

Adding another dimension to the story

How 3-D storytelling collages can jump-start focus group discussions

Marketers and researchers spend a lot of time thinking about brands and product/service categories. Consumers don't. Even for a brand's heaviest users, most brand decisions and interactions are made on autopilot. Because brand interactions are generally not top-of-mind, when consumers discuss brands within a qualitative research environment they tend to gravitate to rational responses, even when many of their brand interactions might be emotionally-based. So how do you turn off the autopilot and get consumers to truly do a conscious self-observation and diagnosis of their brand interaction behavior and attitudes and then share this with you?

Using traditional focus groups is an option. While focus groups may provide a very interactive environment, traditional methods don't always encourage consumers to really do an introspective analysis of their brand/category behavior. Even if the consumers know about the discussion topic in advance - for example, fabric softener - they typically don't spend time before they come to the group exploring how they really think and feel about fabric softener. In their day-to-day life, even when they are using fabric softener, they are generally just going through an automatic routine with very little thought or introspection.

So when they come to a typical focus group and the moderator starts asking them about fabric softener, they have to quickly try to pull up memories based on when they normally interact with fabric softener - at point of purchase, doing laundry, putting on freshly washed clothes, etc. - and this typically generates a "data dump" of top-of-mind answers that may not reflect their actual interactions or give the whole perspective.

Ethnography is another option. Going back to our fabric softener example, using ethnography, we can become observers of consumers as they interact with the brand/category through shop-alongs and observing people doing their laundry in their homes. However, even with the most experienced ethnographer, this may not give a full picture of the process because the fact that you are observing them may change what they would normally do.

Clearly both options have their strengths and weaknesses. We think there is a way to get the best of

snapshot

The author explains how 3-D collaging gives respondents a wider range of artifacts with which to express their feelings on a product or service, potentially unearthing a richer lode of insights.



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both worlds.

What if you could conduct focus groups where the participants are primed to immerse, observe and think about their brand/ category interactions prior to attending the groups without biasing the research? Then their responses would actually reflect an in-depth self-observation and analysis on how they interact with the category, brand, product, etc., based on real-life day-to-day experiences. You would get an inside view of the consumer in their own words and from their perspective.

One technique that elicits this view is a 3-D storytelling collage that participants create prior to attending a focus group. The 3-D collage process and purpose is very different from a traditional collage where people hastily rip pictures from whatever magazines they have on hand and glue them to a piece of paper. It requires people to think beyond magazine pictures. Working with 3-D objects creates an environment where people have to step back and do an in-depth examination of their behavior and attitudes so that they can be translated into a 3-D environment.

Also, unlike many creative techniques that can only be done with “creative” people, which may bias the feedback, we have found that typical consumers can easily and effectively create the 3-D collages.

Any type of visuals

In general, to prepare them for the process, respondents are told that they will need to complete a detailed collage at home before they come to the discussion group. They are urged to be creative and use any type of visuals to represent their feelings or viewpoints. Beyond mere magazine cut-outs, they can use 3-D materials, drawings or anything else they can think of to represent what they are trying to convey. For example, candy wrappers can be used to represent indulgence, broken watches to represent time or drink umbrellas to represent relaxation.

To prevent biasing feedback, the 3-D collage assignment is generally built around a broader category

question and not about a specific brand or product. Using our fabric softener example, we would not ask them to create a 3-D storytelling collage about fabric softener specifically. Instead we could ask them to create a 3-D storytelling collage about the world of laundry:

- What are the four distinctly different things you like about doing laundry?
- What are the four main frustrations you have with doing laundry?

Therefore, we would ask the participants - who will probably be doing at least a couple of loads of laundry prior to the group - to make laundry top-of-mind, which is where fabric softener resides, without ever mentioning fabric softener. In preparation for this 3-D collage, as they are doing laundry in their normal routine and in their normal environment, they are being more mindful of laundry as they are doing it, and paying attention to how they do things and why they make the decisions they make. They then draw on this real-life, in-the-moment thinking to create their 3-D collages and frame out their stories.

