



Brand Tracking In a New Key: What We Advise and Why

Paul Riedesel, Ph.D.

President, Action Marketing Research

Contemporary understanding of how the human mind functions calls into question the research practices and interpretation of conventional brand and advertising tracking. We argue in favor of methods that are more consistent with how the mind actually works.

Tracking methods seem to be carved in stone.

Surveys meant to measure the status of brands over time are called tracking studies. They quite often bookend an advertising campaign, and are then referred to as ad tracking. Most client organizations, advertising agencies, and research companies use a common template for tracking studies, so their content is very routine. With few exceptions, it is expected that a tracking study will ask about:

- Unaided and aided awareness of brands in the category
- Unaided and aided awareness (recall) of advertising in the category
- Purchase interest or consideration of brands in the category
- Attributes of brands in the category

Common additions include:

- Playback of advertising the respondents claims to have seen/heard
- Recognition of advertising content (prompted)
- Sources of advertising awareness
- Overall attitudes about the brands

Because the methods are so routine, it is unusual for anyone to ask, "Why are we doing it this way?" The fact that the end client wants and expects the customary formats is one good reason, but the question deserves more serious consideration.

The theory behind current methods is implicit at best—and old.

Many do not realize it, but current tracking methods imply several dated psychological models. One of them is the "stimulus/response" model. It assumes that organisms are passive recipients of external stimuli (advertising among them). With the right stimuli applied often enough, the organism will respond (such as buying a product). The S/R model and behaviorism in general are out of fashion in professional psychology, yet we too often accept its very mechanical assumptions.

While not integrated with S/R theory at all, a second paradigm is also implicit in conventional tracking methods. (Actually, its roots are in simplified economic theory rather than a serious school of psychology.) We will refer to this paradigm as that of "rational decision making." When making, say, a purchase decision, the paradigm posits that the consumer deliberately weighs the pro's and con's of each alternative against the expected outcomes, and makes a choice. People make different choices because they have different values or a different calculus of pleasure and pain.

One not unimportant attraction of this model is its mathematical tractability. If there are ten relevant product attributes, then I supposedly attach a relative level of importance to each one of them; and if you can measure what I think of all brands on each of those attributes, then you can calculate which brand has the highest utility, and predict that I will buy it.

Even those who don't regard human decision making as being quite this tidy still think of purchase behavior as being largely rational. Just as pollsters ask voters "Which issue was most important in who you voted for?" marketers as a whole want to believe that consumers make choices for reasons they can explain.

Finally, many research methods take for granted that people carry around well-crystallized attitudes about brands and brand attributes. Among these could be a conscious intention to buy certain brands or products. "Hierarchy of effects" models have their surface appeal and have been with us for over 40 years, but that doesn't make them right. One of the best known is "AIDA", which represents the supposed sequence of Attention-Interest-Desire-Action.

Would most users of conventional tracking studies be able to defend the assumptions of S/R theory, simplified microeconomics, the rational choice model, and AIDA? Probably not. They look plausible, but any science behind them is long forgotten. Yet tracking studies proceed year after year with little consciousness of their assumptions about mind and behavior.

The mind is adaptive, driven by emotion, and constituted of memories.

Scholarly research in several fields—notably neuroscience and behavioral economics—has discredited a great deal of what has been taken for granted by marketers and marketing researchers. If we look at the content of standard tracking studies in this new light, we see that some (though not all) of the conventional metrics are of dubious validity.

The brain is anything but a passive recipient of stimuli. It has evolved to filter out many of the sensory inputs it receives. Sometimes a sensory input triggers conscious awareness or reflection, but more often it is ignored. Past experiences have influenced the physical state of the brain in the form of the chemical balance of synapses, so each person is different. What you pay attention to, what you are conscious of, what you learn are dependent on the current state of your brain.

A basic survival mechanism of the primitive part of the brain is the emotional tagging of sensory input. The response modes are simple: positive (pleasure, attraction), negative (pain repulsion), and neutral (ignore it). If things we experience are not tagged with emotion, we do not become aware of them. This is not a matter of people consciously choosing to ignore things (though they can and do). The lower brain saves us a great deal of work by not bothering the higher brain with what it senses to be unimportant.

There is nothing in the brain that remotely resembles a hierarchy of content such as attention, interest, and desire. There are no enduring structures in the brain that can be thought of as "containing" a specific attitude about a brand or anything else. At a biochemical level, all that exists in the brain are bits of memory. When we learn something, what we are really doing is creating memories. Given some stimulus—the mention of a brand, the name of an old classmate, the appearance of a product, the ring of a telephone—we start to call up memories.

