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Successfully planning central location tests

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R E S E A R C H

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The term “central location test” refers to consumer tests conducted in specially adapted facilities in convenient locations where larger groups of people can be gathered. This type of testing is usually used for research into new or modified products, though it also finds successful application in testing advertising or packaging materials – in other words, in any case where direct contact with the item under research is necessary. Central location tests employ both traditional – quantitative and qualitative – research techniques, as well as modern visual techniques involving monitoring of respondents’ eye movements with specialist apparatus (“eye-tracking”), and testing for degree of recall of particular elements of an image by displaying it for a very short time (“t-scope”).

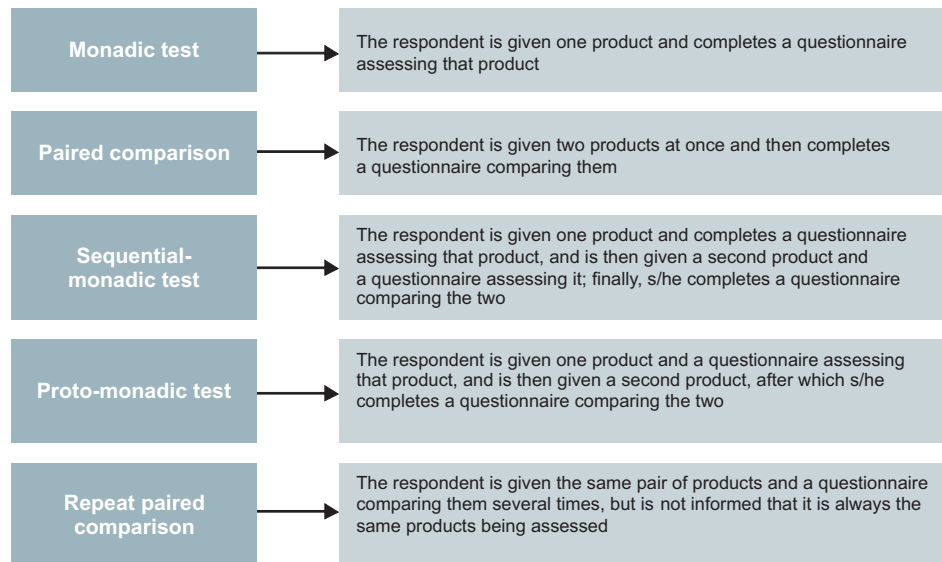
A research agency designing a central location test must take a number of decisions that impact the quality, and thus marketing value, of the data obtained. The following questions must all be taken into consideration when planning such research:

- What method of conducting the test should be used?
- Should respondents be told the brand name of the item being tested?
- What location should be selected for the test?
- What criteria should be taken into account in selection of respondents?
- How should the respondents be recruited?
- How can respondents be persuaded to take part in the test?
- How can the appropriate level of control be assured during the test?
- How can the test be scheduled effectively?

Test scenarios

When planning a central location test there are a range of ways in which it may be conducted:

Test scenarios used in *central location tests*



Source: PMR Research, 2009

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If each respondent is only to assess one product, a “monadic” test format is chosen, whereas if there is a need to test several products at once, one of the other test formats is used. The selection of the type of test depends not only on the number of products to be tested but also on the specific aims of the test.

The monadic test

In this case each respondent assesses only one product. This scenario is used in situations including market launches of new products, in order to find out whether the product will be accepted by consumers. This type of test may also be used to assess innovative products or those with no direct competition on the market. If there is competition, however, and the aim of the test is to define the product’s position in relation to rival products, and/or to identify its differentiating factors, various kinds of comparative tests are used.

Paired comparison

This, the simplest of the comparative tests, involves respondents being shown two products at the same time and comparing them in terms of selected criteria. This test format may also be used successfully to compare different formulas for a product under development in order to establish which of them will be best suited to the market. It is important to remember, however, that the evaluation of the products in a comparative test is a relative evaluation – respondents are assessing which of the products they are testing is better in their opinion.

