



Product Testing Do's and Don'ts... Ten Lessons Learned along the Way

By Rossella Mazzucchelli

Introduction

Every job experience, every project and every team I worked with gave me a new outlook onto this occasionally chaotic world we work in. You could have called me a “purist” in my early years and you would have been right: I was implementing the principles I was taught in school. Not to say that it was entirely a bad thing... as a matter of fact, some projects I worked on early in my career needed a boost in scientific rigor. However with the years, I had to let go of my comfort zone - a world of hard data and many details - in order to venture into the imprecise and unfamiliar worlds of corporate, business and marketing. Perhaps the most important lesson I learned is that the moment you think you know it all, you stop learning and go stale.

1. The GOLDEN Rule of Sensory.

I will start with my all-time favorite: the golden rule of sensory “taste before you test” because it has served me well for so many years. I doubt this rule will ever become obsolete. I will never forget a few years ago when my team and I were about to invest several hours on a labor-intensive, grueling baked pie test. On that day, one of the samples happened to be contaminated with garlic powder. I have nothing against garlic... but in apple pie? Needless to say that particular test was cancelled and rescheduled for a later date with very few resources wasted on a useless test. That event reinforced, once again, what I already knew: all samples should be tasted not only before, but during and after a test is conducted.

2. SMALL Picture... BIG Picture.

People are wired differently. Some of us are most comfortable in the midst of data and minutia while others shy away from details altogether. Regardless of our natural propensity, if you are among those that can pay attention to small details while not losing track of the big picture you have a veritable gift. A revealing moment for me happened while interpreting a piece of research I was conducting on a new product. I was literally disheartened because my [what I thought clever and innovative] research did not bring many of the answers I was looking for. On the contrary, I ended up with more questions than answers. Did I fail to do my job well? Not necessarily... but I was so immersed into the details of the study that I neglected to assess the bigger picture. The very questions that arose from that research were big, important questions, questions that later on made us re-evaluate the proposition, the very reason for the new product to exist.



3. When LESS is MORE.

The challenge is often striking the right balance. Let's take consumer research for example. Are you a proponent of 60 questions per sample per consumer over multiple samples? Or would you rather ask consumers overall liking and leave it up to a trained panel to help explain likes and dislikes? I have encountered both extremes as well as every point in between. The truth is... we all try to get the most out of our research dollars. However, I believe that sometimes you can get more, a lot more, by asking fewer questions. While observing CLTs I personally witnessed consumers so bored with the long list of "look-alike" questions, they were literally checking boxes randomly just to get it over with. Special care is required when testing with children, because depending on the category and the test format, their attention span can surprisingly short. My guideline became "don't go on a fishing expedition and make every question count".

4. When MORE is MORE.

Consumers' attitudes, choices and behaviors are complex. Designing a well-liked food within costs and operational constraints is also complex. Marrying the two pieces can be a tricky proposition. At times, you may choose to make certain assumptions and work with a simplified model. Other times, you break down the big question into smaller ones so that each part can be tackled adequately. The challenge, again, is to strike the right balance between "over-simplification" (where you may lose sight of important variables or interactions) and "dilution" (where you dilute your efforts by trying to work simultaneously on too many different aspects).

Let's take a Category Appraisal for example. You may limit the number of samples and run the risk of missing vital dimensions, you may decide to limit the number of consumers and limit your opportunity to identify a unique consumer cluster/segment, or you may decide to limit the number of testing locations and give up information about regional preferences. Think hard about the short and long term repercussions of the study you are about to execute. More samples, more consumers and more locations in certain cases, may pay off!

5. MIX and MATCH is a Success.

When several techniques are leveraged together, the possibilities for real breakthroughs in sensory research multiply. The ideas of "blended research", "quali-quant" or "mixed-methods" are not new. The tools may be finite, however the combinations are endless. It can be as simple as adding a few exit interviews or a group discussion after a CLT, or combining the usual taste test with a product preparation exercise. Whenever I approached a set of samples or a group of consumers from a few different angles, not only did I get the big picture, I gained deeper insights as well.



