

MESSAGE TESTING BEST PRACTICES

What is it? When should you use it? How can you succeed?





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INTRODUCTION

Your customers largely perceive your company and its products or services through its messaging. At least initially. Before they know you well, they know what you say.

A message can be as simple as a logo or a tagline. It can also be more complex, such as a marketing or advertising campaign. A message is any language you use to communicate an idea about your product, service, or brand. It can differentiate you from your competition. That's why what you say about yourself is so important.

Message testing helps you understand what your customers want, the language they use, and what resonates (or does not resonate) with them. This eBook breaks down some of the basics: what message testing is, when to use it, and how to succeed at this very important element of your go-to-market research.

In GLG's *Message Testing: Practices* eBook, you'll find:

- **What Is Message Testing, and Why Does It Matter?** — What can you learn from message testing, and should you risk not conducting this research?
- **When to Conduct Message Testing** — Where does message testing fit into the research life cycle, and when in your communication development process should you plan to conduct it?
- **How to Conduct Message Testing** — Message testing can be either quantitative or qualitative. What methodology is right for your needs?
- **Improving Message Testing** — What are some simple strategies for improving your message testing research?

This eBook is intended to shine a light on the importance of message testing, and hopefully provide you with some guidance as to how, why, and when you should use it. Understanding your customers seems easy, but often your own biases and assumptions will influence the messages you develop. Message testing is meant to overcome challenges like this and help you craft messages that truly resonate with your customers.

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WHAT IS MESSAGE TESTING, AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

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Are you describing your brand in a way that appeals to your prospects? How do you best position the product you've developed? How can you describe your service to a marketplace in a way that resonates with your customers and prospects?

When you are tasked with the challenge of thinking about how to differentiate your company from the competition, you need to make sure your marketing efforts are effective in targeting the right audience with the right message. But that's not as easy as it sounds. You believe you know what customer needs you want to meet. Can't you just go to market with that?

Not necessarily. Message testing research can better equip you with the insight you need to make the right decisions to optimize your marketing strategy and investment.

What Is Message Testing?

Message testing is a type of market research aimed at evaluating how a company's marketing language around a specific product, solution, or brand resonates with an audience. More broadly, market research, whether conducted through qualitative or quantitative methods, may help you discover a new market or audience segment; message testing specifically will help you understand how to tailor a message to your target audience for maximum impact.

Why Conduct Message Testing?

Within a company, excitement often rides high. You believe you've developed a product or service that fits a unique niche. Your brand self-evidently stands out among your competitors. But this excitement can just be the result of talking among yourselves. The language you've developed is often limited to inside stakeholders. When your company is developing messaging around a new or existing product, solution, or brand, it shouldn't do so in this echo chamber.

Message testing can help you avoid this mistake by guiding you to success in two ways:

1. It can help you understand your customers' values. What do they want and need? What are their pain points and preferences? When you consider all this, you'll better understand how to address these points. It informs how you will talk to your target customers to achieve the desired outcome.
2. It allows you to test your existing messaging against your exact target customers or users. It's an opportunity to experiment with different versions of your marketing messages.

The goal of message testing research is to pinpoint messages that are clear, relevant, and compelling — and connect your brand's story with what your customers care about. Being tactical with your messaging is key, as it helps ensure your message is being interpreted correctly and producing the intended effect. The right message will help compel your target audience to engage, ideally resulting in more leads or sales.

A message that works for your company will not necessarily work for your customers.

A message is language used to communicate an idea about a company's product, service, or brand.

Message Testing Considerations

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to message testing research. It can be tailored to assess a variety of message types at different phases of development.

It can take the form of a marketing communication, an advertising concept or campaign, positioning statements, names, logos, etc. The type of message could vary, but regardless of what it is or where it is in development, it could benefit from being grounded in customer feedback prior to broader launch.

Messages do not always need to be fully developed before testing. If you are early in your development process, consider testing to explore, ideate, or develop your ideas in collaboration with your target audience. If you're listening correctly, this can help you better home in on key themes.

Once you have developed initial statements or concepts with which to experiment, you can test to evaluate, refine, or improve your positioning, incorporating feedback from your customers.

