignore the research. The purpose of conducting research should not be to pick a winner, but rather to provide the most useful information to designers to help them finish the process with a winning design.

Designers are typically very talented and creative people (or they would not be in the position they are). As talented as they may be, however, they are not mind-readers (hence the need for research). A five-year-old's perceptions "fun" are probably different than those of the 38-year-old designer who is trying to design a fun-looking stapler for kids. A 45-year-old man living in Indiana whose first car was a '65 Mustang may have a different perception of what "retro" looks like (in a 2003 Mustang) than the young designer who lives in Los Angeles. A landscape company owner may have a different perception of what makes a piece of lawn equipment look rugged than a designer in the studio.

What research should do is align the designer's perceptions with those of his or her customer. By learning as much up front about the consumers and then observing their reactions to various styling alternatives, designers can create a knowledge base that allows them to see the product through their customers' eyes. At that point, they can use their creative talents in a direction that will connect

with their customers.

3. Don't rely only on qualitative research.

To avoid making the previous mistake (using research as a scorecard), a trend has developed among many companies to conduct only qualitative research. Designers tend to like this trend since their designs are not graded by the respondents. However, the research tends to be much less efficient if only qualitative data is gathered, providing less value for the money spent.

In most cases, the best strategy is to gather both quantitative and qualitative data.

The quantitative data should explain how respondents perceive the designs (i.e., modern, rugged, classy, functional, boring). The qualitative data should explain why they perceive it that way and what specifically (in the design) makes them feel that way.

The qualitative research is the key to developing a knowledge base that designers can utilize, not only in developing the current design, but also future design changes. If the designer already knows that pickup truck owners want a strong-looking truck, then the moderator can explore which shapes and lines give the perception of strength. By having quantitative data already gathered (and knowing which designs are perceived as being strong or weak), the moderator can be much more efficient in his or her quest to understand the whys and whats.

4. Don't rely only on quantitative research.

Relying only on quantitative data will also limit the usefulness of the research and has several drawbacks.

While the quantitative data will provide an accurate measure of respondents' perception of a design, it will not explain why respondents feel the way they do or what part of the design makes them feel that way.

As a result, if the designer wants to make an adjustment in an attempt to capture more "fun" in the stapler design, he or she really does not know where to start. At this point, it becomes trial and error, with a lot of wasted energy.

Quantitative data can tell you if a lawn mower design is perceived to be rugged, but it does not explain whether it is rugged in a positive sense or a negative sense. Qualitative probing helps explain which design cues are viewed positively and which are viewed negatively.

Relying only on quantitative data increases the probability that the research will be used as a scorecard rather than a learning tool for the designers.

5. Choose the comparative set wisely (context effect).

The comparison set in which a new design is tested has a strong effect on the overall acceptance of that design. This is particularly true when testing unique designs that are targeted to be styling leaders in the future. We refer to this phenomenon as the context effect and feel it should be seriously considered when developing the initial marketing research plan.

For example, if testing a futuristic and controversial pickup truck design that is targeted for 2003, you may get different results depending on whether respondents evaluate it along with three current pickup models versus testing it along with three other futuristic designs. Respondents feel much more comfortable viewing today's designs and tend to react negatively to a design that is so different that it stands out. On the flip side, if all of the designs are different or unique, then respondents begin to think outside today's context and focus on evaluating which of the different-looking designs they are attracted to.

In choosing the comparative set for the research study, researchers should consider the following:

- Include as many additional future designs as possible (rather than testing against only current products).

- Have a wide variety of designs that push the extremes (don't test three designs that are similar, with only minor differences).

- Do not be afraid to include products outside the segment to stretch the limits or provide other futuristic designs.

6. Document the intended image of the design before you begin.

If the design team has followed Rule #1 (front-load the research), there should be an abundant amount of information about the target market prior to beginning the design process. At this point, you should know who the design is targeted toward, understand their needs and understand their tastes for other products.

With this knowledge, the team should make some strategic decisions regarding the intended direction and image of the product prior to developing the design. Mapping out the desired image in the same words that you will be asking respondents to describe it (i.e., fun vs. serious, traditional vs. contemporary, luxurious vs. economical) will allow for valuable comparisons down the road.

When evaluating the research

results among consumers, the team should now be looking at both the acceptance of the design and a comparison of the perceived image (among consumers) with the desired image (developed by design/marketing team).

7. Don't believe respondents' first reaction (familiarity effect).

How many times have you heard a respondent say at the end of a focus group, "Well, now that we've been talking about it for two hours, I think it's starting to grow on me." It is fairly normal for respondents to have a negative first reaction to designs that are different or outside of their comfort zone. In many cases, as they become more familiar with the design, their overall opinion will improve in terms of appeal (we refer to this as the familiarity effect).

If the familiarity effect is accounted for effectively in the research design, ratings for future designs will either go up after multiple exposures or stay down after multiple exposures. It is not hard to decipher that designs with ratings that go up after multiple exposures are most likely the designs that will be well accepted in the future.

The danger of not taking into account the familiarity effect is a convergence on safe, boring designs that elicited positive initial reactions

from respondents. Just because respondents have a negative first reaction to a design does not mean they will have a negative reaction to the design three years from now when they see it on the market every day. If Chrysler had listened to only the first reactions of consumers when it was testing the design for its Dodge Ram pickup, it most likely would not have moved forward with that design. As soon as consumers became more comfortable with a truck design that was different, they began to see the many positive attributes of the design (strength, masculinity, power).

Pay close attention

There is a lot more to conducting styling research than asking respondents which design they prefer and why. If not designed properly, marketing research can actually stifle the design process rather than enhance it. The best way to enhance the design process is to pay close attention to the guidelines outlined here with the end goal being to align the designer's perceptions with that of his or her customer. Once the designer can see the product through the eyes of his or her customer their creative talents will blossom and winning designs will be soon to follow. 