

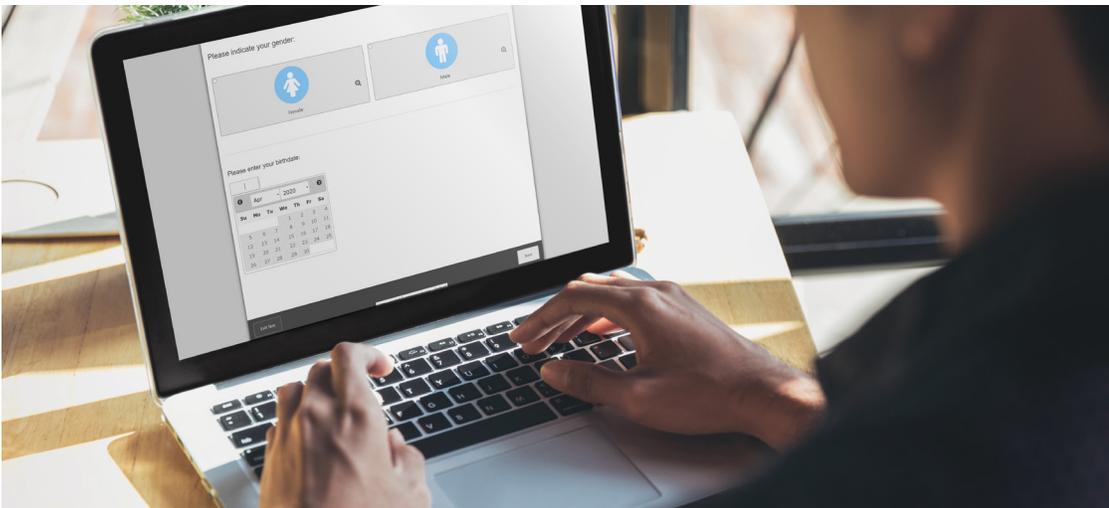


Testing Under Covid-19 Restrictions

With uncertain times ahead due to Covid-19, on-site consumer testing or central location testing will be very difficult to perform. Fortunately with web-based sensory testing software, data collection can be done anywhere in the world with an Internet connection, so when people need to stay inside, they will be able to take part in Home Use Tests (HUT).

Historically, Home Use Testing was a time-consuming and costly endeavour, which involved logistical nightmares and sample losses, and yielded relatively low panelist response rates (<25%).

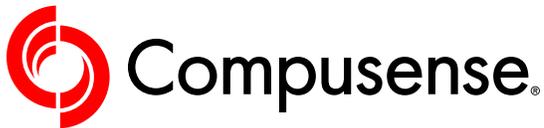
Now, Internet-delivered Home Use Tests have shown to overcome several testing barriers. Testing with Compusense Cloud, can achieve excellent response rates (almost 100%) and a high level of consumer engagement.



Representative Testing Environment (Ecological Validity)

Ecological validity refers to sensory or consumer tests aimed at replicating how the product is actually used.

Home Use Testing allows consumers to evaluate products as they would normally be used at home and in the way that each consumer prefers. Bacon, for example, is a product that is cooked differently by different consumers. Using Home Use Testing to evaluate products such as bacon delivers results that better reflect the response of real consumers as they normally would have prepared it. The use of web-based HUTs also permits the data to be collected for the entire family in the same study. As noted by Montouto-Graña et al. (2012): "Food testing by consumers in their home is considered more optimal compared with laboratory testing and Central Location Testing with regard to realism while tasting and eating a product sample."



Consumer research in stressful times

Now when conducting a Home Use Test, you might be asking yourself: "Will worrying about the current pandemic have an effect on the performance of panelists evaluating products at home? Should we wait until it all blows over before testing again?" Dr. Chris Findlay provides his take on this:

"When working with consumers routinely, controlling context is very important to the outcome of any study. Context may enhance the liking response through pleasant association or create a negative bias that downgrades liking. I think of worry as another potential source of bias.



At the 2019 Pangborn Symposium in Edinburgh, I had great fun conducting an experiment on the impact of context with my colleagues Jeanine Delwiche and Chris Simons. We had around 200 people in our workshop evaluate chocolate under three different scenarios.

As a control, with no special instruction, our audience were asked to simply record their responses to the first chocolate bar on their smart phone or tablet, using seven simple attributes on a ballot.

After a short break, Chris Simons evoked the experience of a high end chocolate shop visually using video images and a description of the sensory cues surrounding that locale. After exposure to this second scenario another chocolate bar was evaluated.

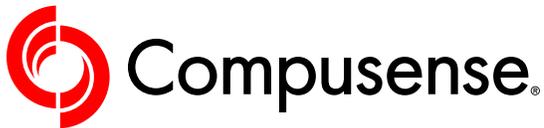
In the third scenario, Jeanine Delwiche led the same audience in a mindfulness exercise to focus their attention and perception on the third chocolate bar.

At the end of this workshop the results were analyzed and presented. The mindfulness exercise showed the greatest impact, the chocolate was perceived to be significantly stronger in vanilla, smoother and more balanced than the control sample. Of course, all of the chocolate was the same. The differences found were a result of the impact of context as a source of bias.

An effective tactic to reduce that kind of bias is to insert "placebo" questions to create distraction and to slow the pace of a test. In a point-of-purchase study on red wine, with over 600 consumers, we wanted to provide a two minute gap between each of 3 samples which were being evaluated for consumer liking. The distractor placebo questions included attitude towards country of origin of wine and to environmental impact of packaging. Some of our consumers became so engaged with those questions that they did not realize it was strictly the product liking we were interested in. The distraction served its purpose.

The point of these examples is to say that consumer response can be effected by context. However, in a fair test, the bias will be the same or similar for each sample and the results from the testing event will be balanced. Much of the art of sensory evaluation is in determining how best to minimize the impact of bias.

In my opinion, the results of a well-conducted sensory or consumer test will be always be valid and robust. So to answer the questions, we should carry on calmly and continue testing with confidence. This is part of the new normal."



Challenges for HUTs

With all of this said, there will still be a number of challenges when it comes to setting up your HUT. Before sending your products out to your panelists or having them pick them up, you will want to make sure you go through this HUT checklist.

- Clearly state your testing objectives
- Determine which products you plan to evaluate
- Create your screener (if it is required) to ensure correct panelist recruitment
- Send out your screener to your consumer database to determine who qualifies and who is available
- Inform the qualifiers about when and how they will be receiving their samples
- Create your questionnaire
- Pretest your questionnaire several times to make sure it is set up correctly and flows properly from end-to-end

Prepare Your Samples for Distribution

- Prepare and review the test instructions as they relate to the samples
- Be very specific using step-by-step instructions
- When testing with multiple samples, ensure that they are clearly identified and that it is easy to evaluate them in the right order.

Product Distribution

- Ship your test sample or arrange for your panelists pick them up
- Make sure that the samples are transported safely, and that protocols are in place to minimize risk to panelists
- Monitor the test as it progresses
- Review Results and generate the test report when you finish the test

If you have any questions or need any assistance, please email info@compusense.com

References

Montouto-Graña, M., Cabanas-Arias, S., Porto-Fojo, S., Vázquez-Odériz, M.L. and Romero-Rodríguez, M.A. (2012), Sensory Characteristics and Consumer Acceptance and Purchase Intention Toward Fresh-Cut Potatoes. *Journal of Food Science*, 77: S40-S46.