

Advertising Testing Techniques



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Advertising Testing Techniques

Executive Summary

Advertisements can be pretested at several points in the creative development process. This report examines some of the common methods used in pretesting research.

The creative process consists of several stages, typically:

1. Creative strategy stage
2. Layout stage
3. Pre-production stage
4. Post-production stage

Pretesting that occurs early in the creative process (stages 1 and 2) is called *concept testing*. Pretesting done in the latter two stages is called *copy testing*.

Concept testing:

Concept tests are characterized by an exploratory focus. In concept tests, the objective is to understand what kind of concepts (usually written descriptions or storyboards) would be well received in the audience. Concept tests frequently involve qualitative research.

Focus groups, depth interviews and projective techniques are some of the commonly used qualitative techniques that are well suited for exploring and generating ad concepts as well as for understanding the reasons for failed ads.

Copy testing:

Copy tests are done to evaluate different executions of an advertising campaign. Copy tests are useful for selecting one out of many different ad executions, or for making adjustments to improve comprehension or the tone of the ad. Copy tests are usually conducted using quantitative research methods, and the test ads are moderately to highly close to the finished execution.

Memory tests (both recall and recognition), persuasion tests, direct-response tests, continuous measurement tests, and physiological response tests are some of the quantitative methods in use. These methods are based on statistical principles and reliably allow the findings to be projected from the survey sample to the population.

In general, concept testing is more appropriate for *strategic research* in which one aims to examine the relative effectiveness of one version of an advertising concept or approach against another. Copy testing is more suited for *evaluative research* in which one attempts to make final go/no-go decisions.

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Guidelines for selecting a research technique:

Several "rules of thumb" should help in selecting the most appropriate research technique:

- Informational ads merit a different testing approach than emotional or "feeling based" advertisements.
- If an ad is expected to achieve its intended purpose through an emotional appeal, the closer to finished form the ad, the more useful the results of the pretest. Rough cuts will underestimate the effectiveness of the ads when the creative strategy takes an emotional approach.
- Ads for which the message strategy is informational can be more effectively tested in rough form (written descriptions, storyboards).
- When the research technique uses measurements of "liking" toward the ad, it is again advisable to use versions of ads that are close to the final form rather than with written concept descriptions or storyboards. Liking is a highly subjective measure, and using storyboards or rough cuts can underestimate the impact of the creative execution on likeability.
- In measuring effectiveness of ads, use multiple indicators like recall, recognition, persuasion, message comprehension etc., rather than relying on just the measure.
- Because of the subjective nature of the analysis and small sample sizes, qualitative techniques such as focus groups are ill-suited to making final go/no-go decisions on ad concepts or campaign executions.
- A study of different measures of advertising effectiveness conducted by the Advertising Research Foundation finds that *top-of-mind recall of the brand* is an exceptionally good predictor of the ultimate effectiveness of the ads (Haley and Baldinger, 1991). Using this type of measure requires a quantitative research technique (such as a theater test or other type of memory test).

The relative strengths and weaknesses of the methods discussed in this report are consolidated in the Table 1. A list of some organizations that offer some of the pretesting methods discussed in this report is given in Table 2.

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Research Techniques for Advertising Pretesting

Advertising pretesting reduces the financial risk inherent in the high cost of producing and rolling out advertising campaigns. Leading consumer packaged goods companies routinely invest a portion of their advertising budgets on ad pretesting to reduce the risk of an underperforming campaign.

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Pretesting that occurs early in the creative process (stages 1 and 2) is called *concept testing*. Pretesting done in the latter two stages is called *copy testing*. In general, concept testing is more appropriate for *strategic research* in which one aims to examine the relative effectiveness of one version of an advertising concept or approach against another. Copy testing is more suited for *evaluative research* in which one attempts to make final go/no-go decisions (Vanden Bergh and Katz, 1989; Wells, Burnett, and Moriarty, 1998).

A. Concept Testing versus Copy Testing

Among the methods of ad testing, there is a simple distinction between concept testing and copy testing, depending on the extent to which the test ad is close to the finished execution.

Concept testing:

Concept tests are characterized by an exploratory focus. In concept tests, the objective is to understand what kind of concepts would be well received in the audience. Concept tests frequently involve qualitative research.

