



Blueprints to successful concept development

Part 2: Framing it in

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Last month, the strategy and rationale for the four cornerstone pieces to successful concept development were introduced as the foundation pieces:

- consumer wants and needs (“the building permits”)
- emotional connections (“the motivation to buy”)
- brand equity (“establishing residence”)
- competitive landscape (“analyzing the market”)

As with any construction project, once you have the foundation complete, it is time to frame in the structure. This article will explain the tactical process and specific qualitative and quantitative tools for evaluating and enhancing concepts that lead to products consumers will love.

Concept development process

The home construction analogy used in our first article works equally well for thinking about the actual concept development process. For instance, think of the key players involved: the client company is similar to a building contractor and the consumer is synonymous with the home buyer. The process for both begins and ends at various points in time, depending upon the progress of development/construction.

Just as there are specific phases to any construction project, there are also key phases to successful concept development. The concept development process is creative, dynamic and iterative. Sometimes you have to stop, go back and re-do work to make the finished concept/product more in line with the expectations of the buyer. Outlined below are the steps to the overall process.

Identify target

Just like knowing “who” will ultimately live in our fictitious house will assist in building the house of their dreams, it is important to identify and stay focused on the target consumer throughout the concept/product development process. While identifying the target seems like the most logical first

step, it is frequently either overlooked or lost sight of along the way. Even worse, sometimes companies build the “house” without identifying a target customer and then try to find an interested prospect after the fact. “If you build it, they will come” is a risky philosophy when it comes to product/concept development.

Whatever the case, failing to identify a target customer typically results in concepts that do not resonate in a meaningful way with consumers.

Assess ideas

When building a house, many difficult decisions and trade-offs must be made regarding the design, the materials used, etc. The same is true in the product/concept development process, where a multitude of ideas may have potential for further development. Since concepts cannot be created out of every idea, it is important to narrow down the idea set to provide a level of focus and efficiency to the rest of the process. Narrowing down can be accomplished through trade-off analysis — identifying appeal, relevance and fit with the category (generally) and brand (specifically). This simple step provides efficiency and rigor to the process, allowing the team to focus on the most vital alternatives.

Develop concepts

Once the list of potential ideas has been narrowed, developing concepts uti-

lizing relevant consumer insight is the next logical step. In addition to consumer insight, it may also be fruitful to utilize diverse internal knowledge and viewpoints when developing concepts. Before revealing concepts to the target consumer, the following basic elements of a good concept should be considered:

- first-person voice to add personal relevance
- simple and to the point
- clear communication of relevant differentiated benefit
 - support of the brand promise
 - use of consumer language — not too technical or worded as a business case
 - can be interpreted in a number of meaningful ways — especially if trying to appeal to more than one target consumer group
 - brings the product to life through creative language, illustrations, tone, examples, etc.
 - is not a sales pitch, but rather a neutral description of what the product would be like

Grow and customize concepts

Just as home buyers often make changes and enhancements to a house (like upgrading to granite countertops or adding a third-car garage), it is important to carefully listen to consumer wants/needs during concept evaluation in order to grow and customize concepts throughout the process. Analyzing and

incorporating consumer insight and language will not only make the concepts the best that they can be, it will also help determine if the concepts are relevant to the target and a good fit for the business (specifically for the product/brand portfolio).

Re-evaluate

Re-evaluate! Re-evaluate! Re-evaluate! If concepts don’t work for the business, or if they miss the mark with the target, it may be necessary to re-work the concepts and re-test. This is where many companies put their blinders on — instead of really listening to consumer feedback, they make the mistake of moving forward with a bad concept. This could be due to political influences within the organization, the emotions of key stakeholders or simply because the company is trying to meet a product launch deadline. It is always better to start over than to force a bad idea through the research function.

