

Product tests: Face-to-Face is particularly relevant

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On the one hand, there currently is a strong trend in market research to concentrate on neuromarketing in order to capture and investigate emotions that influence buying decisions. On the other hand, mobile research has become the focus of attention, in order to apply new technologies in market research, to not lose track of young target groups, but also to be able to provide customers with data and results more quickly. Indeed, these new subject areas bring about lots of new possibilities. Nevertheless, traditional methods have by no means become obsolete. On the contrary – personal face-to-face interviews (F2F) are still essential for certain issues.

Advantages of face-to-face interviews

In comparison with CAWI or CATI surveys, F2F interviews have crucial advantages (see fig.1). Questions can be more complex, since respondents are able to immediately ask for clarification in case they do not understand. The same is true for interviewers; they can make sure that respondents understand all new problems and tasks at hand.



Ultimately this allows surveys to take more time without having to worry about premature termination of the interview. Furthermore, respondents' reactions may be observed during the presentation of concepts or prototypes; this may be done additionally or even as an actual feature of the test set-up.

In contrast, especially with online interviews, it is completely obscure in what kind of situation or setting the respondent filled out

the questionnaire. Did he quietly sit at his computer at home, exclusively concentrating on answering the survey questions? This would probably be the ideal situation that

every market researcher would love to assume. However, it is much more likely that a significant number of online questionnaires is answered in other settings: while watching television with the family, on a mobile device, on the underground, on the way home after work, interrupted by a phone call, etc. Without a doubt, these environmental variables do affect the answer quality. However, during F2F interviews, the circumstances of the assessment are under control, distractions like switched-on televisions or other people in the room are eliminated. The resulting internal validity may justify the larger amount of work.

Reliable and verifiable recruitment

The fact that an F2F interview setting allows the interviewer to ensure that he speaks to the right representatives of the target group, is another advantage not to be underestimated. This is particularly necessary for nuanced assessments of narrowly defined sub groups, for example in product tests. For instance, when a new shampoo formula is tested in a home use test, it is essential that the formula is assessed with respect to the hair type. This hair type must be determined as accurately as possible. A trip to the shampoo aisle at the chemist's clearly reveals the problem: Depending on the brand and product line, the products are aimed at stressed, damaged, dry, frizzy, limp, and flat hair, or hair with split ends, just to name a few. It is often difficult to pick the correct recruiting criteria since they need to be decidedly distinguished from each other. A clear briefing during personal recruitment may facilitate this process, because one can precisely explain the details of each criterion. For example, women with dry hair may rate a shampoo formula very differently than women with damaged hair – a difference that is less obvious to the consumer, yet of decisive significance for our client (see fig.2).



In return, product tests initiated online involve the danger of inadequate recruitment due to too few selected criteria. Consumers may accidentally make a false statement, which causes them to be allocated to the wrong group during subsequent analysis. Moreover, there is a higher dropout rate so that more people must be recruited and more products need to be mailed, which is often particularly difficult to realise if prototypes are involved. After testing the products in the participants'

home, the dropout rate for studio tests is extremely small: The participants can be reminded of the appointment again, and individually requested appointment dates may be accommodated. Both lead to a high rate of returning participants. Furthermore the test is not anonymous for them, since they were already in touch with an interviewer. This in itself already causes them to make an effort to keep the appointment. Ultimately, this saves the client lots of test products and is hence paying off. Moreover, the personal interview setting provides an opportunity to ensure that the product is applied or prepared

correctly. This aspect is especially important for new products; this way difficulties caused by the wording of the instructions can be reliably eradicated early on. A vivid hands-on example from market research was the test of an instant meal. Eventually, the bad ratings were not a result of the meal itself, but rather due to the preparation – some of the testers had added 1000 ml of water instead of 100 ml, so the beef and vegetable stir-fry turned into a soup. This mistake was not discovered and corrected until the F2F interview.

Possible supplements to personal interviews

In addition, the personal interview setting provides several opportunities to obtain additional insights with little effort – for example by using diaries, or smartphones to take pictures or videos as supplements. This additional data material is not only interesting for the client, who receives a much more authentic view into lives and minds of his target groups. It is also possible to react to those documentations immediately in follow-up surveys. The participants' willingness to examine a product more closely increases, the formulation of the results becomes more reflective and more nuanced, and last but not least, the target people receive appropriate appreciation. This a way to counteract the decreasing willingness to participate in market research projects. Hence, even in traditional F2F interviews present important advantages, supplemented with exciting starting points for modern market research methods, that are beneficial for the clients as well as the institutes.

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