Focus groups, depth interviews and projective techniques are some of the commonly used qualitative techniques that are well suited for exploring and generating ad concepts as well as for understanding the reasons for failed ads.

Copy testing:

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B. Methods of presenting test ads

The most simplistic approach to ad pretesting is to use written concepts. Written concept tests can be a reliable predictor of ad effectiveness if:

- the ad is informational in nature, and
- the written description of the ad closely and unambiguously represents the finished ad form. (Vanden Bergh and Katz, 1989).

On the other extreme from testing written descriptions lies testing finished versions of an ad prior to roll out. This may be accomplished either on-air or off-air. A study by the Advertising Research Foundation (Haley and Baldinger, 1991) finds that off-air tests of finished ads can reliably predict ads that eventually perform well in terms of impacting sales:

- On-air tests have an advantage in that they are conducted in the natural context in which the ad is likely to appear. This very advantage turns out to be a disadvantage because, in the natural context, there are so many sources of variation that it is practically impossible to make definitive connections between the test ad and the measured effects.
- Off-air tests, on the other hand, allow more definitive conclusions about the effectiveness of the ad. This is due to greater control over noise variables such as programming context. Furthermore, off-air tests are much less expensive than on-air tests.

There are several shades between the two extremes of concept testing and copy testing depending on the type of stimulus, or ad, used. These include:

- "storyboard" which is essentially a sequence of visual frames of ad scenes with the script of the audio;
- "animatic" which is a film or videotape of drawings with real audio;
- "photomatic" which incorporates a sequence of real photographs and real audio;
- "ripamatic" which employs a collage of actual ads; with (Tellis, 1998).

C. Qualitative and Quantitative Methods

Research methodologies can be categorized as *qualitative* and *quantitative*.

Qualitative methodologies: Qualitative methodologies emphasize the richness and detail of participants' responses. When used in a concept testing context, qualitative research taps into:

- messages and meanings consumers derive from the ads, and
- the ideas and beliefs they associate with the ads.

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Qualitative methods are exceptionally well-suited for exploratory research. In particular, if the objective is to understand how the target audience relates to the product or the consumption situation or understand the critical issues perceived by the target audience in the consumption of the product, then qualitative methods are a must.

However, there are some disadvantages to qualitative methodologies:

- First, the different investigators can interpret the same data differently.
- Second, the process of coding qualitative data tends to be often laborious and subjective.
- Third, the qualitative data tend to involve relatively small sample sizes.

For these reasons, one cannot attribute any statistical properties to the data; thus, qualitative methods are particularly ill-suited for making final go/no-go decisions.

Quantitative methodologies: Quantitative techniques emphasize generalizing the results from a sample to a larger population. The focus is on the statistical properties such as validity and reliability.

Quantitative research should be undertaken only when the critical issues have first been identified. For this reason, engaging in quantitative research without prior qualitative research is frequently unproductive.

A quantitative approach is appropriate when:

- all relevant aspects of the issue have been captured;
- it is possible to meaningfully interpret the numbers;
- the measures are reasonably free from random noise; and
- the process by which the sample is selected conforms to principles of random selection and is sufficiently large.

Item (b) above relates to the notion of validity, which refers to the extent to which a measure actually captures what it is intended to measure. Item (c) above relates to the notion of reliability, which is the extent to which a measure will consistently measure what it is supposed to measure. The consequences of lapses in the integrity of measurements and sampling are quite serious. These implications are beyond the scope of this report.

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D. Methods Used in Concept Testing and Copy Testing

Concept testing generally involves qualitative methods such as focus groups, content analysis of verbal protocols, and depth interviews. On the other hand, copy testing tends to be based on quantitative methods such as memory tests, persuasion tests, behavioral response or direct-response tests, and frame-by-frame tests (Murphy and Cunningham, 1993; McDaniel and Gates, 1991; Wells, Burnett and Moriarty, 1998).

From experience:
General Mills uses focus groups to assess the major communication points of ad concepts. They prefer not to use storyboards or frames, instead using animatics or photomatics.
"Showing people frames or storyboards in a focus group is a total waste of time and money." ---V.P.,
General Mills

1. Qualitative Methods for Concept Testing

a. Focus Groups

Focus groups are used with surprising frequency for making final go/no-go decisions. Reasons usually given are speed of feedback and reduced cost, despite evidence (and exhortations within the research industry) against the practice (Percy and Rossiter, 1997; Wells, Burnett and Moriarty, 1998).

