



# Research Overview: Advertising Testing

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## *Key Issues and Considerations for Designing and Managing Primary Market Research*

### SUMMARY

For the past 50 years or more, advertising agencies, clients and research firms have been involved in the development of advertising messages, the creative vehicles by which those messages can be delivered and tools for measuring the impact of the efforts in question. While relatively few marketers question the need to advertise or communicate with customers in one form or another, the need to *test* advertising prior and subsequent to delivery – and the ideal practices for this area of research – is an issue of ongoing debate.

This overview discusses a variety of issues and considerations related to the assessment of advertising messages, vehicles, context, media, and effectiveness through primary research and provides valuable direction for firms in the initial stages of developing or reviewing their approach to this area of research.



# Research Overview: Advertising Testing

## *Key Issues and Considerations for Designing and Managing Primary Market Research*

### BACKGROUND

Most marketers would agree that advertising – including any form of communication with customers that takes place in a marketing context – can achieve a variety of goals. From creating awareness (they can't buy it if they don't know about it) to communicating information (they won't buy it if they don't know what it is) to sparking behavior (*what* doesn't mean a lot without the *why*), advertising represents one of the most critical forms of customer access a company can utilize and manage. Beyond basic product sales, advertising and other forms of marketing communications play a critical role in forming and evolving customers' impressions of the company, their products and the brand as a whole.

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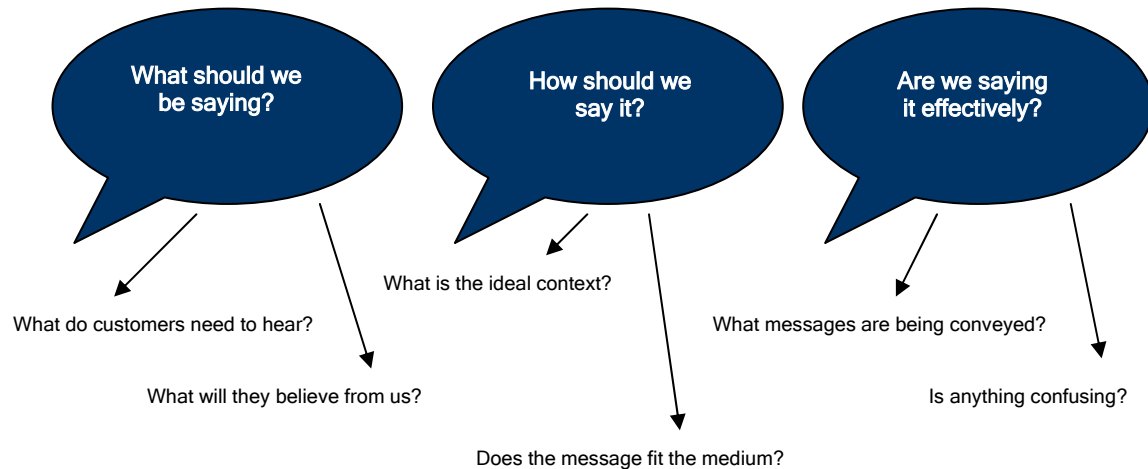
John Wanamaker, a 19<sup>th</sup> century retailing pioneer, addressed the issue of advertising testing in his frequently-cited quote, "Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted. I just wish I could figure out which half." Whether he realized it at the time, Mr. Wanamaker was touching on a highly critical aspect of advertising and ad testing that is still raised today; what is the ROI for money spent on advertising? However, ROI is but one small piece of the complete set of issues and goals related to ad testing in a market research context.

*Just as advertising can attain a highly diverse set of goals, advertising testing research must be designed and implemented in accordance with a highly-detailed set of strategic and actionable objectives.*

## WHY SHOULD WE TEST ADVERTISING?



In very general terms, the dimensions of learning which impact and attach any degree of value to ad testing research can be described at three levels: 1) the identification of an appropriate message, 2) optimizing the vehicle and context for that message, and 3) the determination of success in the delivery of the message(s).

### Why conduct advertising testing research?



**1. What should we be saying?** Among the most critical – and most often overlooked – dimensions of ad testing research is the need to identify the optimum set of messages that will achieve the desired set of goals for the advertising. Many firms implement product benefit and customer segmentation research as part of their overall market intelligence gathering efforts. However, the learnings from these projects are often ignored when the time comes to develop a messaging strategy for their advertising. Rather than limiting product and segmentation research to product development and channel decisions, these projects should be utilized to determine both what customers need to hear about the product and which specific customer groups should be targeted for those messages. This is not to say that research conducted specifically to discover and support messaging strategies is less-than-valuable – quite the contrary. The point is that customers must be queried at some point in the process using either available resources or customized approaches.