Thus they come to the focus groups having really thought about the topic. Because they spent time integrating 3-D objects into their collage and taking notes of specific behaviors as they were interacting with the category and brand in their day-to-day lives, they have really examined their attitudes and behaviors, what they are thinking and feeling and how and why they interact with/ think about the category or brand. They are confident in their opinions, even if they are the only ones in the group to feel that way. The 3-D collage also helps uncover and explain a lot of their emotional and automatic/ sub-conscious behavior.

Truly unaided

The participants present their 3-D storytelling collages at the very beginning of the groups before they are asked any questions or shown any stimuli, so their feedback on the

topic, e.g., laundry, is truly unaided. On average, participants can easily speak uninterrupted for about three minutes while sharing their stories and using the 3-D components to animate their storytelling. Many times, the collage storytelling uncovers perspectives and attitudes that the brand team may not have known were relevant. The 3-D collages, going back to our fabric softener example, could elicit feedback such as when and if in their laundry story fabric softener is even mentioned; how fabric softener is viewed in the laundry process; what adjectives, phrases and descriptions are associated with fabric softener; and frustrations they have.

Rather than having them answer a series of questions in the order dictated by the discussion guide, this storytelling process allows the participants to talk about laundry however they want, so we not only hear their stories but how they tell the stories, including what they say, how they say it, what parts they emphasize and sometimes, more importantly, what they leave out.

While the participants come to the research comfortable in their opinions, they also share and ask each other questions about the stories behind the collages. This process may uncover new relevant touchpoints. In addition, this storytelling process often addresses many of the probes that appear later in the discussion guide in a natural, unaided way, thus eliminating the need to ask these questions directly. We get all these insights without even asking about fabric softener!

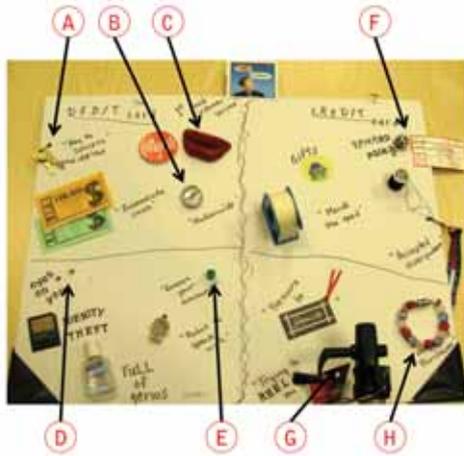
Certain elements need to be in place

We have successfully used this technique across categories, demographics and numerous countries for a number of years. We do not need to screen for “highly creative” participants, but we have found that certain elements need to be in place for the 3-D collage and storytelling to be successful.

An experienced researcher who:

- understands how to create ques-

Figure 1: Payment Card



- A. Keys - If you only spend what you have, then you have the key to successful budgeting.
- B. Compass - Debit cards are accepted nationwide.
- C. Wax lips - My debit card has great customer service.
- D. Wiggle eyes - When I'm typing in my PIN I feel like everyone is watching me and trying to see it.
- E. Eraser - Using the debit card erases the money in your account, so you might not have money if you suddenly need it.
- F. Soccer ball and sports event ticket - I get reward points with my credit card, so I can use them towards doing things I like.
- G. Fishing reel - They reel you in with credit cards so you spend more money than you have.
- H. Bracelet - With my credit card I'm more likely to make unplanned purchases, which can get me into trouble.

Figure 2: Parasite Prevention



- A. Red string - I have to remember to give the cat medicine every month.
- B. Pictures of person's cat and home - I care a lot about my cat, so I don't want anything bad to happen to her.
- C. Cartoon - It's hard giving my cat the medicine because she always fights me on swallowing the pill.
- D. Invoice from veterinarian - Just a check-up is expensive with the vet, and then you add the cost of the parasite medicine each year and it really adds up.
- E. Straw basket of money - It costs a lot for six months of medicine.

are in place, we have had participants from all walks of life create very detailed collages with rich stories behind them across a wide range of categories/ topics.