Lastly, once you have tweaked your message, you might explore testing with end users to select, validate, or confirm your final approach before launching.

It is also important to remember that customer attitudes are dynamic and can change over time in response to shifting trends in the market and competitive landscape. As such, message testing should be revisited occasionally and refined over time to ensure your message continues to resonate and stay relevant amid the changing market landscape.

Message Testing Takeaway

Brand and marketing decisions can be influenced by a number of factors. But if influence comes solely from inside the company, it's easy to fall in love with an idea that sounds great but isn't right for the market.

If you want to stand out, it's essential to deliver a message that matches your customers' wants and needs. Message testing can help you find the clarity you need to make the right marketing decisions for maximum business impact.

WHEN TO CONDUCT MESSAGE TESTING

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When your company is developing messaging around a new or existing product, solution, or brand, message testing is a critical tool to help connect your message with what your customers care about. The questions that follow are where does message testing fit into the research life cycle, and when in your communication development process should you plan to conduct such testing?

Where does message testing fit into the broader research life cycle?

Message testing research can be particularly impactful before the launch of a new or improved product, service, or brand. It allows you to test your messaging concept with your target customers or users, helping ensure your message will produce the intended effect.

Before conducting message testing, you should be far enough along in your research and product development processes that you've assessed the competitive landscape, learned about your customers' pain points, and come up with new or improved solutions. You can now conduct message testing research to help you identify the optimal communication tactics to market your new product or service, or announce a change to an existing product or brand.

Timing for Message Testing

Early-Phase Research	Activities: assessing competitive landscape, listening to customer/user pain points, identifying gaps in the market, generating initial solutions	Too soon for message testing
Product Development	Activities: building initial prototypes/concepts, conducting concept testing, refining final product (or service) offering	Too soon for message testing
Marketing/Go-to-Market	Activities: planning go-to-market strategy, developing communications approach, launching new or updated product or service	Optimal time for message testing

Messages don't
always need
to be fully
developed
before testing.

When in your communication development process should you consider message testing?

You may wish to pursue message testing at separate phases of your communication development process, such as in exploring, refining, or validating.

1. **Exploring:** In the initial stages of developing your communications, you may have a preliminary idea of themes to explore or a general direction for your message. However, it may not be fully developed. It doesn't necessarily need to be complete before you pursue message testing. At this stage, message testing can help you develop a baseline understanding of how your end customers would react to these early concepts to clarify the direction your message development should take.
2. **Refining:** Once you've explored the right direction for your message, you can start formalizing those communication concepts. From here, you may have a few — or many — message concepts to test before settling on the final strategy. In this stage, message testing allows you to understand which elements, among many messages, resonate the most and can help you pinpoint your final messaging statement(s). You can repeat this stage many times until you land on the optimal approach.
3. **Validating:** Once you've refined and developed your message, you may want feedback on slight variations among messages to confirm the best approach. Typically, in this stage, you have no more than two or three messages you're looking to test. Message testing can help you gather feedback from customers/users on minor language differences or glean their preferred message among a few options, enabling you to assess go/no-go readiness ahead of launch.

While there are a few inflection points during the message development journey, you could consider conducting message testing research whether your message is fully developed or not.

The Spectrum of Marketing Message Development



Keep in mind
that once
you launch,
customer
attitudes may
shift over time.

Other Considerations

The sooner you start your message testing research, the more time you have to hone your strategy before launch. You can vary your approach at each stage to glean different types of insights. For instance, you may choose to conduct qualitative research in earlier stages to get deeper information on reactions and then pursue a quantitative methodology later to validate the final approach.

As the landscape changes — whether due to emerging competitors, new technology, or new customers — periodically message testing can ensure your messaging continues to resonate and stays relevant.

The Takeaway

Research and product development require a substantial amount of time and financial commitment, so make sure you get the most out of that investment. When conducted before a broader launch, message testing research can help you explore, refine, or validate that your communication approach will resonate with, and produce the intended outcome from, your target audience.

HOW TO CONDUCT MESSAGE TESTING

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Message testing research is an important part of your communication and marketing development process. Once you have decided to embark on your message testing journey, you may be unsure exactly how to tackle it. There are a variety of methodologies, but which is the right method (or combination of methods)? Though your research objectives and ideal output will dictate which fits best, this section will explore your options and the factors to consider when choosing among them.

