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Watch and Learn

Hang out with youth market in their element

By DEBORAH L. VENCE

Why tweens prefer one soft drink over another, or why teenagers just can't seem to resist a certain brand of jeans, are the kinds of mysteries more businesses want to get to the bottom of.

To find out why the youth market behaves a certain way as consumers, more research firms are using observational research techniques to better observe youths' reactions to certain products and styles.

"We have found that a lot of marketers today want to do (observational research) for the sake of being closer to the consumer...to make the experience as productively efficient as possible while the observers remain as unobtrusive as possible," says Peter Zollo, president of Northbrook, Ill. — based Teen Research Unlimited, a marketing research firm that specializes in the teen market. "We call these types of studies 'in-context research,' as we strive to place the client and the respondent in the context of the particular venue or situation, whether it's... in the gym, on the field, at a concert, or at the beach or the park. By (doing this), we're best able to understand the brand's context — how it fits into (young) consumers' lives and with their lifestyles."

Qualitative researchers in charge of such research should keep in mind a few things before and during a study. Experts in the field offer five tips they say will help gather more useful data and provide clients with a better return on their investment.

RECRUIT 'HIP' RESPONDENTS

One of the first imperatives in setting up a so-called tag-along session — in which qualitative researchers go to a shopping mall, for example, with youth respondents — is to choose *the* most appropriate participants: kids who are hip.

Companies benefit from recruiting teen leaders — those who loyally follow trends — and bring them on as independent recruiters. In turn, the teen recruiters would be charged with the task of drafting the "hippest individ-

uals" as respondents, notes Trenton Haack, director and practice leader of qualitative research for Cincinnati-based Burke, Inc.

"It's important to get the right respondents in order to find out what the latest and greatest thing is," he says.

ASK CLEVER QUESTIONS

Once the researchers are out and about observing the tween or teen respondents in a real-world setting, researchers should then make it a point to step in and interact with the respondents by asking specific questions about why they're buying certain products, experts say.

Nino DeNicola, president of Dialogue Resource, Inc.,

based in Fairfield, Conn., tells of a recent study when certain questions were asked of teen respondents on behalf of one of his clients, a blue jeans manufacturer. In this particular study, for example, Dialogue Resource asked about the jeans' design aspects and what the respondents thought about the way the jeans were packaged on the racks and shelves.

"Basically, you are trying to understand what the actual selection criteria (are). How important is the brand? If it is, what do they look for in the way of specific product attributes? What's important about the jeans, and why?" DeNicola says.

Zollo adds that his firm often debriefs youth respondents immediately after an excursion.

"For example, after a shop-along exercise we'll convene at a nearby food court to talk about what we observed, asking questions about observed behavior and choices," he says. "As important as it is to be able to replicate real-world experiences in observational research, having the opportunity to probe for clarification on what was observed makes subsequent analysis easier and more accurate."

MAKE THEM FEEL COMFORTABLE... THEY'RE THE EXPERTS!

Experts say not to forget to make youth participants feel as comfortable as possible during an observational research study. After all, they *are* the experts.

"Make sure the observations are in an environment that they are comfortable with," says Miguel Lyons-Cavazos, a partner at Redwood Shores, Calif.-based Cheskin Research.

For example, Lyons-Cavazos says, teen respondents may feel more comfortable if they are participating in the study with their friends, even if their friends are not also official respondents in the study. He adds that researchers need to convey to the respondents that they are the "experts" about whatever it is — whether it has to do with music consumption or the latest skateboard design.

THE MORE RESPONDENTS, THE BETTER

Another sure-fire way to gather valuable data is by studying a large group of respondents over a long period of time, DeNicola notes.

The best way, he says, is to recruit 30 or 40 kids and observe eight a day, giving researchers more to work with and a wider range of opinions, as opposed to having just one group on one day.

GET OUT THERE

Finally, experts say that qualitative researchers need to "get out there" and "be themselves."

Researchers need to experience what the youth respondents are experiencing, whether it's buying clothes or other products in a shopping mall or at a music store listening to today's hottest music artists, Lyons-Cavazos says.

"Don't just be the researcher that gathers the info. Get out there and experience what your (youth respondents) are," he adds. "Doing observational research is so much richer when you're a part of it, too." ■

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