

BRAND CONCEPT TESTING: Is Your Message Right for Your Market?

“Know thyself” is one of the tenets of good communications – a concept that’s often easier said than done. It’s also the reason why many professional services organizations have been turning to concept testing to confirm their marketing directions – testing strategies from brand positioning lines to related advertising concepts. Concept testing makes sense particularly when significant resources are put behind the introduction of a new strategic marketing direction.

Concept Testing Defined

But concept testing is not the same as “focus group” testing. The differences are subtle but important. With focus groups, the goal is typically to get product or service feedback that is broad in nature. Concept testing is narrower. In a concept testing session, the goal is to answer the question: How well does our brand (or advertising, etc.) communicate our defined message?

Structured this way, concept testing provides an important barometer of communications effectiveness. In contrast to focus group testing, participants are not asked for feedback that strays too far from communication effectiveness. When testing a brand or advertising strategy, the goals differ greatly from gathering an understanding of purchase decisions of targeted consumers.

Concept testing’s best and highest use is in confirming a marketplace direction, denying it, or clarifying it. Concept testing is by nature a qualitative process. It relies on the perceptions, thoughts and beliefs of its participants.

We have found concept testing to be a valuable tool with law firms that have developed possible brand directions but need outside confirmation of their decisions. The most common scenario is with a firm’s “brand” committee who likes a particular direction but wants specific outside feedback from clients to confirm their decision before introducing the direction within the firm.

Implementation

Typically concept testing sessions involve client groups although some firms have also successfully added non-client groups. Client groups might include a diverse mix of in-house counsel and business executives. Non-client groups might include targeted in-house clients, friends of the firm, referral sources, industry consultants and so forth.

There is no hard and fast rule about how many groups to use.. Some firms gather sufficient information with just one group of clients. Other firms have used two or three diverse groups. More than three groups typically is not productive – again, because the goal is to get specific feedback on whether a chosen direction is an effective way to communicate a chosen message. So, you need to be crystal clear on *what* message your firm is testing and *why* you are testing it.

The general rule for concept testing is this: Look at the results as **directive not definitive**. We say this because our belief is that branding and advertising strategies should come from within a firm – they should communicate the essence of the firm rather than be only a response to the marketplace’s whims. Certainly, brands and ads have to track with a client or prospective client base. But more than anything else, they need to represent who a firm is and what its distinction is. Distinction lasts longer than marketplace trends.

The following case studies provide three different approaches in concept testing. The processes and expectations varied for each group.

Case Study One: Fennemore Craig

Phoenix-based law firm Fennemore Craig decided to use concept testing as it developed its brand essence. “We wanted to see if we were correct in our analysis and also be certain about what aspects of our firm were most important to our clients and prospective clients,” said Jay Kramer, the chair of Fennemore Craig’s Client Development/Retention Committee.

“Our goal in undertaking concept testing was to make sure our brand was aligned with the interests of our clients,” explained Kramer. In identifying its brand, Fennemore Craig discovered that several factors made the firm distinctive. These included the firm’s status as Arizona’s oldest law firm as well as its reputation for broad transactional and litigation experience, and its deep contacts in the Southwest’s business and governmental communities.

For its concept testing, Fennemore identified six high-level executives, including in-house counsels and asked for their participation in a telephone conference call. Each participant received a possible brand line and three advertising applications prior to the call. During the call, each participant was asked specific questions about the communications ability of the brand line as well as each advertisement.

The result? The firm’s clients felt a deep sense of connection to the firm’s history, steadfast service and connections. “Concept testing was one of the most valuable things we could have done. We were surprised by the strength of our clients’ convictions. We, as a firm, had a perception that they might have associated our history as stodgy. Instead, it was an important factor in why they retained us and worked with us,” said Kramer.

Based on the concept testing findings, Fennemore has adopted the brand positioning line, “A Tradition to Leverage.”

Case Study Two: The American Bar Endowment

“What’s important to our members is always what’s important to us,” said Charlie Thompson, a lawyer and former president of the Chicago-based American Bar Endowment, a charitable affiliate of the 400,000-member American Bar Association. The ABE sponsors group insurance products with a unique charitable giving option to ABA-member lawyers.

Indeed, staying close to the sensitivities of the target audience is one of the top reasons firms consider concept testing. In the ABE’s case, it had undergone a brand

development process and emerged with the line, “Insuring Your Life’s Needs. Advancing Your Life’s Work.”

When the line was presented to the ABE’s all-lawyer board of directors, they were evenly even split in preference between this line and one other. “We’re a rather democratic organization given that our board members are lawyers who volunteer their time to work with us. With the fairly even split in brand line preferences, we not only wanted to undergo concept testing to help with our brand decision but also to make sure we were being clear in communicating our distinction to the ultimate consumer: the ABA member,” said Thompson.

In fact, one of the reasons the ABE undertook a brand process was to help it clarify its offerings in the minds of its members as well as increase the visibility of the charitable aspects of its insurance products. Additionally, the ABE wanted its brand to be broad enough to encompass any new programs beyond its insurance programs such as the introduction of its Charitable Gift Fund. “Our family of programs had to all fit under a single brand banner and they had to fit well,” explained Thompson.

Thus, at a recent ABA Annual Meeting, the ABE proceeded to test three possible brand positioning lines. Its approach was to use “intercept interviews,” -- that is, qualifying ABA-member lawyers and then asking them to meet with an interviewer to answer several questions about their preferences. (Unlike focus group testing, concept testing is designed to elicit information about a brand positioning line’s communication effectiveness as measured against an organization’s points of desired distinction.)

With about 30 individual interviews complete, the ABE had its answer: The original, recommended positioning line was confirmed. These findings were presented to the ABE board and the brand line, “Insuring Your Life’s Needs. Advancing Your Life’s Work.” was accepted.

Case Study Three: Wood & Bender

Wood & Bender, a niche law firm in Southern California that specializes in insurance policy enforcement, wanted its brand to be the umbrella for its national communications effort. In order to test its proposed brand, two separate concept testing groups were set up with their primary targets: Large law firms (referral sources) and in-house counsel.

Each group was asked to discuss the communication effectiveness of its proposed message via:

1. The firm’s brand franchise, brand personality, and 5 unique selling points,
2. The firm’s positioning line, and an alternative line,
3. The new firm logo,
4. A potential ad,
5. A potential direct mail piece, and
6. A description of a possible packaged product offering.

The feedback received was extraordinarily precise and positive regarding Wood & Bender’s brand development approach and strategy. Overall, there was great praise for the direction the firm proposed taking. The firm adopted the line, “Settle for everything.” Additionally and

somewhat unexpectedly, there were also a great many excellent suggestions for refining messages and approaches.

Relevant comments from the session included:

“I believe their assertions of expertise. I like the passion in their art.”

“Their upfront, aggressive attitude is distinctive.”

“‘Settle for Everything.’ is a great line. It’s short, distinctive and clever.”

“The ad is superbly written and very clever. It makes ‘Settle for Everything.’ understandable.”

“The direct mail ad has punch. It makes you want to open it.”

“If this (policy analyzer) product went to a board, they would think it was really a good idea. The key is that Wood & Bender isn’t selling insurance and could provide an independent review of insurance policies.”

Anne Gallagher and Merry Neitlich authored this article as partners in Extreme Marketing, which provides full-service brand development and marketing consulting services to professional services firms. Merry can be reached at merry@emconsults.org and Anne anne@emconsults.org