Market Research: Primary vs. Secondary

When it comes to market research, let's start with the basics. There are two types of research: primary and secondary. Primary research, also called "field" research, focuses on new information, gathered first-hand. This type of research is helpful for developing a deeper understanding of customers. By contrast, secondary research, also called "desktop" research, taps into existing information and is helpful when building a baseline about a market, industry, or customer segment.

Message testing is used to evaluate how the message you've developed (or are developing) resonates with your target audience. This requires engaging directly with your potential customers or users to gather first-hand feedback. For this reason, primary research should be a critical focus of your message testing research.

Primary Research: Qualitative vs. Quantitative

There are two types of primary research: qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative research is usually more exploratory, open-ended, and conducted with a smaller, nonrepresentative sample. It helps you gain insights into people's thoughts, feelings, motivations, and behaviors. Quantitative research is usually more tightly structured, close-ended, and designed to reach a larger, more representative sample. It will help you test or confirm clearly defined hypotheses or concepts.

When you are choosing between qualitative and quantitative research, it's important to consider where you are in your development process. In the initial stages of developing your communications, qualitative research can help you explore themes and come up with a general direction for your message. You can also pursue qualitative methods when you want to refine among a few message options before settling on the final direction. Then, once you are further in the message development process, you can leverage quantitative research to test and select the final message ahead of broader launch.

Qualitative research helps you define what people think and feel. Quantitative will help you understand why they think and feel that way.

Qualitative research is more open-ended, so you can probe and gain deeper insights across a smaller sample.

A Deeper Dive into Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is particularly helpful when you want to generate and hone ideas; test initial, rough concepts; uncover opinions and trends; and/or delve into unmet needs, attitudes, and behavior rationales. It also allows you to iterate on your research and adjust along the way. However, given the smaller sample size, results are usually more directional rather than statistically valid.

When you are considering qualitative methods to support your message testing research, you have a few modalities at your disposal, including:

- 1. In-Depth Interviews (IDIs):** These are a one-on-one format of interaction between a skilled interviewer and an individual with first-hand experience, such as a customer or user. In the context of message testing, you can explore what they think about your message and hear them talk in their own words about the message(s) being tested. IDIs can be conducted virtually (audio and/or video) or in person. Face-to-face formats allow you to glean more insight from nonverbal cues such as facial reactions or body language. Because of the one-on-one format, you can dive deep and gain detailed insights; however, relative to other methodologies, it can also require more time and resources to conduct multiple interviews.
- 2. Focus Groups:** This is a format that brings together a small group of participants for a real-time, professionally moderated discussion. While the exact structure of a focus group could vary based on your research objectives, they commonly entail four to six participants per group for 90 to 120 minutes in duration, conducted either virtually or in person (smaller groups may be referred to as dyads or triads). The participants themselves often share similar attributes or behaviors, and thus the discussion can help you gauge where there's consensus around messaging or even spotlight areas of divergence. Given the group dynamic, it can allow you to gather many perspectives at once, which can save time and resources — and you can also uncover new insights as participants interact with and feed off one another.
- 3. Online Discussion Boards (ODBs):** This format entails a private, online forum where a group of participants (about 15 to 30) asynchronously respond to moderator prompts and activities over the span of a few days. Conducted entirely online, the format allows for a variety of multimedia prompts and response modes, whether text, photo, and/or video. The asynchronous nature allows participants the flexibility to log in at their leisure, which can enable greater reach (e.g., across time zones) relative to a time-bound focus group. The format lends itself to candid and considered responses as opposed to real-time gut reactions. Since boards are typically conducted over the span of a few days, you can make tweaks to stimuli and iterate along the way. Boards can also be more time- and cost-effective than other methods.

Ultimately, qualitative methods of testing are ideal when you are looking to derive insight into how customers perceive your message on an emotional level and whether or not it is resonating.

The output of quantitative research is a more objective dataset that can be measured and analyzed.