Act as lie detectors

Often these collages provide feedback that is key to the research findings/ strategic analysis, and it ensures that the feedback is true to the participants' lives. In addition, these collages act as lie detectors or as unrealistic rational thought detectors. If, during the latter parts of the group when concepts and/or other stimuli are shown, the participants start saying things that are inconsistent with their previous unaided 3-D storytelling, the moderator knows to probe further - "You liked this concept, but in your collage, you said that wasn't important to you. Help me understand." This step provides a reality check and ensures that participants articulate the missing links on how they come to conclusions. Without the 3-D storytelling collages, the moderator would not have that extra filter in place.

The 3-D storytelling collages, regardless of the category or the demographic, have provided deep, rich feedback that may not have been gotten in a traditional question-and-answer focus group. Below are some examples, and in the accompanying collage pictures we have called out some of the three-dimensional components of the collage. (Note that the examples also include some short quotes, but the stories told when the 3-D collages were presented were much more detailed.)

Payment card project

The question: When researching a new type of payment card, we asked the participants to create collages explaining how and when they decided to use a debit card versus a credit card.

The findings: While we had not specifically asked about pain points associated with each payment method, when presenting their collages every participant talked about frustrations they had and what could be done to make both products more appealing.

tions that lead to meaningful introspection/ thinking prior to the group while avoiding bias, i.e., which one or two questions should be used to create the 3-D storytelling collage;

- creates a recruiting screener that selects participants representative of the general target population for the study, even if we are asking them to do something creative;
- creates detailed instructions that explain the collage without scaring off potential participants.

Detailed instructions on how to create the 3-D collage with examples of how visuals and materials can be used that are both read to the participants during the recruiting process and sent to them well in advance of the research.

An experienced recruiting partner who is:

- not focused on just recruiting bodies to fill the chairs but on getting participants who will take the time to really think about the topic in advance;
- willing to go the extra mile and explain the collage in detail as scripted by the researcher and not try to summarize the instructions;
- aware that a project with such an assignment needs to be fully recruited well in advance of the research so that the participants have at least three to four days to both think about and create their collages prior to coming to the groups.

As long as all of these elements

The implications: Based on this feedback, even though the participants reacted positively to the concepts, we were able to see that the new payment-card concepts that were being explored during the groups were not addressing their pain points or building on the reasons they chose various payment types.

Feline flea and tick prevention project

The question: This exercise was done with cat owners (both users and non-users of flea/tick prevention products) who were asked to list reasons they would and would not use flea/tick prevention on their cats.