The more synapses that fire together, the more vivid our conscious thought will be. But the brain is still drawing on an incredibly large pool of discrete bits. The connections between them are hardly orderly. Mention of your third grade teacher might lead you to think of a childhood pet, a photo album your parents have, or the "haunted house" near your school.

In the view of one author (Erik du Plessis), the brain is like an overstuffed cupboard full of memories. It does not have tidy compartments. But if a brand has been built well, for instance, mention of it will trigger a network of memories that have a positive emotional charge.

Much of what we do is not the end-result of conscious decision making.

Thinking and deciding are work. Work takes energy. Thinking about too many things may distract you from the saber tooth tiger creeping your way. Natural selection has rewarded our species for its ability to avoid making conscious decisions whenever possible!

Consider a mundane trip through a grocery store. Observational research shows that many purchases take but a few seconds. The shopper is not deciding which brand to buy, but searching for her habitual brand. Deliberated purchases may well be the exception in many categories.

Furthermore, research shows that people often come to conclusions (such as purchases) for reasons they cannot explain. "I just liked it better." "Something told me that he was right for me." "Is that what I bought?" The moral is that the unconscious is a powerful agent in our lives.

Win their attention and liking, and their pocketbooks will follow.

This is the essence of what we believe about building a brand. Advertising and many other tools of marketing are means. There is no one best way to use them, but they must be subordinate to those two ends.

First of all, potential buyers must "know" about your brand in the sense of having a dense neural network of memories associated with it. You want any mention or thought of the category—especially about a purchase—to trigger a quick cascade of memories of your brand. This is a zero-sum process insofar as consciousness given to one brand comes at the expense of another.

Second, you want those memories and the images formed from them to have a positive emotional charge. Unlike the lower brain, the higher brain discerns a repertoire of emotions. Each of the following sensations, and many more, could be helpful if they are tied to your brand more than others:

- Safety and security
- Physical exhilaration
- Hedonic satisfaction
- Satisfaction from caring for others
- Exclusivity or uniqueness

Of course you need products that meet expectations. Of course you need good product distribution. Of course you need appropriate pricing. But for those whose job it is to build brands, nothing matters more than beating the competition at creating and sustaining rich, emotionally positive brand memories.

All else being equal, the consumer will buy the brand about which he/she has the richest, most positive feelings.

Working Smarter

We do not think that the hierarchy of effects model is valid. We certainly do not think that brand choice typically follows from a conscious weighing of brand attributes. For that matter, we doubt that the attitudes supposedly measured by many brand attribute questions even existed before the survey question was asked! We do not think that consumers have resolved on their likelihood of buying various brands, and then committed them to memory in case a researcher should ask.

We do think that tracking research needs to be taken apart, and put back together again using only the methods and concepts that are justified by what we now know.

In this final section we will outline our views on what tracking studies should look like in concrete terms. The language should be largely familiar. The underlying rationale is often not.

Awareness of the Brand

Conceptually, the goal of such questions is to quantify the breadth and depth of consumers' memories associated with the brand. Although we typically report out simple percentages of "aware" and "non-aware" consumers, there really is an underlying continuum.

- Unaided recall of brand names, given a category prompt, is a good if rough indicator. The more often your brand is named first or mentioned at all, the higher in consciousness it must be, and/or the more closely linked it is to memories of the category as presented.
- Aided recognition of brand names is also an indicator of the presence of brand-related memories. Its value varies, however. If the brands you care about are close to universally recognized (say, 90% or higher), there is little point wasting interview time by asking aided questions.

- Familiarity with a brand does not lend itself to discrete yes/no percentages, but may be a more valid indicator of the depth of memories. We offer several levels of familiarity and include an option like "I had not heard of this brand until today."
- A measure that could be called depth of awareness is impractical in most survey environments, but would be an excellent gauge of the extent to which consumers have memories (or knowledge) about the brand. It would take the form of asking consumers to talk about whatever comes to mind about the brand. How many literal words were said? How long did she/he talk about Brand A compared to Brand B?

Advertising Awareness

Since many tracking studies originate in agencies or are used by client companies to evaluate their agencies, ad awareness questions are taken very seriously. Doing so may be tactically necessary, but it must be remembered that advertising is only a means. The brand is the end.

