



## Brand Engineering: A Qualitative Approach to Market Research

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### ***What is brand engineering?***

Market research has become a necessary instrument for business decision making for companies working in Russia over the last 10 years. If, before, it was enough to provide decent-quality merchandise at a somewhat affordable price and arrange for distribution for your brand to take a place among the leaders within a year, then today these are necessary but insufficient conditions for success.

Today, the barriers for FMCG merchandise to enter the market have increased, and now appear quite formidable. A key aspect in working with a brand is *positioning*: creating a clear message connected with the brand.

In its essence, positioning is a set of images and words connected with the brand. Each company seeks images that differentiate its brands from competitors, as well as from other brands in its own portfolio.

Many transnational companies pay great attention to positioning their brands and spend significant parts of their marketing budgets on research and the purchase of marketing consulting services, which help make the positioning relevant, in the eyes of both local consumers (for example, Russians), as well as global ones (in all countries where the brand is distributed).

When developing or correcting positioning, companies generally do not just want to communicate with their consumer audience in modern terms, but also try look into the future, to find the most relevant trends and tie them to their brand.

Research companies, being an support industry, have developed a number of methods for finding relevant consumer insights. Some of these methods are considered innovational. Generally, qualitative methods are used to develop or alter brand positioning, which will be discussed in this article.

The set of research methods that will be discussed will further be referred to as brand engineering. Sociology has a methodological school called *social engineering*, at times linked to conspiracy theory and besmirched by a certain mysticism. The main task of social engineering is creating a program for change in society and implementing it. In general, this is very much an applied branch of sociology. That is precisely why we decided to call the school of market research that seeks positioning *brand engineering*.



## ***How does it work?***

When discussing innovational parts of qualitative research methods, the popularity among clients of rather sophisticated approaches to reaching the target consumer audience must be noted. International companies aspire to understand the value perceptions of the world of opinion leaders within the target consumer audience. Research companies, on the other hand, aim to use clear and simple methods to reach *trend-setters*.

The marketing problem solved with these complicated methods can be stated in rather simple terms: discovering cultural trends attractive to the target audience and seeking possibilities for building associations with the client brand.

O+K Market Research has used a set of qualitative market research methods to achieve this goal in a number of projects.

Generally, the project consists of several stages, unified by the logical approach to the goal. The first stage of the research is dedicated to finding attractive emotional territories for the target consumer group. In the second stage, the emotional territories formed are evaluated by consumers through the prism of existing attitudes for brands. The result, in its ideal finale, is that the client receives unique insights for the emotional superstructure of its own brand.

Going into the details, the first stage uses instruments that allow the researcher maximum immersion in the cultural environment of consumers. These may be ethnographic research through immersed observation, diaries (both paper and online), as well as the use of experts in the field of culture/semiotics. It must be noted that, for the first stage, leading edge or trend setter consumers are recruited, that is, those who may be the source or carriers of a yet-unformed cultural trend. For example, such research could find such trends as LiveJournal or interesting popular characters, like Masyanya (a trendy Russian online animated serial).

Clearly, the primary goal of this stage is not so much using the correct line of instruments for finding trends, but rather the proper selection of trend-setters from the entire set of consumers.

Generally, it is rather difficult to find a clear and simple set of criteria to differentiate trend-setters from average consumers. In our work, we use the following criteria in recruiting respondents:

- Have a large social circle, highly socially active
- Creativity and non-standard thinking
- High relevancy to product category studied



One of the more obvious methods for recruitment is through blogging services, such as [www.livejournal.com](http://www.livejournal.com) or [www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com), where it is rather simple to operate with all three criteria groups for recruitment. For example:

- "Friend of/Friends" ratio: the number of friends should be over 20, and the ratio should be over 2
- Posts most often added to memories: author's post has been added to memories >25 times
- Comment ratio "Received/Written": >1.5
- Active life in LiveJournal: last post no further than 1 week from date of recruitment

This stage is of principal importance, since if the "wrong" respondents are found in the process of recruitment, the conclusions based on information gathered may also be incorrect.

After the trend-setters have been found, we strive to work with them in the most intensive and productive way. Generally, most of the work is done online. Each of the participants works on his own blog, with us not limiting research participation to solely the completion of creative assignments, also giving respondents the chance to communicate with each other within the created community. It is that community which allows us to create the necessary group dynamic and receive information on truly relevant trends.

Usually, the research team works with respondents over the course of two weeks. Over the course of this period, researchers become direct participants in all discussions conducted within the community. However, the primary goal for this stage is the discussion of blocks essential to the research and filling them with information.

Generally, the following key areas are accented over the course of two weeks:

- Current life (What? Where? Who with? Why?)
- Life values (perception of the surrounding reality)
- Self-identification (important things in life)
- Vision of the future (aspirational life-style)
- Finding trends in modern society (music, technology, fashion, sports, celebrities, symbols)
- Discovering emotional territories (most significant to brand studied and product category)
- Current perceptions of category
- Brand attitudes and their place in the lives of respondents: projective methods

Every day, participants must write in their blog and leave comments for the blogs of other participants. The research moderator, one of the project managers, watches that this is done. Two weeks of intensive work require good motivation and high respondent involvement. Therefore, we generally provide a first prize for the best blog and highest comment activity as well as the monetary compensation usual for qualitative research.

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After conducting the blog stage, a focus group is usually held, in person, with the most active respondents. In the course of this focus group, information on trends and territories gained in the blog stage is used for materials. It is after this discussion that hypotheses about emotional territories and possibilities for creating associations between the territories and the brand in the given category (RTB and benefits) are formed.

Thus, the results of the first stage of the research are the emotional territories attractive to the consumer, with a maximum of materials (symbols, photo, video, things, words), and, possibly, brand positioning concepts that reflect the link between the territories and the brand.

Emotional territories based on multiple insights are the results of the analytical work of the research team. The most important point in the course of the analysis is the necessity of taking into account the product category and surrounding competitors:

- Market conditions
- Competitors' communications in the category and in neighbouring categories
- Previous brand initiatives (unless the brand is new)



### ***What are the results?***

In the second stage, developed territories are transformed into moodboards or concepts, which are further discussed in more orthodox creative focus groups. The result of this stage should be an evaluation of the popularization of the trend among the target audience, and the possibility of attaching that trend to the client's brand.

The importance of involving the client's team in each of the stages of the research and regular communication with the researcher should be stressed. It is the involvement of the client's team that allows for a comprehensive approach to the implementation of the research results for all 4P of the client's brand.

The results of the project are creative briefs for the advertising agency, possible changes in product packaging, the creation of a new SKU, sometimes even the creation of a new brand.

Unfortunately, due to the confidentiality standards in the industry, I cannot disclose real examples at this time, since all research projects carried out by O+K in this form are currently in active exploitation.