

# Why do we bother to pre-test?

Helen Westwell, Hall & Partners, argues that pre-tests need to provide rich information to justify their use – whatever their precise objectives

**A**S FAR BACK as 1974 Alan Hedges, in *Testing to Destruction* (1), said of creative advertising research 'we are not testing the advertising since we do not have, and cannot have any such machine'. This, of course, is conceptually correct; how can we test how an ad will work in real life when by definition a test is not real life?

Because of this, advertising pre-testing is a highly controversial area of market research. Many people, especially those responsible for planning and creating advertisements, have a genuine loathing of it. It is a heartfelt fear that goes far beyond the natural – but uncommercial – urge to protect the creative element of an agency's work.

Many of us at Hall & Partners are trained in advertising and, to an extent, we share these concerns. However, there are very valid and practical reasons to attempt to pre-test advertising. These reasons are many and varied and cover areas such as the following.

- *A condition of running the ad.* Given the not insignificant expense of both making and airing advertising, it seems sensible that the company has some prior indication of whether it will work – whether it is likely to give a sales return on the investment, for example.

- *Company policy.* Particularly in the larger companies, it has become policy that all ads must be pre-tested, often at animatic or finished film stage.

- *To resolve internal disagreements.* One side may believe an ad will work while the other does not. Given that these are both subjective opinions, often the only resolution is to quantify consumers' opinions on the matter.

- *To decide on one ad over another.* If two or more routes have been developed and there is a disagreement on which one will best fulfil its objectives, pre-testing is considered a better option than relying

on subjective opinion.

- *Executional questions.* There are often executional elements where there are different options, such as: which music track? Are the characters right for the brand? Is the joke funny? Again, decisions that people too close to the brand and the ad sometimes cannot make a judgment on and need the consumer's point of view.

It is also likely that the reasons for a specific pre-test will fall into one or more of these categories and with different people involved in the process needing different information from it.

## How are these needs being fulfilled?

It seems to us at Hall & Partners that the pre-testing products currently available do not sufficiently answer these needs and as such are seriously flawed. Even 25 years after the publication of *Testing to Destruction*, many remain rigid and over-mechanistic in their approach.

Even when a more flexible methodology is adopted, the analysis of data and presentation of findings can be crude and over-simplistic. To be specific, we believe that there are at least six major criticisms of current pre-testing methods. They are as follows.

- *The one-number answer.* Too often a pre-testing methodology will reduce a necessarily complex answer to a single score. Results are judged good or bad, black or white, depending on which side of the 'norm' they fall. But how is the norm calculated? Is it a scientific measure, which reflects the performance of a group of similar brands whose owners are pursuing the same objectives? Or is it

just a crude average, representing more than a chalk mark on a building's yardstick? To say an ad sits 0.75 above or below a crude average means nothing at all.

- *The 'one measure fits all' assumption.* People have argued for decades which measures best predict how successful an advertisement will be. There is the 'recall' camp, which goes back to George Gallup in the 1930s who argued that consumers' ability to remember an advertisement is directly related to sales. Then there are the 'persuasion shifters' who believe that advertising success is best predicted by the number of people who – in a research environment – choose one brand over another after seeing an advertisement. While the latter is preferable in so far as it assumes that an advertisement must alter consumer consciousness to work, it tracks only an active change in behaviour.

As Colin McDonald has said (2), 'a persuasion shifting approach favours particular types of advertisements ... launch ... new news ... attention ... and the rational'. But what of the increasing number of advertisements that are designed to alter people's perceptions and not necessarily immediate behaviour? For this type of advertising – much of it now aimed at maintaining consumers' brand relationships – new and much more sophisticated pre-testing measures are required.

- *The mechanistic approach.* Nothing likely to infuriate an advertising agency creative team more than an electronic mechanical system that seeks to test consumer reaction to an advertisement

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