Sequential-monadic test

To obtain both a relative and absolute product assessment a sophisticated test format is used, which involves respondents first assessing each product separately and only then comparing them. This enables the client to establish whether the differences between the products pointed out by respondents in their comparisons are also noted when the products are being assessed separately. When two products are being compared there is a natural tendency to exaggerate differences. Hence, if in view of the aims of the study this needs to be avoided, the sequential-monadic test can be very useful.

Proto-monadic test

This differs from the sequential-monadic test in that there is no questionnaire assessing the second product – the first product is assessed but the second only compared with the first. The order in which the products are presented is rotated, which gives both comparative results and evaluations of each product.

Repeat paired comparison

In this scenario respondents compare the same pair of products at least twice. The aim of this is to ensure that the respondents' assessments of the products were not random or the result of a momentary impression.

In all the above scenarios, where there is a large number of product variants to be tested, a solution is devised whereby each respondent only tests a subset of all the variants. This is usually due to restrictions on budget or time, or to the limited wherewithal for testing larger numbers of samples in a single session. For instance, when assessing the taste of biscuits, after trying 4-5 products, respondents will be unable to distinguish sufficiently between the levels of sweetness of subsequent biscuits.

“Blind” and branded tests

The brand is an integral part of the product. Assessment of the product is connected with awareness and perception of its brand, opinions on its typical users, and the consumer's own experiences of the brand. For all these reasons, the decision as to whether or not to reveal the brand of the item being tested is a key one, and must be subordinated to the aims of the study.

A **“blind”** test should be used where opinions on the attributes of the product itself (flavour, appearance, etc.) are required – so that the brand does not affect the assessment. Such tests are used to compare rival products (they reveal most clearly the differences between the products) or at the product design stage – tests on prototypes enable manufacturers to create the formula that most suits consumers.

Where it is an assessment of the actual impact of the product on the consumer that is required, a **branded test** (test with brand name obvious) is used. In this situation, the test approximates a natural purchasing situation, where the consumer takes decisions resulting in the selection of a particular product.

Test location

The test location is a very important element of the research (it should be central, convenient to access, close to the recruitment point in the case of on-street recruitment, etc.), but there are also other factors that need to be taken into consideration, such as the size of the room, fixtures, equipment available, etc. Above all it is vital that there is the facility to separate respondents, by ensuring suitable distance between each table, or using screens or booths, so that respondents cannot see the products concurrently being tested by other people or hear their opinions. Where foodstuffs are being tested, additional equipment is also required for preparation and/or storage at suitable temperatures. An effective air-conditioning system is vital where product scent or aroma is being tested.

Respondent selection criteria

The most commonly used criterion taken into account in selection of respondents for consumer tests is use of a particular product or product in a given category. Various additional criteria are also used, such as gender, age, etc. The selection criteria are established above all on the basis of the research aims. When conducting research among several categories of product users it is important to remember that regular users are normally more sensitive to changes in the product and will also find it easier to recognise differences between products than occasional users.

Recruitment of respondents

The way in which respondents are recruited should be appropriate to pre-established selection criteria. If the selection criteria are easy to meet (e.g.: age, gender, use of any product in a given category) simple ad hoc recruitment ("off the street") may bring satisfactory results. There are often many benefits to be had in recruiting in the vicinity of shopping centres or major shopping streets, as these are places where people of all different categories who consume all kinds of products may be found. Recruiting people off the street is a cheap method that brings in lots of respondents in a short time, but is best suited to interviews that last no longer than around 15 minutes, as this does not interfere with respondents' plans and hence they can be persuaded to take part in the tests relatively easily.

Telephone recruitment is more effective in the case of recruitment criteria that are more difficult to meet, and in many instances proves cheaper than "on-street" recruitment. This method is used where the interviews are long, or repeated, and where respondents will be required to attend several tests.

Another method is recruitment of respondents via announcements in the press or on the internet. However, it is important to remember that certain categories of people that are not users of these media are hard to reach through these channels. The "snowball" recruitment method, which involves asking recruits to recommend their own friends is another effective method of prospecting respondents, particularly in the case of groups that are hard to recruit. However, this method carries the risk that the respondent group will be too homogeneous (e.g. in terms of age or education) and may not reflect the actual structure of consumer groups. In practice, combining various techniques of participant recruitment often brings fairly good results.