A Deeper Dive into Quantitative Research

Compared with qualitative research, quantitative research is more structured and tightly controlled. For this reason, it is useful in testing a well-defined communication concept that you want to validate before launch — which means it usually comes into play toward the end of your message development process.

One of the most popular ways to pursue quantitative research is to conduct a survey, which is a great method of collecting a higher volume of data in a short time period. It also has greater reach, which can help garner a wider range of respondents. This can result in a high-quality dataset that is more representative of the population.

When designing a survey, you can ask many types of questions ranging from rating, ranking, single- or multi-select, matrix tables, and other typically close-ended questions. To message test, you can also consider a monadic or a sequential design to help refine and select optimal messaging. The former allows you to focus on a single message at a time to confirm whether it's ready for launch, whereas the latter allows you to compare multiple messages with different angles to select the best concept.

You may want to message test via a survey if you want a measurable dataset with a more representative population — and if you are far enough along in your development that you have a well-defined message (or a set of a few messages) to test.

Factors to Consider When Choosing the Right Method(s)

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to market research. What's more, you are not limited to pursuing a single methodology. In fact, most research would benefit from combining a few methods to gain deeper insights across your development journey. You can pursue IDIs to explore initial themes, then conduct focus groups to refine initial messaging concepts, and finally conduct a survey to select the best message ahead of launch. Even after launch, you may want to periodically revisit certain methods because customer attitudes can shift over time in response to changing market dynamics.

That said, depending on where you are in the development process, a few factors may dictate which method (or combination of methods) might be the right choice for you:

Message Testing: Qual vs. Quant

	Qualitative			Quantitative
	In-Depth Interviews	Focus Groups	Online Discussion Boards	Surveys
Format	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• One-on-one interaction• Time bound (synchronous)• Real-time reactions• Loosely structured, open-ended• Virtual or in person	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Small group discussion• Time bound (synchronous)• Real-time reactions• Loosely structured, open-ended• Virtual or in person	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Small group discussion• Asynchronous• Candid, considered responses• Loosely structured, open-ended• Online	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Data collection method with a larger sample size• Asynchronous• Double-blinded & anonymous• Tightly structured, close-ended• Online
Output	Textual, rich data from which you can derive themes and pull quotes	Textual, rich data from which you can derive themes and pull quotes	Textual, rich data from which you can derive themes and pull quotes	Data that is more measurable and can be analyzed with statistical tool
When to Engage	Exploring or refining potential messaging	Exploring or refining potential messaging	Exploring or refining potential messaging	Testing developed messages prior to launch
Typical Timeline	~1-2+ weeks (variable based on N)	~4-6 weeks	~4-5 weeks	~1-2 weeks
Budget	May require the most time & resources to execute among qual options	Middle-ground option for saving time & resources among the qual options	May save most time & resources to execute among qual options	Fastest & cheapest among all research options

When designing your research plan, you need to consider many variables. While common considerations include your preferred mode of communication, desired output, timeline, and budget, each project is unique and other factors could influence your reasons for conducting one method over another. If you are not sure where to start, consider partnering with an experienced moderator or engaging a research partner to help you come up with the best research design based on your goals.

The Takeaway

Conducting primary research like message testing is an essential exercise to connect what your customers care about with the messaging you ultimately develop. While you can approach your research plan in many ways, the best method — or combination of methods — will help ensure your message is being interpreted correctly and producing the intended effect.

IMPROVING B2B MESSAGE TESTING

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Before discussing how to improve message testing in B2B marketing, let's start with the basics: What is a message?

A message can be as simple and as short as a logo, name, or tagline. Or it can be longer, such as a short paragraph or a combination of images, text, and other elements. Messages can take many forms, from text to visual elements to audio or video or some combination of all of these. At GLG, we study all kinds of messages, including multimedia messages, in which the visual and print elements often are tested separately.

Why Test Your Messages?

Message testing is important for any business that wants to reach their target audience in a way that best resonates with them. The classic example of this, which may be apocryphal, is General Motors' marketing of the Chevy Nova in Latin America. While "nova" in Spanish and English both have a celestial connotation, the pronunciation of the word in Spanish is "no va," which means "doesn't go" — hardly a great name for a car. The story goes that this resulted in poor sales in Spanish-speaking countries.