Focus groups typically involve exposing the ad or versions of the ad concept to a group of 8-12 respondents. A moderator facilitates the discussion and walks the group through a series of issues that are outlined in the discussion guide.

The most distinguishing feature of the focus group is the group interaction. Focus groups are exceptionally useful for:

- understanding the relevant and critical issues in a given consumption situation from the consumer stand point,
- gathering preliminary impressions and evaluations of ads and ad concepts,
- generating new concepts,
- understanding results from quantitative tests that have already been conducted,
- structuring questionnaires and
- developing hypotheses for future quantitative studies (Murphy and Cunningham, 1993; McDaniel and Gates, 1991).

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Focus groups are vulnerable to biased interpretations, the discussion can be dominated by a small subset of the group members thus distorting the results, and are particularly ill suited for drawing conclusions.

b. In-depth Interviews

In-depth interviews involve one-on-one discussion with the respondents. Interviews are very effective when a research has a good idea of the critical issues but does not have a sense of the kind of responses one will get (Tellis, 1998). They allow significant probing, and they can be very effectively used for testing rough cuts of ads, and for testing and generating new ad concepts. Group pressures are absent, which can bias the outcome of focus groups. As with other qualitative techniques, interviewer bias can be significant. Interviews tend to be both expensive and exhausting.

From experience: Fallon McElligott, the ad agency for Miller Brewing Co., will test key frames using focus groups. The creative staff (not the moderator) puts a great deal of effort in communicating the essence of the commercial to the participants.

c. Projective Techniques

In these techniques, the respondent is instructed to project himself/herself into the situation and then verbalize the thoughts.

There are many variations in projective techniques such as word association, sentence completion, and story completion. These techniques are very effective when the most crucial aspects/effects of ad processing cannot be assessed by direct question, but surface only when subjects project themselves into the ad (McDaniel and Gates, 1991).

From experience:
"At DDB, we test ad concepts via one-on-one interviews and focus groups. We test concepts as animatics by dropping them into real TV programming at research test centers."

- Executive at
Budweiser's ad agency

The underlying philosophy in such techniques is that when viewers are exposed to incomplete or partially complete stimuli, they use their attitudes and intentions in completing the stimuli, and in doing so, reveal the inner motivations, fears, aspirations and hopes which may not surface under direct questioning.

Projective techniques can be very effective for evaluating ad concepts and for generating new concepts, but not useful for making final decisions. Its use requires an experienced interviewer/analyst for the evaluation to be effective.

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2. Quantitative Methods for Copy Testing a. Memory Tests

Memory tests are based on the notion that advertisements leave a mental imprint on the viewer (Wells, Burnett, and Moriarty, 1998), and a more effective advertisement leaves a stronger mental imprint. Memory tests fall into two general categories, recall tests and recognition tests.

Day After Recall Tests: In a typical "day after recall" test (also known as on-air tests), a finished commercial embedded in a typical programming context is shown to subjects in a test market. Several hundred households are contacted (usually by telephone) until about two hundred subjects who saw the program at the time of airing the test commercial are found (Wells, Burnett, and Moriarty, 1998). These subjects are then asked whether they are able to recall seeing any ads for the relevant product category.

The greatest advantage of day after recall tests is the realism of the context in which the test takes place.

The disadvantages of traditional recall tests include expensive air time, severe loss of control over the programming context, and the low incidence rate of the subjects in a random sample that watch the program when the test ad was aired.

- The proportion of subjects correctly recalling the ad, also known as unaided recall, measures the strength of the mental imprint left by the test commercial. ‘
- If subjects are not able to recall seeing the ad unaided, they are asked if they recall seeing any ad for the advertised brand. The proportion of people recalling the ad when probed with the brand name is called aided recall.

Another variation of the traditional recall test, called the cable test, is to instruct a group of subjects to watch a particular program on a cable television network. This differs from the traditional method in that, at the beginning of the test, one can have a rough estimate of the number of people who will certainly be watching the program in which the ad is embedded. Cable tests offer a middle ground between traditional recall tests and theater tests in terms of cost and reliability (below).