Assess potential

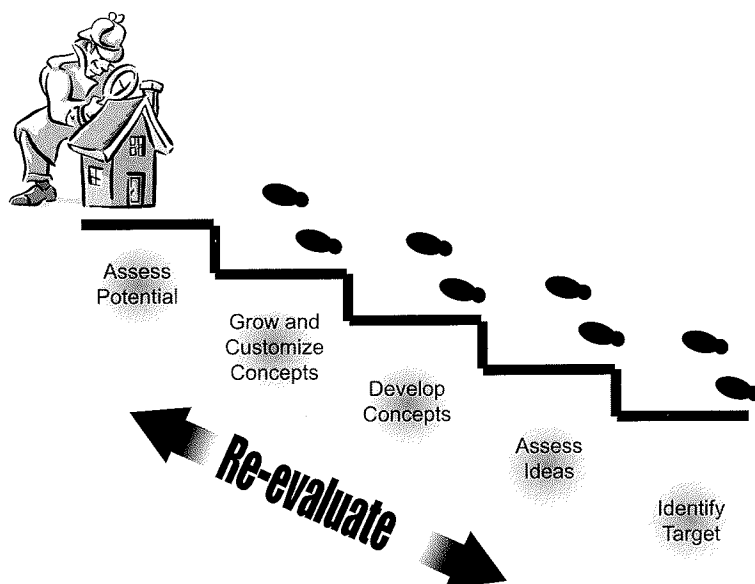
All of the above mentioned steps should create confidence in concepts’ readiness for a simulated test market evaluation (e.g., AC Nielsen’s BASES). However, it is important to check key measures — appeal, purchase consideration, and other specific brand attributes) before investing resources in a more sophisticated market structure test.

Study design

Gathering consumer insights from both a qualitative and quantitative perspective is essential to driving a winning product design. It is important to note that each product development endeavor is different (due to varying business/brand objectives). So while the remaining sections of this article describe general qualitative and quantitative research philosophies for concept development, we recommend approaching each concept development effort with a clean blueprint — only then will the best study design result.

Qualitative research tools

Each individual project is unique, just as each house built is personalized to the buyer’s desires. The following



qualitative approach therefore is intended to review our overall philosophy and research tools, and is not meant to be used as a specific process.

Once the initial concept platforms have been developed, qualitative research is used as a discovery initiative. Its dynamic nature provides customers the ability to interact with the concepts, while at the same time offering opportunity for marketing and product development to grow the ideas into more evolved, consumer-acceptable forms. The overall objective of qualitative research is to gain directional understanding of appeal, relevance, fit with brand equity and ability to differentiate.

The first, and arguably the most important, part of the qualitative approach begins early in the process by thoroughly understanding the client's objectives and desired output. Further, understanding the intention of each concept helps determine if it is working — this is especially important for edgier concepts that tend not to be immediately accepted.

Prior to getting consumer feedback, it is important to prepare two key players — the qualitative moderator and the key stakeholders.

- Utilize the moderator as a partner and provide the concepts early enough so that the moderator can live with the ideas for a few days prior to the research. This “soak” time allows the moderator to anticipate consumer questions. Sometimes concepts are handed to the moderator five minutes prior to the groups — to the detriment of the entire research process.

- Key stakeholders should also be introduced to the concepts well before fielding the research to provide ample opportunity for tweaks and a reality check with business objectives.

Once in the qualitative setting, there are several specific guidelines (described below) to make the concept evaluation process most efficient and fruitful:

- Setting parameters — At the beginning of the qualitative session, it is important to set the stage and let the target consumers know what to expect — specifically what will be covered and what will not be covered.

- Setting tone, tempo and expectations — The moderator should calculate how much time is allotted for each concept and set the pace with the first concept. Communicating that there is a lot to cover, and the time allotment for each concept, makes it easier to move along when needed — “in the interest of time.”

- Make it real and relevant — Placing the consumer in a realistic environment (as much as possible) helps them relate to the idea in a more concrete and meaningful way. Visualization techniques work well because respondents are asked to use their imagination to envision a typical usage situation and what the product may actually be like. Also, bringing in props (e.g., stocked store shelves, music, etc.) is another way to make the focus group room seem more like a realistic purchase or usage environment. Whatever it takes, the importance of getting respondents into the “game” mindset should not be underestimated.

- Ask each respondent to make a personal commitment — To minimize groupthink, it is important to ask respondents NOT to talk or make any comment — good or bad — while concepts are being passed around and evaluated. To further encourage commitment, ask respondents to informally rate the concept on a 1-5 (“does not appeal at all” to “extremely appealing”) scale and to write down their ratings. Also ask respondents to write down their initial reactions and what is being communicated to ensure they understand the intent of each concept.

- Standard questions — While a number of customized questions are at the core of each study, listed below are some standard questions that should be included in any concept evaluation:

Understanding strategic perspective

- What is your initial impression/reaction?