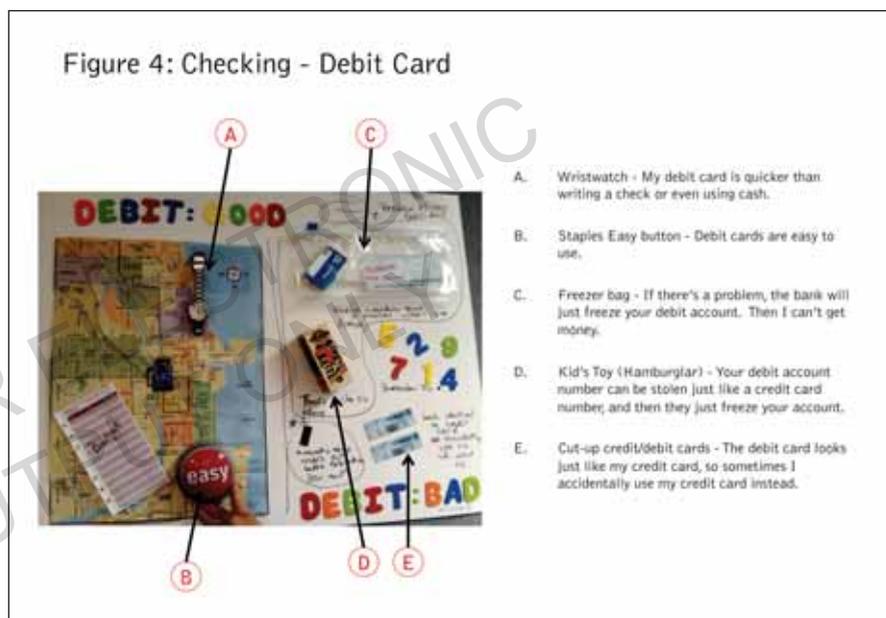
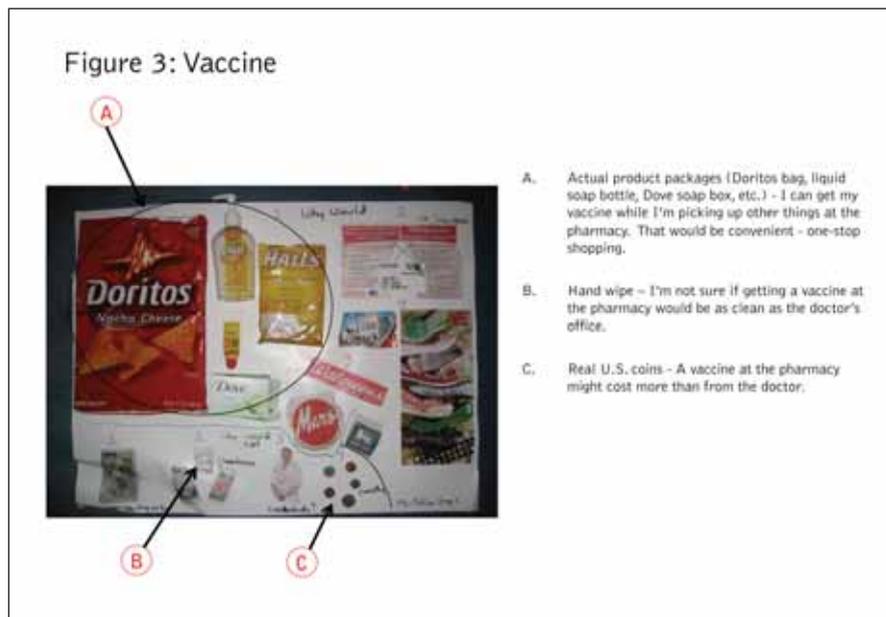
The findings: Of course, this exercise led to detailed stories about the motivators and barriers to using flea/tick prevention. However, it also led to valuable feedback that was not part of the initial research objectives or even an initial concern of the clients. The feedback ended up impacting the product positioning. Specifically, the cat owners defined an “inside cat” and “outside cat” quite differently from the client and the veterinarians. For cat owners, an outside cat lived outside and never went inside, while an inside cat slept inside but also could go out in the backyard or on the porch. In addition, many cat owners felt that an indoor cat, as they were defining it, didn’t need flea and tick prevention even if it often spent some time outside.

The implications: Led to new ideas for positioning the flea/tick prevention product and new ways for veterinarians to talk to cat owners about flea/tick prevention.

Department store research

The question: In a project for a department store, women who shopped at a range of different department stores created a collage illustrating what they liked and didn’t like about the shopping experience at our client’s and competing department stores.

The findings: This exercise helped elucidate how they really felt about our client’s department store without alerting them to the fact that we



were interested in learning how to enhance their usage of the department store’s retail credit card. Even though we had not mentioned the retail store credit cards, in nearly all cases the women spoke (unaided) about their feelings - both positive and negative - about the different retail store credit cards associated with the different stores. In addition, while all of the stores were rationally seen as stores that provided items for the whole family, the store we were researching had a different emotional connection for the women. This particular store was one that they reserved for their “me-time,” when they were relaxing and shopping for themselves. Therefore, while on a practical level this store was no dif-

ferent from competitive stores, on an emotional level it was seen completely differently and this exercise helped the participants articulate that difference.

The implications: Incorporated “me-time” rewards into the retail credit card, which led to increased usage of the card.