Remuneration of respondent

When planning such tests, a decision also needs to be taken regarding the form of remuneration given to the respondents for their participation in the interview. For product tests, the remuneration may be a sample of the product being tested, or another product in a similar category. Money or vouchers are another frequently used form of remuneration – and often the most effective in terms of persuading people to take part. Where respondents are recruited in advance and a particular time is arranged for the interview, the remuneration is usually much higher than that offered to respondents recruited on the street (double or even more), as much greater involvement is required of the respondent. In deciding on the level of remuneration, factors to take into consideration include the length of time the interview lasts and how many times the respondent has been asked to attend the venue. The subject of the interview is also relevant. Our experience indicates that the attractiveness of the subject to the participant can in itself be an additional stimulus to take part.

Quality control

One of the ways in which the central location test differs from consumer tests conducted in respondents' homes ("in-home test") is the fact that the data is gathered in the same, standardised conditions. Conducting interviews with respondents in the same space and at approximately the same time ensures control over external factors with the potential to impact the test results. For instance, lighting may influence perception of packaging and its visual attractiveness, while the temperature in which food is stored can affect its taste or smell. Of course, while appropriate training of interviewers is also important for controlling the progress of all types of tests, one clear advantage of central location tests is that the project manager is able to monitor personally the data gathering process, or designate a suitable person as supervisor. Personal control of the testing process by the coordinator produces high-quality results.

Central location tests with PMR

PMR Research conducts in-hall / central location tests in all major cities in Poland, as well as in other countries in Central and Eastern Europe: the Czech Republic and Slovakia, Hungary, Russia and Ukraine, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Romania and Bulgaria, and Slovenia.

For more detailed information regarding our services, please call (48 12) 618 90 80 or e-mail us at: info@pmr-r.com.

Selected central location tests conducted by PMR:

Test on new women's fragrances. The client who commissioned this research specialises in testing products for cosmetics, homeware and foodstuff/beverage manufacturers. To date we have conducted three series of tests involving a total of over 500 women. The test results help the client to find the most appropriate types of scent to launch on the Polish market.

Test on fragrances of fabric softeners. This project was commissioned by one of Europe's major fragrance producers. It comprised two stages: during the first stage female respondents assessed the smell of washing freshly washed in particular liquids. The second stage involved the same fragrances being tested, again by women, in the form of the softener liquid itself in bottles. This method facilitated the identification of differences in opinion of the scent of the softener itself and the smell it lent the washing done with it.

Test of fresh vegetables. During this test respondents tried fresh vegetables and gave their opinions on their taste, associations they produced, etc. Over 130 people took part in the test, each of them testing between 6 and 12 types of vegetables over two days. The results of the study were used by the client to select themes and motifs to be used to promote various types of product.

Test on alcoholic beverages. The aim of this project was to find out the preferences of the Polish vodka consumer, to gather opinions on flavoured vodkas, and to test an advertising concept. The test combined qualitative and quantitative techniques. In the course of the three-hour session respondents not only answered questions, but also assessed advertising concepts, watched a film, and took part in a 20-30-minute discussion on vodkas and their flavours. 105 respondents gave their answers using personal keypads, which enabled the clients to watch the results of the test in real time on monitors at the rear of the room.

Confectionery test. We conducted a three-day product test in Warsaw and Krakow. Test participants had to attend our hall three times over three consecutive days, and on each occasion try several sweet snacks. In all, we conducted 150 full three-day interviews, testing a total of three product categories, each with five variants. The test results served to indicate the most suitable variant of the product for a Polish market launch.

About PMR

PMR Research (www.research-pmr.com)

is the specialised custom market research unit of PMR. Services provided by PMR Research include:

- customer satisfaction studies (consumer and B2B)
- brand awareness and brand image studies
- segmentation, distribution and competition studies
- in-depth sector analyses prepared using PMR Research's proprietary methodology.

We are adept in the full array of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. PMR Research specialises in serving clients from the IT, telecommunications, pharmaceutical, FMCG, retail and construction sectors. We also specialise in business-to-business studies. Still we provide services to companies from all sectors of the economy.

We regularly collaborate with international partners on international projects. We operate in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Montenegro, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Turkey, Ukraine.



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