Developing rapid and effective communications testing: testing best before/use by date messages

We tested 16 different executions of messaging around the difference between a use-by date and best-before date on milk, using Ipsos DUEL. Early iterations of four messages were created explaining the difference between a use-by-date versus a best-before date. Messages each used a different image, and one did not have one. **Messages were pitted against each other, and participants were asked to select which one they preferred, and the selected iteration progressed to the next round.** Full details of these messages can be found in the appendix to this report, alongside a table showing full results from the testing.

Key findings

- the use of **images** makes pieces of communications more likeable
- the **real-life picture** of milk was liked the most, reinforcing the hypothesis emerging from the literature review that “real-life” situations are a key factor for successful communication
- top performing stimuli provided an instruction for the public to act upon, or a **call to action** (reflecting previous findings presented in this report)
- it is difficult to distinguish between whether focusing on the Best-before or Use-by date makes a difference, although on the whole messages referencing use-by date performed slightly better. The message on Use-by date (without the sniff test) was more likely to be considered by “relevant” than others, perhaps because consumers are instinctively more concerned about “safety” than “quality”.

Findings

The pieces of content with the highest which performed best were Stimulus 12 and Stimulus 4:

- both pieces of content use a **real-life image of milk** (Image 3)
- stimulus 12, which wins overall, focuses on the best-before date (Message C) and Stimulus 4 focuses on the use-by date (Message A). Both messages are **instructional**, providing the reader with an action (i.e., Stimulus 12 says “you can check the look and smell”, Stimulus 4 says “you should not use the smell test”). This is in comparison to the other two messages which are more descriptive.

When looking specifically at how different variations of messaging performed, we could observe some trends:

- overall, messages focusing solely on the **Use-by date** (Messages C and B) tended to perform better
- whilst Message A with the **real-life image of milk** was among the top two (message focusing on use-by date, with advice on the “sniff test”), when accompanied with other

images or no images at all it did less well. This suggest more unpicking might be needed to understand the relationship between this specific message and the different pictures presented in the iterations tested.

When looking at the use of images specifically, we observed the following patterns:

- the bottom two performing Stimuli (13, 1) both used no **images**, highlighting the importance of a visual aid
- stimulus 13, a bottom performing iteration, also uses Message D, which focused on the **Best-before date** and does perform well across the board (the highest score it achieves is 100, and this is with the top performing image)
- similarly, iterations which used the **cartoon image of milk** (Image 1) tended to perform less, suggesting it is important to use real life scenarios.

In the survey we also asked about specific relevance and differentiation. On average, two in five (44%) thought the stimuli shown were relevant. “Differentiation” is not a key engagement indicator for the FSA, and this is reflected by the relatively lower average scores for differentiation (32% average).

- when it comes to the **relevance score**, there were no clear patters amongst the bottom scoring stimuli. However, Messages B (around use-by date, without sniff test) seemed to perform better than average (at 53% for stimulus 6, 52% for stimulus 8 and 49% for stimulus 7 vs an average of 44%). This reinforces the findings above, which is messages focusing on **use-by dates** might resonate better with the public
- when it comes to **differentiation score**, there were no clear patterns. However, three out of the three stimuli without pictures (Stimuli 9, 5, 13) performed slightly worse, reinforcing the point that imaged help materials stand out.