

MARKET RESEARCH • *Play by the rules*

Survey may not measure true awareness

By STEPHEN J. HELLEBUSCH

On many research occasions, there is an interest in learning what happened to “awareness” as a result of marketing’s efforts for the brand. Obviously, people need to be aware of a brand before they can consider buying it. Even if they don’t – for example, they see it on a shelf - having them aware prior to seeing it may influence the purchase decision. But when we talk about awareness, do we know what aspect of it we’re really talking about?

Usually, research is implemented without much thought to what we want to measure because awareness of all major marketing elements is collected in the same interview. This is efficient, and it makes sense.

Given that all of the “normal” measures of awareness are to be collected and that there is some agreement as to how to analyze the results, one must think about the type of awareness that is of greatest interest. Basically, there are three types - unaided, aided, and total - and we’ll use an example based on brand awareness to illustrate the differences between them.

At one point in time, a relatively small mouthwash brand on the market for many years was making an attempt to increase sales with TV advertising. The brand group wished to measure changes in awareness and claimed purchase as a result of the advertising efforts, and so a tracking study was designed to obtain that information. Tracking “waves” were scheduled to occur quarterly, during the year the ads were shown.

The group conducted telephone interviews, and the first set of questions after screening was “unaided”, meaning that no brand was mentioned to a respondent until after all of these questions were asked. The brand awareness questions were “What brands of mouthwash are you aware of?” and “Any others?” The questions required respondents to recall brand names. Psychologists have known for a long time that recall is difficult, and it is especially hard to recall a set of random brands, with no effort to study the set.

But some marketers think of recall, or unaided brand awareness, in a different way. They realize that it is difficult but at the same time think of it as a “consideration set”; the brands a respondent can recall are the brands most likely purchase. While this might not be true, having the brand “in mind” may help, even in situations where it has a small effect. Our mouthwash brand had a 6% unaided brand awareness at the start of advertising - somewhat lower than we anticipated. Clearly, not too many mouthwash users thought of it or included it in their consideration set.

The second type of brand awareness is “aided”, which means the brand name is mentioned to respondents, and they can say “Yes” or “No” to whether they are aware of the brand or not. Traditionally, the aided question is asked only of those respondents who have not mentioned the brand on an unaided basis. The question in our mouthwash survey was, “Have you ever heard of (Brand)?”. As one would expect, aided awareness is much higher than unaided. Our mouthwash brand had an aided-awareness level of 65%. It had been around so long that most people knew of it, even if they couldn’t unaidedly recall it.

Aided-brand awareness is recognition, as opposed to recall, and psychologists have long known that recognition is generally accurate. In fact, researchers occasionally put a fictitious brand name in a survey for aided recall – for example, “Have you ever heard of Superfresh?” – and the nonexistent brand usually has a very low level of aided “ghost” awareness.

The final type of awareness is total, which is simply the addition of unaided and aided. Our mouthwash had a total awareness level of 71%, prior to the start of advertising. Since total = unaided + aided, it is not necessary to look at all three types in an analysis. We typically look at total and unaided, and consider unaided brand awareness as the more important of the two measures, since it is the measure of the percent that has our brand in mind.

What you consider important can impact how you measure awareness. We have seen major packaged goods companies collect all brand awareness by mailing questionnaires to a representative pane. This method is, relatively, inexpensive; however, it only obtains total brand awareness. If you consider measuring the percent that have the brand in mind important, this method will not work. To obtain unaided brand awareness, interviewing must be conducted in-person, by telephone, or via email - methods in which the researcher can control the order of question appearance, rather than let the respondent control it. Therefore, the inexpensive method is not just cheaper; it involves a trade-off of one type of data for another.

Our mouthwash brand is a case in point. Over the course of the year

in which the ads ran on TV total brand awareness did not change. It remained at about 70%. Unaided brand awareness, however, rose to 16% in the first wave after advertising began. If we only had examined total awareness, we never would have known how effective our advertising really was in generating “awareness” of our brand.

Stephen J. Hellebusch is president of Hellebusch Research and Consulting, Inc. in Cincinnati, OH. He can be reached at 800.871.6922 or email: steve@hellrc.com