

Motivational Research

By Jerry W. Thomas

Motivational research is a type of marketing research that attempts to explain why consumers behave as they do. Motivational research seeks to discover and comprehend what consumers do not fully understand about themselves.



Implicitly, motivational research assumes the existence of underlying or unconscious motives that influence consumer behavior. Motivational research attempts to identify forces and influences that consumers may not be aware of (e.g., cultural factors, sociological forces). Typically, these unconscious motives (or beyond-awareness reasons) are intertwined with and complicated by conscious motives, cultural biases, economic variables, and fashion trends (broadly defined). Motivational research attempts to sift through all of these influences and factors to unravel the mystery of consumer behavior as it relates to a specific product or service, so that the marketer better understands the target audience and how to influence that audience.

Motivational research is most valuable when powerful underlying motives are suspected of exerting influence upon consumer

behavior. Products and services that relate, or might relate, to attraction of the opposite sex, to personal adornment, to status or self-esteem, to power, to death, to fears, or to social taboos are all likely candidates for motivational research. For example, why do women tend to increase their expenditures on clothing and personal adornment products as they approach the age of 50 to 55? The reasons relate to the loss of youth's beauty and the loss of fertility, and to related fears of losing their husbands' love. It is also a time of life when discretionary incomes are rising (the children are leaving the nest). Other motives are at work as well (women are complicated creatures), but a standard marketing research survey would never reveal these motives, because most women are not really aware of why their interest in expensive adornments increases at this particular point in their lives.

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Even benign, or low-involvement, product categories can often benefit from the insights provided by motivational research. Typically, in low-involvement product categories, perception variables and cultural influences are most important. Our culture is a system of rules and “regulations” that simplify and optimize our existence. Cultural rules govern how we squeeze a tube of toothpaste, how we open packages, how we use a bath towel, who does what work, etc. Most of us are relatively unaware of these cultural rules. Understanding how these cultural rules influence a particular product can be extremely valuable information for the marketer.

The Major Techniques

The three major motivational research techniques are observation, focus groups, and depth interviews. Observation can be a fruitful method of deriving hypotheses about human motives. Anthropologists have pioneered the development of this technique. All of us are familiar with anthropologists living with the “natives” to understand their behavior. This same systematic observation can produce equally insightful results about consumer behavior. Observation can be accomplished in person or sometimes through the convenience of video. Usually, personal observation is simply too expensive, and most consumers don’t want an anthropologist living in their households for a month or two.

It is easier to observe consumers in buying situations than in their homes, and here the observation can be in person or by video cameras. Generally, video cameras are less intrusive than an in-person observer. Finding a representative set of cooperative stores, however, is not an easy task, and the installation and maintenance of video cameras is not without its difficulties. In-store observers can be used as well, so long as they have some “cover” that makes their presence less obvious. But

observation by video or human eye cannot answer every question. Generally, observation must be supplemented by focus groups or depth interviews to fully understand why consumers are doing what they do.

The Focus Group

The focus group in the hands of a skilled moderator can be a valuable motivational research technique. To reach its full motivational potential, the group interview must be largely nondirective in style, and the group must achieve spontaneous interaction. It is the mutual reinforcement within the group (the group excitement and spontaneity) that produces the revelations and behaviors that reveal underlying motives. A focus group discussion dominated by the moderator will rarely produce any motivational insights. A focus group actively led by the moderator with much direct questioning of respondents will seldom yield motivational understanding. But the focus group is a legitimate motivational technique.

The Depth Interview

The heart and soul of motivational research is the depth interview, a lengthy (one to two hours), one-on-one, personal interview, conducted directly by the motivational researcher. Much of the power of the depth interview is dependent upon the insight, sensitivity, and skill of the motivational researcher. The interviewing task cannot be delegated to traditional marketing research interviewers—who have no training in motivational techniques.

During the personal interview, the motivational researcher strives to create an empathic relationship with each respondent, a feeling of rapport, mutual trust, and understanding. The researcher creates a climate in which the respondent feels free to express his feelings and his thoughts, without fear of embarrassment or rejection. The researcher conveys a feeling that the respondent and his opinions are important and worthwhile, no matter

what those opinions are. The motivational researcher is accepting, nonthreatening, and supportive. The emotional empathy between motivational researcher and respondent is the single most important determinant of an effective interview.