Vaccination research

The question: When researching in-store signage and brochures for flu vaccinations, we asked the participants to create a collage explaining why they would or wouldn’t get vaccinated in a pharmacy. (Some had previously been vaccinated in a pharmacy, others had not.)

The findings: We learned that

Figure 5: Supermarket

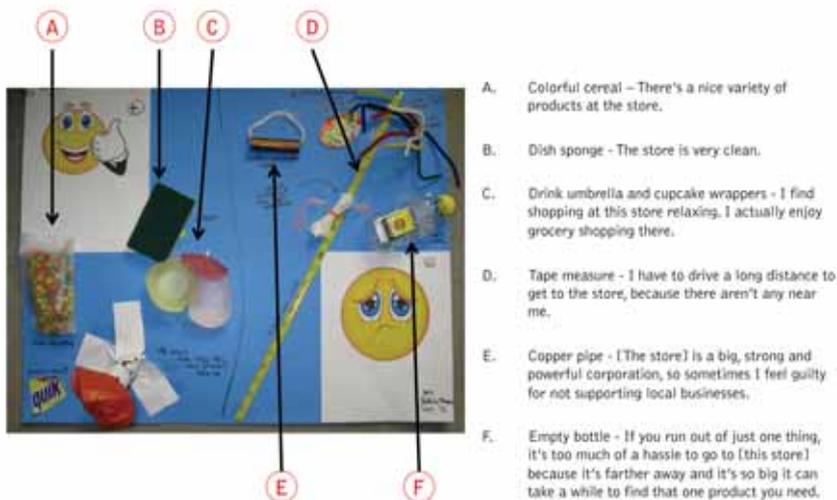


Figure 6: Ideal Pen



while pharmacies were seen as convenient there were many reasons participants were reluctant to get vaccinated there, including concerns about who was administering the vaccine; the cleanliness of the pharmacy; questions about whether the pharmacy would be administering the same vaccine as the doctor's office; privacy; cost, etc.

The implications: This feedback clearly identified new, specific directions and possibly barriers that were currently missing from the proposed in-pharmacy posters and brochures.

Checking account/ debit card project

The question: Consumers were asked to create a collage about why

they like using their debit card and why they don't like using their debit card.

The findings: We learned that consumers liked using their debit cards for budgeting purposes and that using them was as easy as a credit card. However, they have a lot of concerns about fraud protection and how fraud affects their bank accounts.

The implications: The feedback showed the client that there was a market for a new card that had the budgeting power of a debit card but with the fraud protection of a credit card.

Supermarket project

The question: For a project about a supermarket's consumer reward

card program, consumers - both cardholders and non-cardholders - were asked to create a collage about what they like about that store - both the shopping experience and the actual company - and what they don't like about the store.

The findings: We found that most consumers genuinely enjoyed the shopping experience at this store but none of the consumers - neither cardholders nor non-cardholders - mentioned the store's consumer reward program or its benefits in their collages, which showed that the program was not top-of-mind in the shopping experience.

The implications: The client realized that the program needed to be better communicated in the in-store signage, cashier interaction, etc.

New pen line project

The question: In a project where we would be showing over 50 pen prototypes, we felt this amount would overwhelm the consumer so we asked the participants to use visuals and 3-D materials to describe what their ideal pen would be, including what it would look like, what it would feel like and what problems it would solve.

The findings: This helped solidify what they wanted prior to seeing all the pens. Therefore participants could clearly show and explain what they wanted.

The implications: As a result, prior to showing them any stimuli, the participants clearly articulated to themselves what parameters a pen would need to meet to be considered good or better than existing pens, so they were not overwhelmed by all the choices. We were also able to use the collage storytelling knowledge to probe their reactions to the proposed pen designs in a more meaningful way.

Best of both worlds

If done properly, 3-D storytelling collage technique can combine the best of both worlds - focus groups and ethnographies. Therefore, this technique should be considered as an addition to an experienced market researcher's already rich arsenal of methods and techniques. | Q