- Questions on unaided recall of advertising by brand often provide disappointing results. Well-known brands get credit even if they have run nothing in years. A smaller brand may have committed to the biggest media schedule in its history, only to see numbers under five percent. Even though you may have asked for a window of three to six months, probing may determine that the campaign the consumer is remembering happened years ago. In net, we feel this question is often expendable.
- Aided or prompted awareness of advertising by brands yields larger percentages, but we know that these numbers are also questionable.
 - Asking those who claim to be aware of an ad to play back the ideas or setting is a step toward winnowing out the false awareness.
- We are of the opinion that recognition of advertising scenes, tag lines, characters or images is a more meaningful topic of questioning. It is easier to do this in Internet interviewing than in a telephone survey, unfortunately. If your intent is to accurately measure the proportion of respondents who were actually exposed to a spot or campaign, this is the only choice. If you want to test the impact of two or more spots that you know had comparable media weight, then recognition is the proper metric, not vague "awareness."

Brand Valence

While asking purchase intent questions may be a necessary evil, our view is that they do not usually measure existing attitudes the consumer has. Our strong preference for a key or overall measure is one we call brand valence. It is meant to measure the net emotional charge that brand memories carry. In our theory, this charge runs from negative to positive with a genuine neutral midpoint, and such a continuum is intuitive to consumers.

While the question still requires consumers to quantify what is in their minds, we believe that reflecting on their visceral feelings is more natural and less work than deliberating on their purchase intent or consideration.

Think again of what we know about actual buying processes. Once the consumer is activated to shop, he/she will be exposed to brand cues such as packaging or even brand names. Those cues will trigger brand memories, if any, with their emotional color. The more positive those associations are, the more that brand will serve as a tie-breaker between products that are otherwise acceptable in terms of price, size, or other features.

- The appropriate scale must, therefore, range from negative to positive values with "0" in the middle. We have been satisfied with an explicit scale of -5 to +5.
- We prefer language that refers to how the respondent feels about the brand—"very negative" to "very positive"; liking-disliking or favorability are other possible anchors.
- We also recommend asking valence questions only about brands with which the consumer is somewhat familiar.
- To represent overall valence for all consumers, we have no qualms about assigning a value of "0" for those who are unfamiliar.

Brand Attributes

This final component of many tracking studies has uncertain value in our opinion. While brands may differ significantly from each other, these differences are suspiciously correlated with each other, overall brand familiarity, valence, and past purchasing. Furthermore, it is exceptional for the average attribute ratings of a given brand to change meaningfully over time. We also know that answering a long series of such ratings for multiple brands is tedious for respondents. Dropout rates in our online surveys invariably spike when an attribute question grid comes up.

To be fair, many advertising campaigns are designed to change the image of the brand in some way. How can their success be evaluated if we don't collect attribute ratings?

To begin with, isolate the characterizations that matter most for the brand at this moment in time. If there are more than three that the campaign is charged with communicating, it is already on the path to failure. Consumers rarely carry around ten—much less 20 or 30—independent assessments in their heads of attributes for multiple brands. What they will have when a brand has been mentioned is some cascade of memories. Once they have spilled out, the consumer will tend to answer each attribute question on the basis of the totality of those memories, not just the ones we think they should pay attention to.

The goals of a campaign (hopefully three or less) are commonly worked into actual tag lines. To the degree that consumers recognize the line and correctly associate it with your brand, then that "attribute" is helping. Rates of recognition and correct attribution are unequivocal and easily tracked over time.

If what you are doing is truly a tracking study rather than a more comprehensive positioning study (where some of our concerns also apply), then you probably care only about 1) how your brand has changed and 2) how it compares to the competition on the whole.

We recommend a form of questioning that is more efficient, less aggravating to study respondents, and closely tied to what matters. For those who are at least somewhat familiar with your brand, we would explicitly ask whether that brand is better, worse, or comparable to other brands in the category on the attributes of interest. For instance:

- Compared to other brands you might consider, would you say Acme is . . .
 - Much more innovative
 - Somewhat more innovative
 - Somewhat less innovative
 - Much less innovative
 - Or, about as innovative as other brands

Why wade through three, or four, or five, or more repetitions of an "innovation" question just because "it's always been done that way"? Will you and your client really use all that data on the other brands? How credible is it anyway if your respondents were getting cranky?

Change can be difficult

Old habits die hard, and that is no less true of research practices. But Socrates taught that "the unexamined life is not worth living", and we would add a corollary that even well-established research methods should also be re-examined from time to time.

We believe that many of the implicit theoretical underpinnings of conventional tracking research have been discredited. We have much better explanations and models of cognitive processes than we did 30 or 40 years ago, so we have a professional obligation to revise our methods and models. This paper proposes what amount to modest changes in the content of tracking surveys, though accompanied by very different interpretations of the findings.

If we are asked to work with your company for an ad/brand tracking study, we will advocate the methods presented here backed by the principles we have reviewed. One thing we are certain of is that we are wrong in some respect; but we are equally certain that performing brand tracking in this new key is a significant improvement over the old one.