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Theater Test:

Instead of embedding the test ad in a prime-time context, frequently, advertisers do theater tests that involve large groups of respondents being exposed to ads in a controlled setting. This test is called the theater test.

As with the traditional recall tests, one can measure day after recall or delayed recall in which recall measures are collected more than 24 hours after exposure to the ad.

The greatest advantage of theater tests is the control over the context in which the ad appears. Because of this, it is possible to attribute the recall to the test ad rather than uncontrolled variation that plague the traditional tests. The downside with theater tests is that it is a forced exposure method, which tends to make the processing of the ad more artificial. The measures and procedure for collecting the recall measures is identical to the one described above.

Wells, Burnett, and Moriarty (1998) observe that while traditional recall tests can be done only with finished ads, theater tests and cable tests can be done with rough cuts.

A study of different measures of advertising effectiveness conducted by the Advertising Research Foundation finds that, among the different measures of salience, top-of-mind recall of the brand is an exceptionally good predictor of the ultimate effectiveness of the ads (Haley and Baldinger, 1991). While recall tests appear to be generally reliable, their validity has been called into question (Gibson, 1983).

Recognition Tests:

Recognition tests involve the ability of viewers to correctly identify an ad/brand/message that they have been previously exposed to. Two variants of the recognition tests are the Starch test and the Bruzzone test (Wells, Burnett, and Moriarty, 1998).

The Starch test is applicable only to print ads that have already run. An interviewer shows each subject a magazine containing the ads being tested. For each ad, the interviewer asks the subject whether (a) they have noticed the ad; (b) they have associated the contents of the ad with the advertiser's name or logo; and (c) whether they have read more than 50% of the contents of the ad.

The Bruzzone test is a recognition test conducted through mail surveys. Questionnaires containing frames and audio scripts from television commercials (without the brand name) are sent to subjects and subjects are asked whether they recognize the ad. Subsequently they are asked to identify the brand name advertised.

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Both these tests are generally inexpensive and have been shown to be generally reliable. They are not particularly valid because of the number of false positives, i.e., viewers recognizing advertisements that they were never exposed to in the first place. This weakness is a relatively minor issue because recent advances in the measurement of recognition that can account for false positives.

Despite these advantages, recall and recognition tests, with the exception of the theater recall test, are generally useful only when the ad is close to the finished form, by which time significant investment has already taken place. The results are interpretable only when carefully controlled random samples are used, as with any quantitative methodology. These methods do not assess other critical aspects of ad effectiveness such as message comprehension and persuasion.

b. Persuasion Tests

Persuasion tests examine the effectiveness of ad exposure on changes in attitude and behavioral intentions.

The classic format of persuasion tests is the pretest-exposure-retest format in which brand attitudes and purchase probabilities (behavioral intentions) are assessed prior to exposure to the ad, and following exposure to the ad. There are several variations in persuasion tests depending on whether the ad is exposed as part of an overall program context, and the extent to which the pretest and retest are separated from exposure.

The most critical aspect of the persuasion tests -- one that makes them very expensive - is audience composition (Wells, Burnett, and Moriarty, 1998). Audience composition affects the usefulness of persuasion tests to a greater extent than recall and recognition tests. Hence, sampling accuracy is very important.

c. Direct Response

Tests As the name indicates, these tests measure the extent to which consumers actually behave differently as a consequence of ad exposure.

In these tests, the ad typically contains phone numbers which consumers can call for additional information or buy the product. The number of calls which consumers make following ad exposure measures the effectiveness of the ad. These measures are effectively only for those ads in which direct response is meaningful in the consumption context. As pointed out by Wells, Burnett, and Moriarty (1998), most ads are intended to encourage visits to retail outlets rather than encourage making phone calls, hence direct response tests may not be relevant in most situations. These tests can be used in a variety of media as long as measuring consumers' behavioral responses, such as making phone calls, is meaningful and relevant. Despite this limitation, direct response tests have excellent reliability and validity.

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d. Frame-by-Frame Tests or Continuous Measurement Tests

In continuous measurement tests, a large group of viewers are seated in a theater-like environment and given hand-held devices that contain a dial or numeric key pad. The viewers are instructed to turn the dial to the left or right to indicate dislikes or like toward the commercial.