The motivational researcher relies heavily upon nondirective interviewing techniques. Her goal is to get the respondent to talk, and keep talking. The researcher tends to introduce general topics, rather than ask direct questions. She probes by raising her eyebrows, by a questioning look upon her face, by paraphrasing what the respondent has said, or by reflecting the respondent's own words back to the respondent in a questioning tone. Nondirective techniques are the least threatening (and the least biasing) to the respondent.

Projective techniques can play an important role in motivational research. Sometimes a respondent can see in others what he cannot see—or will not admit—about himself. The motivational researcher often asks the respondent to tell a story, play a role, draw a picture, complete a sentence, or associate words with a stimulus. Photographs, product samples, packages, and advertisements can also be used as stimuli to evoke additional feelings, imagery, and comment.

During the interview, the researcher watches for clues that might indicate that a “sensitive nerve” has been touched. Long pauses by the respondent, slips of the tongue, fidgeting, variations in voice pitch, strong emotions, facial expressions, eye movements, avoidance of a question, fixation on an issue, and body language are some of the clues the motivational researcher keys on. These “sensitive” topics and issues are then the focus of additional inquiry and exploration later in the interview.

Each interview is tape-recorded and transcribed. A typical motivational study, consisting of 30 to 50 depth interviews, yields 1,000 to 2,000 pages of typed verbatim dialogue. During the interview, the motivational researcher makes

notes about the respondent's behavior, mannerisms, physical appearance, personality characteristics, and nonverbal communication. These notes become a road map to help the researcher understand and interpret the verbatim transcript of the interview.

The Analysis

The motivational researcher reads and rereads the hundreds of pages of verbatim respondent dialogue. As she reads, the researcher looks for systematic patterns of response. She identifies logical inconsistencies or apparent contradictions. She compares direct responses against projective responses. She notes the consistent use of unusual words or phrases. She studies the explicit content of the interview and contemplates its meaning in relation to the implicit content. She searches for what is not said as diligently as she does for what is said. Like a detective, she sifts through the clues and the evidence to deduce the forces and motives influencing consumer behavior. No one clue or piece of evidence is treated as being very important. It is the convergence of evidence and facts that leads to significant conclusions. In the scientific tradition, empiricism and logic must come together and make sense.

The analysis begins at the cultural level. Cultural values and influences are the ocean in which we all swim and, of which, most of us are completely unaware. What we eat, the way we eat, how we dress, what we think and feel, and the language we speak are dimensions of our culture. These taken-for-granted cultural dimensions are the basic building blocks that begin the motivational researcher's analysis. The culture is the context that must be understood before the behavior of individuals within the context can be understood. Every product has cultural values and rules that influence its perception and its usage.

Once the cultural context is reasonably well understood, the next analytic step is the exploration of the unique motivations that relate to the product category. What psychological needs does the product fulfill? Does the product have any social overtones or anthropological significance? Does the product relate to one's status aspirations, to competitive drives, to feelings of self-esteem, to security needs? Are masochistic motives involved? Does the product have deep symbolic significance? And so on. Some of these motives must be inferred since respondents are often unaware of why they do what they do. But the analysis is not complete.

The last major dimension that must be understood is the business environment, including competitive forces, brand perceptions and images, relative market shares, the role of advertising in the category, and trends in the marketplace. Only part of this business environment knowledge can come from the respondent, of course, but understanding the business context is crucial to the interpretation of consumer motives in a way that will lead to useful results. Understanding the consumer's motives is worthless unless somehow that knowledge can be translated into actionable marketing and advertising recommendations.

Sometimes a motivational study is followed by quantitative surveys to confirm the motivational hypotheses as well as to measure the relative extent of those motives in the general population. But many times motivational studies cannot be proved or disproved by survey research, especially when completely unconscious motives are involved. In these cases, the final evaluation of the hypothesized motives is by the testing of concepts (or advertising alternatives) that address the different motives, or by other types of contrived experiments.

One final note is relevant to the successful conduct of motivational research. It is critically important that the motivational researcher not be overly theoretical. An eclectic, wide-ranging, and open-minded philosophical perspective is best. The researcher should not formulate any "cast in stone" hypotheses before she conducts the motivational study. Strongly held hypotheses, or rigid adherence to theory, will doom a motivational study to failure. Too often we see what we set out to see, or find that for which we search, whether it exists or not. An objective, open, unfettered mind is the motivational researcher's greatest asset.

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