- What is this communicating?

- In what way can you personally relate to this idea? (Provide personal examples.)

- What else do you need to know to accept or reject the idea?

- What does this communicate about

the brand? The company?

- Does this make sense?

Understanding tactical perspective

- Describe specific likes. What should be kept? How can we make it better?

- Describe specific dislikes. What are your concerns? How can this be fixed?

- Based on this concept, what are your expectations of this potential product?

- Brainstorm across a variety of product attributes considering before, during and after usage.

- Summing it up — While only directional, it is important for each respondent to narrow down the choice set and choose the preferred concept at the end of the session. This allows you to determine if one concept stands out in the crowd. Further, understanding if the idea is ownable and differentiating provides a double check with brand equity and provides strategic insight to help make key business decisions.

- Reality check — Prior to wrapping things up, it is important to have respondents take a step back and answer the question “Are you really in love with any of these concepts or are you simply basing your preferred choice on the best of a set of bad ideas?”

Quantitative research tools

Note: The quantitative research discussed in this article is considered custom quantitative. The purpose of this quantitative research is to ensure that the best possible concepts are placed in the more expensive simulated market test (such as AC Nielsen's BASES testing).

While qualitative research can provide great direction and rich insights, even the best qualitative research cannot provide a projectable “winning” concept with any degree of confidence. Therefore quantitative research is necessary to narrow down the scope of potential concepts and to identify a winner or winners.

Focusing on the desired consumer target, quantitative research is used to ensure that the concept is appealing to this group of consumers. There are a

variety of ways to approach the quantitative study design — depending upon who the target market is and how easy or difficult it is to interact with them. Internet, intercepts, in-home placements and central location tests are methodologies effective for gathering quantitative evaluations. Listed below is a general overview of two commonly-used questionnaire designs, along with the strengths and weaknesses of each. Each design can be successfully accomplished no matter the survey method (i.e., mail, Internet, central location, etc.).

Monadic approach: each respondent evaluates only one concept, ratings are compared and analyzed.

- More expensive — need to match samples.

- Not as sensitive to differences.

- More reliable, closer to real life — if respondents see more than one alternative, the first one presented tends to color the impression of the others evaluated. Generally, the first concept presented gets higher scores.

Sequential monadic approach: each respondent evaluates more than one concept, ratings are compared and analyzed.

- More economical, no need to match samples.

- First concept tested gives a “pure” monadic read.

- Easier to obtain overall preference.

- Not as close to real life.

- Concepts are rotated to balance out the order bias — every single possible rotation can be presented to average

out order effects.

While each research endeavor will include specific survey questions relevant to the business/brand, the following list includes some of the most typical measures:

- appeal

- uniqueness

- believability

- purchase consideration

- communication of intended message

- communication of intended benefits

- ability to meet an unmet need

- fit with product

The outcome from quantitative research is the identification of a winning concept, along with the appropriate consumer target. Quantitative results should also provide direction on the relevance of the concept to the target market, specific strengths, weaknesses and ability to satisfy unmet needs. If all of these steps are successfully met, a company should feel confident about taking concepts into a volumetrics study.

Finally, great care should be taken to determine how a winning concept is selected. The following questions must be answered prior to further quantitative testing: What are the key areas of interest for these concepts? What is the best way to score each concept to determine a winner? What are the criteria for a winning concept, other than just being the best among a potentially losing set of concepts?


Creating synergy

Because concept development is an

iterative process, synergy can be created through use of a research partner that is skilled in both qualitative and quantitative research. A firm that is expert in both areas of research can offer consistency and evolved learning throughout the concept development process. And, while the benefits of time and cost efficiencies are obvious, the not-so-obvious benefit is that fewer translation issues will arise from attempts to transfer knowledge from one firm to another. It is time-consuming and challenging to intimately understand the consumer, the concepts, the market, etc. — the fewer firms involved, the more lucid the process remains.

Guideline for tactical pieces

In last month's Part 1, we suggested using the article from a planning perspective and as a springboard for internal communication. We recommend using Part 2 as a guideline for the more tactical pieces of the concept development process. The end result of using the information from both articles will produce high confidence when engaging in concept development.

To leave you with one final home construction analogy, just as the success of a house construction project culminates when the buyers come to view it as their home, following our guidelines for consumer-driven concept development will transform concepts into a final product that buyers will eagerly adopt. 

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