Each terminal is linked to a central computer and is given an identification number at the start of the test. Demographic information about the viewer is tagged to this identification. Thus, in addition to collecting overall like-dislike movements over the course of the ad, these movements can be split by demographic variables and other measures that have been collected.

From experience:
"We created our own system for continuously tracking consumer responses to commercials during audience testing. We test groups of 250 people in theatres. The commercials are embedded in television shows. You need a large group, but the data really help pinpoint good and bad parts of a commercial."
--V.P. General Mills

When used effectively, the results of continuous response measures can be surprisingly effective in separating good ads from the bad. Because of the moment-to-moment nature of the data, the advantage of this test is that it measures the process whereas all other tests measure the effects.

Research has shown that continuous measures of liking toward the ad can be an effective predictor of brand attitudes (Baumgartner, Sujan, and Padgett, 1997). Specifically, it has been shown that brand attitudes depend on (a) the magnitude of positive emotions, (b) the proximity of the peak positive emotion to the end of the commercial, and (c) a continuously increasing pattern for the positive emotion throughout the commercial.

One of the important things to keep in mind when using continuous monitoring methods is that these methods measure liking toward the ad. They do not measure memory or persuasion or message comprehension. Therefore, when used in conjunction with other measures of memory or attention, these methods can be very effective. It has to be noted that these systems are relatively new, and little is known about their validity or reliability. Continuous measurement methods cannot be used outside a theater, research or laboratory context because of the equipment needed to conduct these tests.

e. Physiological Measures

There are several other methods of testing advertisements that do not require any conscious "response" from the part of the subject because they tap into the involuntary reactions to stimuli.

Eye-movement analysis:

In eye-movement analysis, in context of print ads, an instrument monitors the movement of the subject's eyes sixty times every second. Thus, eye-movement analyses can identify reading patterns if they exist. This analysis can also point-out what portions of the print ad gets most attention. In galvanic skin-response methods, changes in the electrical conductivity of the skin are recorded by applying probes.

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Brain-wave analysis:

In brain-wave analysis, changes in electrical potential in the brain are recorded through an electroencephalograph. All these measures are based on the notion that physiological arousal can be informative about the effectiveness of the ad. These methods often involve cumbersome equipment that make it far removed from the natural settings in which advertisements are processed. They are better suited for testing emotional, "feeling" based commercials than for examining the effectiveness of informational, or "thinking" based commercials.

E. Summary

There are several different methods one can use for testing the effectiveness of an ad. The choice of method depends on whether campaign development is in the creative strategy stage, layout stage, production stage, or post-production stage.

One of the important rules to keep in mind is that, if the ad is expected to achieve its intended purpose by impacting liking toward the ad, the closer one is to the finished form the more useful the results of the pretest. Rough cuts will underestimate the effectiveness of the ads when the creative strategy takes an emotional approach.

Another rule of thumb is that, in measuring effectiveness of ads, use multiple indicators like recall, recognition, persuasion, message comprehension etc., rather than relying on just one measure.

Enough cannot be said about the pitfalls of using focus group methods for confirmatory purposes. Interpretation bias is a major risk factor with this methodology. Confirmation of a conclusion and generalizing it to a population is possible only when sound statistically reliable practices are applied. Focus groups do not provide data that can be generalized using any type of inferential statistical methodology. These problems are compounded when "quantitative" measures are collected following or during focus group discussion (counting of individual responses, use of evaluation forms, etc.). This results in a situation called "correlated errors", thus each data point is not independent of another. This results in an increased likelihood of erroneous go/no-go decisions.

This report presents an overview of different methods (see Table 1) used in pretesting ads, and thus is simplistic in the treatment of methodologies. This overview is clearly not exhaustive. Depending on the service provider (see Table 2), one may find variations of the methods reported here, and other methods not reported. The advantages and disadvantages outlined for the various methods may not exist in certain specific situations. In order to evaluate the suitability of a method, it is imperative to understand the consumption context, communication objectives, and budgetary and time considerations.

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While there is no way of recommending any ad testing methodology without an understanding of the specific communication objective, here are some issues outlined by Batra, Myers, and Aaker (1995) one should think about out before deciding which method, or combination of methods, is appropriate.

