



The Role of Research in the Name Development and Selection Process

To Focus Group, or Not To Focus Group...When Does Market Research Really Count?

“Let’s put together a few focus groups, show them the names, see what they think, and then we’ll know which name to choose.”

Sound like a good idea? Not always. When in the throes of selecting a new name, soliciting consumer feedback may seem like a great way to take ambiguity out of the process. Many marketers, uncertain about whether or not to change the company name or unable to decide among new brand name candidates, assume that focus groups will be a quick and easy solution to their dilemma. But that may not always be the case.

So before you settle down behind the one-way mirror, it is wise to stop and ask yourself, what is it I really need to learn, where are my information gaps? Do you need a disaster check on decisions made by management? Do you need help “selling up” a new idea? Do you need to gauge target market interest in a new product or service? Or do you need help deciding which new name candidate to select?

The answers to these questions are crucial because clearly defining what it is you need to accomplish with research will determine what type of research, if any, you should undertake to arrive at the right name solution.

Qualitative Research

Focus groups, interviews and other qualitative research techniques are very useful tools with which to discover and understand your target audience’s desires, needs, and priorities. But they are not designed to function as decision-making tools: they cannot tell you which name will perform the best. Understanding the strengths and limitations of qualitative research and how best to use it will save you a lot of time, money, and effort.

If you need to gain greater insight into how your company’s product or service is perceived and valued by your target audience, qualitative research, such as focus groups, can provide an abundance of valuable information. A skilled moderator can guide the focus group respondents through exercises that help them express

- how they feel about your company, product, or service
- the quality of their experience with it
- how that experience measures up to their experiences with your competitors
- what unique benefits they perceive your company, product, or service to offer
- how credible and appealing they think your positioning really is

What focus groups can do, when well-constructed and expertly facilitated, is garner considerable useful information about such perceptions, and the insight gleaned from the groups can both focus and inspire the creative expression of your company’s or product’s brand value. Themes emerging from the consumers’ discussion of your offering’s unique benefits can, for instance, spark ideas for names, taglines, and advertising and promotional campaigns that map directly to your target market’s perceptions and aspirations.



“Since qualitative research can provide so much valuable information with such a modest investment, why not just invite a couple dozen consumers in for pizza and M&Ms and have them evaluate the names and pick out the winner?”

Because it can be a sure-fire way to kill a perfectly good name, that’s why.

The Safest Solution or the Best Solution

How people respond to a name in a focus group is apt to be very different from how they are likely to respond to a name that’s launched with an exciting and well-considered branding effort behind it. Without the context of your advertising and promotional efforts to inform their answers, focus group respondents almost always require company and product names to be descriptive, to provide more grounding information than they would ever need to function in the real world. As a result, the safest, most descriptive names most often emerge as the front-runners in qualitative studies.

Adopting the safest solution isn’t always the best solution. Often the best solution requires a touch of the unexpected, a bit of daring or a dash of flair to stand out among the crowd. Focus groups can provide invaluable insight, but you cannot expect consumers to tell you which name offers the greatest brand-building opportunity. Ultimately, selecting a new name requires intuition. That’s where branding experience and acumen take over and that’s when extraordinary names are identified and selected.

The bottom line is that qualitative research is a tool best applied to help you understand how consumers understand and appreciate who you are, what you do or provide, and how that measures up against what your competitors offer. The insight you gain from qualitative research can indeed help you express your brand in a compelling manner. But qualitative research is poorly applied as an evaluative tool, and should therefore not be used to determine which name candidate will ultimately prove to be the “winner.”

Quantitative Research

So what do you do if you have more than one name candidate that meets your branding goals and management is struggling to understand which name offers the greatest potential? A temptation marketers often succumb to when faced with deciding among a finalist list of attractive name candidates is to conduct an informal survey among colleagues, friends, and family to determine which name is liked the best. This and similar “sniff test” practices are highly unreliable, and often, instead of providing clarity, serve simply to derail the name selection process.

To resolve the struggle over which of several viable name candidates is the one with the most potential, a quantitative research study can prove to be a very effective decision-making tool.

Unlike an informal “sniff test,” a well-designed quantitative study can provide valid data on the appeal of each name candidate, gauge its appropriateness for the product or category, and indicate whether or not it conveys the correct attributes vis-à-vis the product positioning and desired brand attributes.



Specifically, in a quantitative study of alternative name candidates, a statistically representative sample of your target market are queried to determine which name will perform best against specific criteria. If, for example, a goal of your branding effort is to communicate “consummate professionalism,” a well-crafted quantitative study can provide you with projectable data about

- what percentage of your target audience will think Name A connotes professionalism
- what percentage of your target audience will think Name B connotes professionalism
- how each name compares to every other name in the study with respect to communicating professionalism
- which name overall is the most effective at communicating the idea of professionalism

With quantitative research, the bottom line is that it can provide you with an accurate read on how many members of your target market will respond to a particular name, in what way, and to what degree. This insight into target market behavior can be of great value when trying to determine where to expend your precious branding budget and resources.

The “No Research” Option

But what if your company cannot afford to conduct research, or the time requirements of a research study are untenable due to scheduling restraints? Is all lost?

No, of course not. Research data can provide insight into your target market’s brand perceptions and provide statistical projections about their responses to various solutions. But it cannot replace your own deep understanding of your company’s capabilities and potential, your specific marketplace opportunities, your strategic intent, the competitive playing field, the “next big thing,” or, finally, what the right solution actually is for your brand.

A new name is an opportunity, and, in marketing as in all areas of life, an opportunity can be seized and realized without the benefit of research. Ultimately, your unique knowledge of your situation – coupled with your intuition – is the best guide for selecting a new name or any other essential branding tool.

(Metaphor would like to thank Dan Rubin of The B/R/S Group for his contribution to this discussion.)

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