*Research initially conducted in relation to a seemingly unrelated set of goals can often lend critical insight into - and support for - decisions related to advertising messaging strategy and tactics.*



**2. How should we say it?** Decisions related to the context and medium of a message can and do have significant impact on the overall success of a campaign. With regard to context, advertising can take any number of directions, from humor to endorsements to competitive comparisons to visual demonstrations to characterization. Unfortunately, clients often narrow their decisions to a small number or even a single context based on past experiences and emotional preference without gathering feedback from their customers. In terms of media decisions, specific delivery mechanisms (television, radio, Internet, etc.) are too often selected based on price and audience characteristics alone. While these aspects of the media model are critical, consideration should also be given to whether customers will accept a specific message more openly if delivered through one medium versus another. For example, will a celebrity endorsement carry the same weight and meaning over the radio as it would in print or on television?

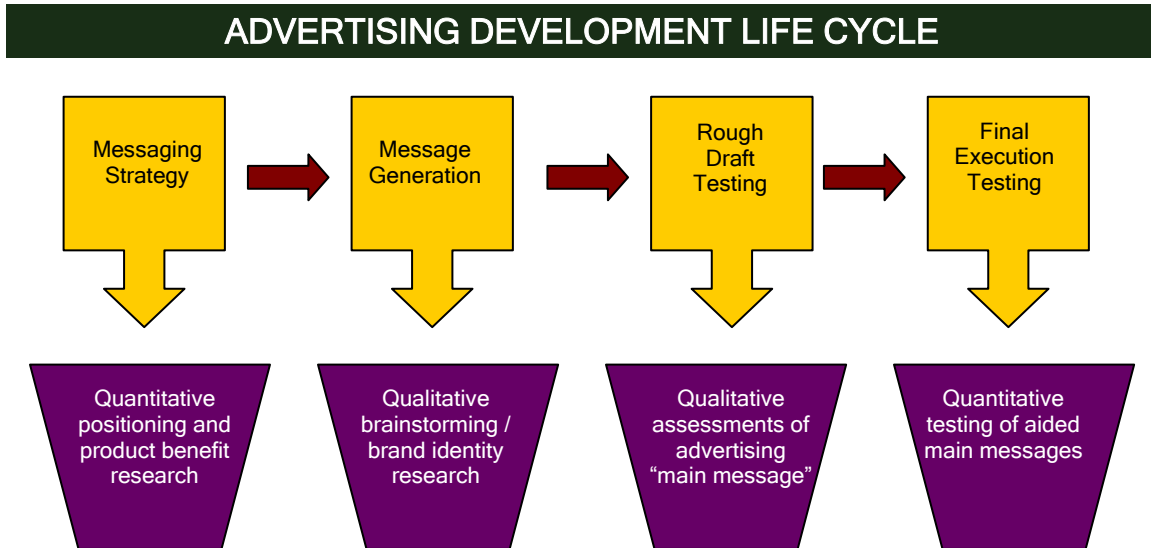
**3. Are we saying it effectively?** Research conducted in order to test the effectiveness of an ad or campaign is likely the area that receives the most attention currently. Whether the research is designed to explore rough draft executions or post-delivery effectiveness, the objectives are no less critical. What is our advertising saying to the customer and what is the impact of that message? The methodological and analytical issues associated with message effectiveness testing are highly complex and deserving of more complete discussion. Still, what should be remembered is that any research designed to test ad effectiveness must be tailored to the objectives of the advertising and the target audience in question. The more specific the approach with regard to these factors, the more accurate and actionable the research will be in the end.

## WHEN AND HOW SHOULD WE TEST OUR ADVERTISING?

The questions of when ad testing research should be implemented and what approaches should be utilized relative to the total ad development life cycle is also complex, and should be determined based on agreement between the client and their agency as to where in that life cycle the greatest degree of risk exists. Certainly, research can and is implemented at various stages, from message generation to final execution testing. However, that is not to say that research *should* be conducted at every stage.

*Clients and agencies must work together to determine if and where ad testing research is (most) appropriate. If buy-in is not established by all stakeholders involved, the value and actionability of the learnings is certain to be compromised.*

As noted in the diagram below, the stage in the development process at which an ad is to be tested impacts, to a large degree, the selection of an appropriate methodology, with the method then having clear implications on the conclusions that can be drawn from the research.



While the totality of elements to be included in any qualitative OR quantitative ad testing research program is beyond the scope of this overview, the following guidelines should always be taken into consideration in related research:

- Include a variety of audiences and stakeholders in the research, such as customers, employees, and vendors. The more complete the picture, the more confident you can be in your decisions.
- Select the optimum research methodology based on the objectives, not vice versa. Just as 1-1 interviews are not an appropriate vehicle for determining the impact of advertising on customer awareness, quantitative telephone interviews are not an effective tool for capturing reactions to rough draft television ads.
- Do not rely solely on research to drive your advertising-related decision making. As with any research, information gathered in the context of ad testing is but one piece of the total pie of information available and relevant to the decisions at hand.

*“Advertising without preparation (research) is like a waterfall going to waste. The power may be there, but it is not made effective. We must center the force and direct it in a practical direction.” -Claude Hopkins*