

Projective Techniques in Marketing Research

Issues to Consider

The Challenge

With today's overcrowding and overlapping in many product/service categories, it is increasingly difficult for companies to sustain clearly identifiable features and benefits that distinguish their products or services from competitive ones. This necessitates a shift from marketing themes based on demonstrable functional differences to appeals that tap consumers' more subjective and subconscious susceptibilities regarding the product/service category in general and a brand in particular.

But while consumers can usually provide direct, reliable information about their objective buying decisions, they are ill-equipped to explain their more emotionally based choices. The research challenge, then, is to get at these motivations indirectly, and this is where projective techniques come in.

The Rationale

Rooted in long-established and accepted psychological tools such as the Rorschach and Thematic Apperception Test, projective techniques originally developed for the study of personality have been adapted over the years by market researchers to uncover consumers' latent feelings, beliefs, or predispositions that respondents are unwilling or unable to access themselves.

In projective questioning, interview subjects are instructed not to respond directly from their own perspective, which could invite self-censorship to avoid uncomfortable personal revelations, but rather to attribute motivations and interpret the behavior of others. By this projection of relevant feelings and beliefs onto (unknown, "fictional") others, respondents can safely, if indirectly, reveal their own leanings.

Some Specific Tools

Researchers can choose from a wide variety of projective exercises, with the decision typically driven by such considerations as study objective (e.g., segmentation development, product category satisfaction, brand imagery); interview format (e.g., focus group, individual interview, online); demographic characteristics of the sample; nature of the test stimuli (if any); etc. Illustrative, but by no means exhaustive, of the possibilities are:

- Association Techniques:
 - Respondents are presented with a stimulus and asked to react with the first thing that comes to mind (e.g., word association).
- Completion Techniques:
 - Respondents are asked to finish an incomplete stimulus situation. Common techniques are sentence completion and story completion.

- Construction Techniques:
 - These require respondents to construct a response in the form of a story, dialogue or description. Various construction techniques can employ pictures, cartoons, and collages.
- Expressive Techniques:
 - Respondents are presented with a verbal or visual situation and asked to relate to the feelings and attitudes of the people described or depicted in that situation. Respondents are asked to express not their own feelings or attitudes, but those of others. Common approaches here are role playing and third-person techniques.

Analysis and Interpretation

Many types of projective exercises are available, and they can be customized — or even newly devised — for a particular research undertaking. Moreover, most are not especially difficult to administer, and they can add an element of engaged interest or fun to an otherwise standard focus group or depth interview. However, selecting and administering the exercises is the easy part. The hard part is knowing what to do with the “raw” results. Projective techniques are an aspect of qualitative research; and as such — even more so than with the analysis and synthesis of group discussion or one-on-one interview content — the usefulness of the results depends on skillful and experienced interpretation.

Let Us Help

At DR we have been using projective techniques in focus groups and depth interviews for more than 15 years. As a result of our training and background in clinical psychology combined with our practical application of these tools in various project contexts — including and especially advertising research — we understand the value of projective techniques and we know how to use them.

Dialogue Resource is a marketing research and consulting firm located in Boston, MA.