6. Partnerships.

Throughout my career I met sensory scientists that worked in relative isolation. But where is the fun in that? Sensory professionals should step up to the plate and - let me quote someone from my past - “put their skins into the game”. To do that, you should not work alone. You will need partners, supporters, and allies.

Personally, I learned a lot from my fellow sensory colleagues. However, it was through partnering with Culinary Design manager, Market Researchers and Marketers that my horizon was broadened. For example, I got to experiment novel product development techniques with Culinary Design professionals and along with Market Research and R&D colleagues we challenged the status quo and re-defined the meaning of Gold Standard. Far more exciting than running triangle tests!

7. What’s wrong with my data?

We are all so busy, we are always rushing, trying to catch our breath and re-gain a bit of mental sanity. How many meetings did you attend? Did you get any time at your desk today? When did you take an honest, hard look at your raw data last? Too often we rush into routine data analysis and we don’t take the time to look at our data. When we do... we might end up opening a can of worms. I should never forget a pudding CLT conducted with kids. I noticed unusual high standard deviations on an attribute and I started to dig deeper. Responses from a small group of kids did not make any sense at all and as a result, the trends in the data were hidden. What do you do? Keep them or delete them? Whatever you do... try not to ignore unusual patterns in the data and even most importantly, never take the easy way out.

8. Innovation & Creativity.

Let the fun begin! We often approach innovation by having a brainstorming session, which is typically driven by Marketing in some companies and by R&D in others. Common outcomes from such sessions are re-hashing of old ideas and twists on competitors’ newer ideas. I have experienced companies struggling with innovation. Some companies consider going through extravagant re-modeling of their offices to spur creativity (I have seen the blueprints), others send their employees to expensive workshops and so on. Judging from the books and white papers written on this topic, companies are seeking new ways to inspire their employees to be more innovative and creative.

A company that has done something sensible about it is Intel. As a supplier of computer chips to the computing and communication industries they committed to study people in order to identify ways in which future technology can be shaped to create user value. A key process, called „user-centered innovation process”, referred to by some as “people-inspired innovation” ends and begins with people. Intel knows well that user value has several interdependent components, ranging from the function or utility of the product, to the benefits and the emotional and often irrational connection users make with the product or the social capital that is gained by owning the product. Which brings me to the next point...

9. EMOTION sells... or is emotion overrated?

Based on what I have seen so far, emotions are seldom overrated. The vast majority of research that is conducted to understand what drives overall acceptance is just one piece of the puzzle. I feel that in this area we are just starting to scratch the surface. We often stop research as soon as we have a “story” that makes sense, although there are often hidden truths ready to be discovered. As sensory scientists, we are often focusing on those product characteristics that we can see, hear, touch, taste or smell. However, we all know how the 5 senses are closely connected to memories and emotions. Research has shown that on average we make over 200 food choices a day. Some are obvious, some are subtle. Consumers don’t just buy based on information provided on the package or product characteristics; they buy based on emotions, coupled with facts. Perhaps it wouldn’t be a bad idea to act a little more as psychologists and a bit less as scientists!

10. Quality Rules.

Judging from the sheer volume of Client requests, one of the trends of the decade must be redefining QUALITY. Many companies are currently re-evaluating their current quality programs and practices. Some sensory people I know try not to get too involved in quality programs. Many say... “It would be too big of a job” or even “it’s too boring”. The truth is, evaluating, designing and implementing a quality program can be a daunting task. Such programs tend to be complex, large in scale and results are often not immediate.

The truth of the matter is: Quality programs around the world would greatly benefit from having one of us on the team. This is also an exciting time for Quality. We used to judge product quality by average or mean-based measures of past production. However, our consumers don't judge our products based on averages, they feel the variance in each product they purchase and use. Part of re-defining Quality is re-defining how we think about it. A new philosophy, based on old and newer concepts such as: Continuous Improvement, Total Quality Management, consumer-driven specification and Six Sigma must be applied to everything we do, day in and day out.

About the Author

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