

# Insight-Out Design

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**T**he Tropicana “orange and straw” debacle is well on its way to becoming a classic example of redesign gone wrong. The lesson is simple but profound: Good designers always remember that they are designing for real people, not for their firms, themselves, or even their clients. This means that design and consumer research are inextricably linked.

Design, at its core, is an empathetic undertaking. Unlike art, which springs from the artist’s need for self-expression, design is always for someone else. Both are creative, innovative, and original. But for all they have in common, art and design are very different. Design seeks to enhance a consumer’s experience of or interaction with a product. It’s all about problem solving and communication.

Good research properly applied can be a designer’s best friend. Yet, sad to say, every designer has experienced the pain of poorly conceived or applied research. As much as good information is invaluable to the design process, poor research can subvert and even kill great design. Here are a few points to remember in getting the most from your design research.

**Invest in learning both before and after the design stage.** There are two main ways research can be used to inform and optimize the design process: insight and equity understanding before design, and post-design validation. Both are valuable and useful, but many marketers spend a disproportionate amount of their research dollars on post-design testing.

Validation can hypothesize business performance of a new design, making it a good final step before launch, but bypassing insight research means we miss the opportunity to learn from, and be inspired by, consumers. Without a deep understanding of consumers, a designer can’t improve an experience or solve a problem for them. Even worse, a beloved brand icon can be mishandled, provoking a backlash from loyal customers.

Everyone on the redesign team for Downy fabric softener knew the importance of the Downy baby as a cherished icon linked to important equities. The brand was evolving and wanted the package design to help claim ground on new desired equities such as “engaging” and “magnetic.” We knew to do that we’d have to carefully evolve the baby icon, respecting the consumer attachment, while also making sure it was helping propel the brand forward.



## Great design informed by solid research is the shortest distance between a shopper and a brand.

Through qualitative equity understanding and insights research before the design stage, we learned that a slightly older and “more awake” child was a great way to gain ground on the aspirational attribute of “magnetic.” The resulting design features a baby engaged in eye contact with shoppers, drawing them in at shelf. The baby continues to be an important point of attachment for consumers while working hard for Downy, giving the brand the forward momentum it needs.

### Include designers in the research process.

Creative thought and development require both left-brain skills, such as analysis and verification, and the right-brain skills of innovation and “what if” thinking. Designers, who are by nature creative thinkers, take a whole-minded approach to all that they do, synthesizing left- and right-brain attributes. Like left-brain analytical types, creative thinkers do study and analyze, but they also have heightened powers of perception that enable them to see what others may miss.

A few years ago we were researching new package designs for a security company. From

listening to consumers, the design team learned that there were two factors contributing to a sense of security in a consumer’s mind: the ability to prevent break-ins, and tightly fitting locks and closures. This insight led to a reorientation of the handle sets in the package, allowing the closing mechanics to be easily viewed by shoppers and reinforcing the product message of safety and security.

If the need for efficiency requires you to limit team members, disinvite one of the left-brain analytical types rather than the ambidextrous design types. Analytical thinking is critical to any design process, but it is often overrepresented within large organizations. Including designers in the research process is inherently efficient because they bring a natural ability to listen and respond with both sides of the brain fully engaged.

**Be sure that research is structured, executed and interpreted appropriately.** The biggest fallacy is that likability and preference matter greatly in package design. In advertising copy testing, likability is an important measure of effectiveness, signaling higher recall and purchase interest. Marketers know if there is strong consumer preference for one ad over another, very likely that ad will perform better in market.

There is nothing inherently wrong with asking preference questions in the context of design research; the difficulty lies in how to use the results. If 60 percent of consumers prefer design A and 40 percent design B, how does this help you? But if your brand benefit is relaxation and you’ve learned that 60 percent of consumers associate a wave pattern with a feeling of calm, that’s information you can act on.

To ensure proper application of research, make certain at the outset that the creative brief is fully aligned with the success criteria. A design objective for a food product might be to improve perception of taste, but the success criteria for the research might be written as “premium and sophisticated.” So even if the food looks tasty as can be on the packaging, it will not meet the specified research criteria.

**Learn from qualitative as well as quantitative research.** We have been seeing companies converge around the notion that research is only valid if it’s quantitative in nature. This is understandable, given that many practitioners have reduced qualitative research to interrogatory focus groups



## Field Guide to Design Research

**F**ocus groups can be a great qualitative tool, but there are many more ways to engage consumers qualitatively. Go out and shop with them, spend time with them at the point of usage, think of them as human beings and not just as consumers.

- Don't accept that a statement made in a focus group necessarily reflects beliefs or translates into behavior. Use qualitative research appropriately— to look for new insights, uncover patterns of belief, and stimulate new thinking.
- Don't assume your customers enjoy those 30-minute online surveys. Decide what you must know and only ask those questions.
- Don't take purchase interest scores literally. Such scores are far more reflective of appeal and attitude than predictive of actual behavior.
- Never research a package as a “disaster check.” What are you going to do if it is a disaster?
- Don't believe package tests that allow consumers to deconstruct a package and then rebuild it with their preferred elements. Creativity is not purely rational. Let the designers do the designing and the consumers the reacting.
- Start with broader questions, then narrow your focus. If you jump to specifics too early, consumers will find it difficult to back out, causing them to respond to stimulus in a more universal way.
- If preference questions are asked, bring them in after other important information (communication profile, equity assessment, fit with desired attributes) has been determined. People find it annoying when they continue to be asked about something they rejected earlier.

and so many “observers” take consumers literally. Rather than seek out great qualitative researchers and innovative approaches, many skip the valuable qualitative learning entirely, jumping to quantitative validation.

Quantitative validation research is very helpful at hypothesizing what the business performance of alternative designs might be—but only when we really know what we are measuring and when we understand the marketplace dynamics.

When the creative insights stage of research is skipped, we have little understanding of what we're designing and why consumers feel a certain way or believe a certain thing. It is often the *whys* behind something, attitudinal motivations and emotions, that can unlock opportunities for our brands.

Before the first round exploratory for the recent Cheer redesign, we fielded attitudinal territory research. Knowing that consumers may not be comfortable with the language of design, we used words, pictures, patterns, colors, and even other brands to learn about distinct design spaces. In this way we were able to ascertain what drove consumers to this territory, uncovering insights that fueled the design process.

We learned about the meaning of color and brightness of color, properties that are central to the Cheer brand. We learned that simple means credible,

and we learned that these consumers wanted to be delighted by some relevant twist or reference. This information helped us get closer to our target audience.

The final package design was barely changed from the very first concept review based on our attitudinal territory research. The newly created “Cheerdrop” element, scored significantly higher versus the prior design on bringing to life the new Cheer bright-clean equity in both qualitative and quantitative post-design research. Overall, the entire design process was rendered more efficient and focused. ■



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