



Copernicus
*Marketing Consulting
and Research*

Self-Reported Importance

No Winning Insights Here

By Kevin J. Clancy, Ph. D., and Peter C. Krieg

To find out what buyers care about—in other words—what’s most important when considering a purchase in a particular product or service category—too many marketers think all they have to do is ask.

WARNING: This is exactly what you DO NOT want to do!

In a typical situation, researchers will pull out a list of 25-125 different attributes, such as “contains fluoride,” in the case of toothpaste or, “has ATMs everywhere,” in the case of a bank, and benefits, such as, “prevents tooth decay,” or “makes you feel like a valued customer,” and ask you how important each is on a five-point scale. For instance: “When you are in the market for a new sports car, how important is it to you that the car impresses your friends and neighbors?” Extremely important? Very Important? Somewhat important? Slightly important? Not at all important?

The problem is you'll never learn what's really important by asking what's important: It's highly unlikely to tell you what is truly motivating in the category. Here's why.

Take a new energy cola. Researchers asked respondents about the importance of taste, refreshment, sugar content, caffeine content, color of the can, availability of 16 oz. bottles, has taurine, availability in grocery stores, availability in health clubs, offers the lowest price, it makes you feel young, and a whole slew of other characteristics. Taste and refreshment, not unexpectedly, topped the list as very important characteristics, along with sugar and caffeine content, while taurine, makes you feel young, and lowest price rounded out the bottom of the list. So what's wrong with this picture?

Well, for one, taste and refreshment are price-of-admission items—the very basics any energy cola needs to get into and stay in the market. After all, who's going to seek out and buy an energy cola on a regular basis that they think tastes bad? Same goes for sugar and caffeine. These aren't exciting positioning opportunities for a new energy cola because every market player has to have them, so everyone already does. There's no chance to break out from the clutter with these product attributes.

These issues become particularly evident when you go on to ask respondents how satisfied they are with the brands they use regularly in terms of the same set of attributes and benefits on another five-point scale. This scale might range from “extremely satisfied” to “not at all satisfied,” or “excellent” to “poor”—it makes no difference which one you use. What you find is that these price-of-admission items are both very important *and* already satisfied (i.e., the brands they use rank “high” on importance and satisfaction). Phil Kotler, the dean of American marketing professors currently at the Kellogg School of Business at Northwestern University, would say that these characteristics are, therefore, not consumer problems. Because marketing is the discipline concerned with solving buyer problems, importance ratings alone do not reveal information key to good marketing.

People will also say that something is unimportant if they don't know anything about it. People aren't likely to admit to what they don't know, but even if they are, how many will really spend the time learning about what something is to answer a questionnaire? In the case of the energy cola, "contains taurine," was unlikely to rank as very important until recently. Red Bull, one of the fastest growing soft drinks in America, burst on the scene a couple of years ago and its key ingredient, the herbal stimulant taurine, emerged as an important point of differentiation. Now every soft drink company is trying to replicate Red Bull's success with all manner of "natural," herbal energy-boosters.

Further bear in mind that "importance" is a loaded word; it inherently implies rationality. So when asked about importance, people naturally want to give a response they think the researcher wants to hear, a response that will make them look good in the interviewer's eyes—whether those eyes are in front of them or not. Ask what's important and people will give you the most rational, expected, socially acceptable answers.

As a result, no one will *ever* tell you that "makes you feel young," is especially important, yet it has been an overwhelmingly successful positioning for Pepsi for decades. People just naturally hesitate to say anything that makes them seem superficial. Likewise, people do not want to admit they are price sensitive. No one wants to come across as cheap, so low price, though it may be highly motivating, is reported as relatively unimportant. This holds true whether a respondent is interviewed by a live person, or is responding to a mail questionnaire, or online survey.

Conclusion: Self-reported importance yields no great insights, certainly not the kind that leads to truly transformational marketing.