The Advertisement Used:	Written Statement, or Rough Cuts, or Finished Version.
Frequency of Exposure:	Single Exposure, or Multiple Exposure.
How the Pretest Ad is Shown:	Isolated, or In a clutter, or In a television program or magazine.
Where the Exposure Occurs:	In a shopping center facility, or At home on TV or Magazine or mail, or At home through watching pre-invited programs, or In a theatre
How does the Exposure Take Place:	Prerecruited forced exposure, or Natural exposure.
Geographic Scope	One city, or Several cities, or Nationwide.

Measures of Effectiveness: Pre/Post measures of attitude/intention change, or Multiple measure of recall, involvement, attitude shift, commitment, or Post-only measures, or Test market sales.

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Table 1: An Overview of the Advantages and Disadvantages of Pretesting Methods

Pretest Method	Remarks
Focus Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + effective for developing new ad concepts and testing ad concepts, and diagnosing failed ads. - not useful for confirmatory research and go/no go decision due to the absence of statistical properties necessary for generalizability of results
Depth Interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + effective for testing rough cuts of ads and ad concepts, and when consumers' conscious responses surface only under detailed probing + laddering, a technique for eliciting means-ends chains can be successfully applied only in this technique. - suffers from problems similar to focus groups.
Projective Techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + effective for testing effectiveness of ads concepts and executions of ads which focus on what consumers bring to the ad rather than what they take from it. - suffer from problems similar to focus groups and depth interviews
Recall Test	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + employ sensible measure of memorability of ad. + top-of-mind recall can be a good predictor of the success of ad. - ad recall measures based on detailed probing do not separate good ads from bad. - test ad has to be reasonably close to finished product especially for on-air tests.
Recognition Tests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + ease and speed of administration. - good only for eliminating ads that perform poorly, but not good for selecting winners. - measures of recognition are so varied, and the commonly used measures have serious limitations.



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<p>Communication and Persuasion Tests</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + use some of the most relevant measures such as ad attitudes, brand attitudes, and behavioral intentions. + these tests measure behavior -- the most unambiguous measure of ad effectiveness. - measures such as liking toward the ad are good predictors only for ad concepts that are informational, and not good for transformational ads.
<p>Direct Response Tests</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - may not be relevant in most cases, especially when ads focus on attitudinal rather than behavioral changes. - pretest ads have to be sufficiently close to final form. - tests may have to be conducted on-air and ads may have to be embedded in real programming non-forced exposure context.
<p>Continuous Measurement Tests</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + unparalleled in terms of providing the process by which ads affect recall, recognition, message comprehension, and behavior. + exceptionally useful in isolating specific aspects of the commercial which impact liking toward the ad. + can be used for animatic, photomatic, ripamatic, and finished form ads. - cannot be used for print ads, storyboards or concept tests of TV ads, or any kind of pretest ads that do not extend over time.
<p>Physiological Measures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + excellent for measuring emotional arousal which cannot be picked up by questionnaires or probing. - rather cumbersome equipment and artificial testing context. - effective only for pretest ads which are close to the finished form.



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Table 2: Partial List of Major Specialist Suppliers of Ad Testing Research

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Supplier	Medium	Methods
ASI Market Research, Inc. New York, NY.	Television, print	Recall; Persuasion
Bruzzone Research Co. Alameda, CA.	Television	Recognition
Burke Marketing Research Cincinnati, OH.	Television, print	Recall; Persuasion; In-market sales#
Communications Workshop, Inc. Chicago, IL.	Television, print, radio	Communications Tests*
Diagnostic Research, Inc. New York, NY.	Television, print, radio	Communications Tests
Gallup and Robinson, Inc. Princeton, NJ.	Television, print	Recall; Persuasion
Information Resources, Inc. Chicago, IL.	Television	In-market sales
McCollum-Spielman	Television	Communications Tests
Starch INRA Hooper, Inc. Mamaroneck, NY.	Print	Recognition

*Communication tests measure delivery of intended message, unintended messages, and audience reaction to message, characters, situation, and tone of the ad.

In-market sales tests evaluate ads based on impact on sales.



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