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## DVJ POINT OF VIEW

Reflecting Reality—Statements in Questionnaires Generate Limited or Even Biased Insights

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## BACKGROUND

The goal of market(ing) research is to collect information about markets and/or consumers in order to gain insight and/or support decision making. Given this goal, market research should design studies that mirror as closely as possible the way in which consumers evaluate and choose products in real life. Only then can findings from market research produce valid insights. However, we identify a number of issues in contemporary market research that may limit or even bias the insights they generate. One such issue relates to consumer evaluation and decision making.

Scientific research<sup>1</sup> indicates that consumers most of the time spend very little time and effort on the evaluations and choices they make. Hence, market research should capture this type of behavior. Unfortunately, market research is replete with approaches that do not reflect consumers' natural way of evaluating and deciding. Specifically, presenting respondents with researcher defined statements and questions in order to capture how consumers evaluate brands, products, packages, or campaigns may produce misleading information and insights. In the current white paper we hold this view point. We also offer an alternative: asking respondents to report the first associations that come to their minds when they are confronted with a brand, package, or advertising. We will argue why including associations in market research is critical in generating valid insights that reflect real world evaluation and decision making.

## STATEMENTS AND QUESTIONS PRODUCE LIMITED OR EVEN BIASED INSIGHTS

It is common practice in market research to use statements in order to capture how consumers evaluate brands, products, packages, or campaigns. For example, market researchers ask consumers to rate the perceived quality of a product, how credible their most recent campaign is, how likeable consumers find their brand endorser, et cetera. This approach allows market researchers to understand to what extent consumers agree with concepts defined by market researchers. However, the fact that consumers only respond to statements that researchers include in the questionnaire is problematic for at least two reasons. We will elaborate on them below.

### Insights are steered by researchers, not consumers

By nature, statements and questions reflect concepts which *marketers* believe are important in consumer evaluation and choice. Market research that only presents researcher-defined statements to respondents will limit its insights to exactly those pre-defined concepts. This does not mean that consumers' responses are invalid. What it does mean is that the scope of the study and its resulting insights are limited to the concepts researchers decided to include in the study. For example, when asked, consumers may indicate that they consider a brand's packaging as appealing, but this does not mean that packaging is a salient aspect for them, let alone that it is a



relevant driver of their purchase decisions in the relevant category. Similarly, it does not mean that a brand's packaging stands out from the competition when consumers are deciding between alternatives. In sum, focusing on predefined statements and questions in market research limits its findings to concepts that marketers feel are important. It does not provide insight into the concepts and associations that come up naturally in consumers' heads and that drive their evaluations and behaviors. Hence, focusing on consumers' self-generated responses to brands, products, packages, or campaigns produces insights into the full scope of relevant concepts in consumer evaluation and behavior.

## Statements do not reflect real-life evaluation and decision processes

A second reason why focusing solely on statements and questions produces limited or even biased insights involves the consumer evaluation and decision process. Arguably, no single market researcher believes that consumers routinely rate concepts such as likeability, credibility, and quality when they stand in front of a shelf, trying to decide between brands. But responding to statements and questions in a questionnaire is a relatively rational and effortful endeavor, which is inconsistent with consumers' natural tendency to make quick and intuitive decisions. As Ian Murray,<sup>2</sup> on his GreenBook blog, put it:

"Market research... has clung to the standard rational model of economics for far too long. ... There are many innovative approaches ... that are enhancing the ability of MR to capture real world decisions and behavior."

Surely there are situations where consumers put mental effort into their choices, but more often, consumers rely on associations and intuitions when making decisions.<sup>1</sup> Including free associations in market research is a powerful way to increase its external validity, because associations resemble consumers' natural evaluation and decision process.

## THE VALUE OF FREE ASSOCIATIONS

Associations in market research represent an indirect form of questioning that encourages respondents to project their underlying motivations, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings. Respondents are asked to write down the things that spontaneously come to mind when they think of the brand, commercial, or package. Because consumers subsequently rate the extent to which their associations are positive or negative, validity is automatically ensured.

Scientific research shows that associations are key in consumer evaluation, memory, and choice. As marketing professors Van Osselaer and Janiszewski<sup>3</sup> put it, "brand associations are fundamental to understanding product evaluation." Researchers from the UK<sup>4</sup> note that consumers use brand associations to aid them in their purchase decisions, and as such, brand associations are a core component of brand equity. In addition, research on our own database empirically demonstrates the relative predictive power of the number of free associations reported by respondents on the one hand and their responses to statements and questions on the other hand. We combined a large number of copy tests from various brands and categories

into a single data base in order to perform a meta-analysis on the value of associations vs. statements. The main outcome of focus was brand impact—a composite measure of unaided brand awareness, aided brand awareness, ad recognition, and claimed message recall. As can be seen in the figure below, regression analysis demonstrated that the number of associations respondents reported in response to a commercial was a substantially stronger predictor of brand impact than responses to statements such as likeability of the commercial and commercial credibility.



**Figure.** Predictors of brand impact, based on regression analysis on DVJ Insights copy test database.

## CONCLUSION

In order to generate insights that reflect the way consumers evaluate and decide in real life, market research should employ methods that mirror naturally occurring processes. As scientific research demonstrates that consumers generally put little effort into their evaluations and decisions, market research should use measurements that capture these fast, intuitive processes. Associations, where consumers report their first thoughts in response to a brand, package, or campaign, are better in reflecting real life consumer evaluations and decisions than presenting consumers with statements and questions. The latter not only are a poor reflection of natural consumer behavior, the insights they produce are also limited or even biased because they reflect researcher (nor consumer) defined concepts. Associations reflect natural evaluation and decision making better, and hence provide more valid insights when they are included in market research.

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## ABOUT THE COMPANY

### DVJ

DVJ is a fast growing market research agency, and is currently enjoying global expansion. With offices in the Netherlands and the UK, DVJ conducts online research in more than 40 countries worldwide. DVJ focuses on delivering excellent, innovative and exciting research, always developed to validate and explore at the same time. DVJ combines Industry knowledge with top class research solutions. The vision of DVJ is to make research fun and to make sure we truly listen to our clients and consumers.

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