

Creative Testing

You may not feel inspired to hang a velvet Elvis in your living room, but ask yourself this: If nobody's buying them, why are they still making them? Things that make you shudder may be someone else's idea of a living room centerpiece.

Effective creative, like effective messaging, doesn't focus on you. It zeroes in on the people you're trying to reach, who, incidentally, often don't share your sense of style, sense of humor, or sense of social justice. And since there's no accounting for taste, a little bit of money spent up front testing your creative can help ensure that the whole lot of money you spend rolling out your campaign is money well spent. Creative testing gives you insight into how well (or how poorly) your target audience will respond to your campaign. It can, however, be expensive. An experienced market research company can help you make any needed trade-offs.

Basic Creative Testing

You say po-tay-to, I say po-tah-to. That's okay—as long as we both know we're talking about a starchy vegetable that tastes good with gravy. If you've ever played a game of telephone, you know how quickly communications can disintegrate. You know what you want to say, but do you know how your target audience hears and interprets it?

In its simplest form, creative testing involves showing an ad to members of your target audience and asking them to describe the main point and how they feel about it. Creative testing looks at four things:

1. **Comprehension.** Do people understand the ad in the way it's intended? Is the message clear and easily articulated?
2. **Reaction.** What sort of feelings or attitudes does the ad provoke? Are people moved? Is the ad interesting and relevant? Do people like it? Do they believe it?

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3. **Stopping and staying power.** Do people pay attention to the ad? Do they recognize and remember it easily?
4. **Red flags.** Did the ad produce any unintended effects? Did it elicit negative responses or resistance because of language, imagery, tone, wording, etc.?

Some specific techniques used to test audience comprehension and reaction include the following:

- **Narrative playback** asks respondents to recall and articulate the narrative or storyline.
- **Talk-back testing** asks respondents to explain the point of the ad in their own words. This shows how well the ad is understood and how easily your target audience can share the message.
- **Overall reaction** measures how people felt about the ad, including likeability, stimulation or entertainment value, relevance, newsworthiness, uniqueness, and believability.
- **Persuasion** asks whether respondents found the ad compelling and persuasive.
- **Instant response** relies on a computer-based system to measure second-by-second reactions to speeches, advertisements, etc. Respondents continuously turn dials to show how much they like what they're hearing and/or seeing throughout the broadcast.

Focus groups/interviews. Focus groups and personal interviews are the two most common forms of creative testing. However, testing can also be done via questionnaires, online, or in mall intercepts where respondents are recruited at a shopping mall.

True Story: Life may be like a box of chocolates, but untested creative is a can of worms. While working at an ad agency, one of the authors of this toolkit tested five logos for a client. Three out of twelve respondents said that one of the logos vaguely reminded them of a swastika. The horrified design team immediately pulled the logo, which was meant to look like a computer chip. In LGBT advocacy work, unintended negative effects sometimes include stirring up the “ick” factor, upsetting African American allies with comparisons to the civil rights movement, and inadvertently reinforcing stereotypes about LGBT people as strident, affluent, and unlike other Americans.

To test your creative, show respondents a mock-up of the ad and then ask for their reaction. Qualitative creative testing gives you good insight into how people will react to your ad and why. However, because qualitative testing means small sample sizes, your findings may not represent the attitudes of your overall target audience.

Quantitative methods. It's possible (though often expensive) to test creative quantitatively. For example, some firms recruit participants to look at the creative online and then ask them to fill out survey questions. Alternatively, focus groups and interviews can be supplemented by asking participants to fill out quantitative surveys as opposed to simply discussing their reactions.

What to Test

You need something to show people before you can test your creative. This can range from a storyboard to a finished ad. More finished materials have more accurate testing results, but they're also more expensive to develop. You might test a finished print ad, but not a finished TV commercial. From roughest to most finished, creative materials might include:

- **Storyboards.** These are hand-drawn and give a rough idea of what the final ad might look like. You can supplement them with other media (e.g., a recorded track of music and/or words). Test storyboards with focus groups to obtain very early qualitative results.

Tip: If you have a small budget, you could test your creative using a central-site intercept survey.

Recruit participants from a public area, such as a shopping mall or busy downtown street. Show them your creative and then ask them to respond to a quick survey. The fast turnaround and high volume of responses makes this method ideal for testing draft executions (i.e., print or television ads prior to production and implementation). When all's said and done, you'll have generated semi-quantitative results. Even though you didn't select your sample randomly, you did use closed-ended questions and tabulate the answers statistically. Use the results to influence your final creative decisions.

- **Roughs.** Prototypes of multimedia campaign ads, roughs have primitive production values. They may include cartoon storyboards set to music or narration, photographic scenes taken from stock footage, or even actual video footage taken from other sources (e.g., finished commercials). Producing roughs isn't cheap, but they can help you get a decent read on ad effectiveness.
- **Finished ads.** Testing an ad in its completed state obviously yields the most valid results. But considering the economics, few campaigns test this type of material.

Limitations

Creative testing is generally worthwhile. But there are times when it's not effective or when you should take it with a grain of salt. Some limitations that effect creative testing include:

- **Sleeper effect.** Hostile political ads have a "sleeper effect" in that they provoke an immediate negative response toward the attacker, but are highly effective over time.
- **Social norms.** If your topic has poor public support, your ad may perform poorly, even if the execution is excellent. Think of it this way: a team of tap-dancing monkeys in tutus singing "Blue Suede Shoes" would probably not get you to hang that velvet Elvis in your living room. And that's a much easier challenge than moving public opinion on tough social issues.
- **Repetition.** Remember your first cup of coffee? Some things in life are an acquired taste. Unfortunately, this also holds true for advertising. Ads that only reach people once won't change their deeply held beliefs. Hence the limitations of creative testing. Tested ads normally get a single exposure (or at most, two exposures). In the real world, we see ads multiple times. Subtle or complex ads may easily flunk a single-exposure creative test, but do very well on the air.