Another mythic case involves laundry detergent. To market its brand universally, Procter & Gamble supposedly used pictures, not words, to depict a dirty shirt going into a washing machine, detergent being added, and the shirt coming out clean. The pictures, of course, were arranged left to right. But in countries that read from right to left, such as Hebrew- and Arabic-speaking countries, the ad was interpreted as showing a shirt getting dirtier.

These examples, despite their questionable provenance, persist because they are stark — and humorous — reminders of how messaging can have unintended consequences. Often, real-world message failures are as simple as a missing letter or word. But bigger misses are always possible. Message testing can spot these misses before launch.

Perhaps more important, testing can help you determine whether your messaging will help achieve your desired goals. It also can provide a better understanding of how to talk to customers.

The wrong message has the potential to wreak havoc.

Use message testing to develop messages that can later go through the improvement stage.

Goals that may drive message testing include:

- Developing a new message.
- Improving the message. If you're using several messages, or different messages are up for consideration, each can be tested against benchmarks or norms. You can perform other tests to determine why a message is performing the way it is — and which elements to tweak to create a different perception.
- Selection, or determining the best message. In addition to testing several messages against one another, you can test a specific message to determine whether it meets agreed-upon goals.

Types of Message Testing

The type of message testing performed typically varies with where a product or service is in its development cycle. Early on, you can test the ideas behind a message to help you create an effective strategy. Later, testing often focuses on specific message elements to determine if they resonate with the target audience. Finally, as a product/service goes to market, you can test to validate its messaging, perhaps to determine which of several messages work best.

In B2B survey research, the most common measures used to evaluate messages are affect, clarity, associations, and behavioral intent, with additional tasks, used to identify which parts of the message drive impact.

- Affect. These measures involve how people feel about a message. Do they find it appealing, compelling, useful, unique, or innovative? Often, these attributes are measured using “agree/disagree” questions or semantic differentials.
- Clarity. Message clarity is particularly important in testing taglines, logos, and names to assess a message's effectiveness in communicating its intended purpose or function. Common measures include ease of understanding, ease of recall, and match to intended meaning.
- Associations. These measures provide understanding of the positive and negative associations messaging triggers in clients, customers, or prospects. Commonly measured positive associations include attributes such as premium, easy to use, efficient, productive, and affordable. Testing for negative associations that one wishes to avoid, such as cheap or inefficient, is also prevalent.
- Behavioral intent. Behavioral intent questions measure the self-reported likelihood that someone will take a particular action, such as wanting to learn more, recommending a product or service to a colleague, or purchasing/using a product or service. The simplest message tests sometimes focus on behavioral intent measures alone, excluding the others. Here, the dataset collected often comes from responses on a “likely” to “unlikely” continuum.

Ultimately, message testing can answer a few key questions that can help your business create more successful messaging:

- Does your target audience have a positive perception of the message (e.g., is it positive, appealing, compelling, and easy to understand)?
- Does the message communicate information that matches what your customer wants and needs?
- Does the message lead to customer behaviors that will benefit your business goals?

Answering these questions can provide a holistic understanding of your messages and assist you in making data-driven decisions about your marketing language.

All things being equal, a good message is more likely to result in a sale or lead a user to recommend your product or service. In short, message testing can have substantial rewards.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lauren Bledsoe and Meaghan Bradley lead experienced teams supporting GLG's Professional Services Firm clientele and Corporate clientele in the Americas, respectively. Their teams provide customized qualitative research offerings with either panel-only (B2B) or full-service options. Engagement formats include SME (subject matter expert) placements/staff augmentation, focus groups, panels/ad boards, online discussion boards, workshops, and in-person in-depth interviews.

Lauren has more than nine years of client service experience, and Meaghan has more than six years of client service experience in a qualitative research context spanning both the United States and EMEA. Lauren earned her bachelor's degree after studying public policy and business at Duke University. Meaghan earned her bachelor's degree in business administration at Manhattan College.

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To craft the best message and help deliver your intended business outcome, you want to align with your customer needs and brand values to effectively reach your desired audience. GLG's data-driven approach helps you develop messaging, measure its performance, and enhance it with clarity and confidence. **Learn More.**