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Advancements in Laddering

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INTRODUCTION

Positioning, a term made popular by Ries and Trout in 1972 with *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind*, is defined as designing and executing a marketing strategy to form a particular mental representation of a product or brand in the consumer's mind (Peter & Olson, 1993). Because these representations comprise an array of image and characteristic associations, positioning offers marketers the potential to meaningfully differentiate their brand in the marketplace, because it provides consumers with reasons to choose the brand. But identifying the right combination of images and characteristics to associate with a brand is an extremely difficult task given the number of possible variations that exist and the competitive pressures in the marketplace. Consider the automobile industry, for example. Potential positioning classifications include quality, technical sophistication, driving performance, style, luxury, utility, value, and even popularity. Each broad classification contains additional subtypes as numerous as the car models themselves. The critical question for the marketer is which positioning is best? How can a brand be positioned, or repositioned, to motivate more consumers to purchase?

Positioning, above all else, must strive to differentiate a brand as special and superior to the competition. To do this, the position must be based on the same criteria that consumers use when choosing a brand in a given category. This is the most direct path to gaining marketplace success and long-term equity for the brand. Thus, effective positioning begins with understanding the consumer because the position must become an integral part of the consumer's brand choice process.

The means-end approach (Gutman, 1982), as accomplished via laddering interviews (Olson & Reynolds, 1983; Reynolds & Gutman, 1988), enables

marketers to look at their brands through the consumer's eyes and see the brand in terms of the consumer's decision-making criteria. Since the 1980s, thousands of laddering interviews have been conducted investigating dozens of product categories around the world. A number of valuable lessons have been learned.

The purpose of this chapter is to expand on previous descriptions of laddering methodology (cf. Reynolds & Gutman, 1988) to provide marketers with current means-end practices based on this wealth of real-world research experience. By using the research designs, interview techniques, and data analysis procedures outlined here, a marketer can better understand consumers' personally relevant decisions that drive their product and brand choices. Then they can use this understanding to position their brands for greater market success.

Means-End Theory Background

Means-end theory reflects a perspective grounded in cognitive psychology. The focus is on the linkages between attributes that exist in products (the means), the consequences for the consumer provided by those attributes, and the personal values (the ends) that the consequences reinforce (Olson & Reynolds, 1983). Attributes are perceived qualities or features of products or services. Attributes can include both physical (5.0-liter engine) and abstract (style) product characteristics. Importantly, attributes provide or lead to consequences, which are personal outcomes or results derived from usage or consumption. For example, a 5.0-liter engine can produce the consequence of fast acceleration, but expensive service can lead to not having money for other things. If the consequence is desired, then the attribute is considered a positive for the brand. For many people, fast acceleration is desired, so a 5.0-liter engine would be a positive attribute. Conversely, if the consequence is undesired, then the attribute is considered a negative. Expensive service would be a negative if it reduced the money left for other things. Alternatively, expensive service might be positive if it meant getting "the best." Consequences can be classified as either functional or psychosocial. Functional consequences are rather immediate, tangible, physical experiences, whereas psychosocial consequences are emotional or social and more symbolic, including how the consumer personally feels or how the consumer feels about interacting with others.

In turn, consequences are important to the extent they satisfy the consumer's personal values or goals. Values are defined as the beliefs that people hold about themselves, and desirable values are goals that represent governing drives and motivations. For example, fast acceleration might provide a boost to one's ego, a positive goal or value. Just as fast acceleration explained why a 5.0-liter engine was important, an ego boost would explain why fast acceleration was desired. In contrast, negative consequences obstruct or prevent a person from obtaining a personal value. Not having money for other things would be undesirable if it prevents a person from obtaining the value represented by peace of mind.

Personal values can be classified as instrumental values, which are higher order personal feelings, or terminal values, which are end states or life goals.

Attributes, consequences, and values—also called the *elements of positioning strategy*—delineate three main levels of cognitive abstraction (Gutman & Reynolds, 1979). Attributes are the most tangible or concrete, whereas values are the most abstract, and consequences lie between. Within each level are the additional classifications mentioned before: concrete and abstract for attributes, functional and psycho-social for consequences, and instrumental and terminal for values. Understanding levels of abstraction is important because product choice is based on the combination of different levels, reflected by the ability of a brand's attributes to provide consequences that satisfy values. The means-end framework explains how attributes of products are given their relative importance in the choice process (Reynolds, Cockle, & Rochon, 1990). Also, elements at different levels perform different functions with respect to perceptual differentiation between brands. Perceptual judgments are believed to reflect attribute discriminations, whereas preference differences are thought to reflect higher order value differences (Reynolds, 1988). Therefore, positioning strategies that exclude higher order elements often fail to motivate consumers to choose the brand.

A consumer's sequence of attributes, consequences, and values (A-C-Vs) associated with a product or brand is called a *means-end chain* and represents a perceptual orientation of decision criteria. The dominant perceptual orientation among all consumers of a brand is known as the brand's positioning. However, just as brands can have multiple attributes and multiple usage occasions, consumers can have multiple chains of decision criteria for a given category and even for a single brand. Uncovering these perceptual orientations, including the most dominant one, is accomplished by an interviewing process called laddering. A laddering interview moves a respondent from a discriminating attribute up the levels of abstraction by asking a form of the question: "Why is that important to you?"

Prior to commencing laddering research, however, four fundamental research design questions should be answered. The answers to these questions serve to frame the laddering interviews and ensure that the research addresses all of the brand's positioning problems. These questions management should answer are: Who are the relevant customers? What are the customers' relevant behaviors? What are the relevant contexts of the behavior? And, what are the competitive choice alternatives?

LADDERING RESEARCH DESIGN: FRAMING THE PROBLEM

The first design question that should be answered is: Who are the relevant customers to be interviewed? The answer to this question becomes the criterion for selecting the research sample. For developing positioning strategies for products and brands, relevant customers are people whose beliefs are critical to fully understanding the competitive set of brands in the market. Laddering involves detailed probing about consumers' brand beliefs, so respondents must have knowledge about specific brands in the category. In most cases, brand usage is the key criteria because it ensures that respondents are conversant about a brand. One of the best ways to classify brand users is by frequency of use and relative brand loyalty. For brands that product purchase involves someone other than the user, the sample might include purchasers as well as users.

Frequency of category use classifications can include heavy users, light users, and non-users. Heavy users frequently have the greatest level of knowledge and the most extreme views about the category, so they often can provide the most detailed information. They also can represent the greatest volume and profit, although this is not always the case. Light users are usually greater in number than heavy users, and they tend to have less extreme views. They also can represent the greatest potential for brand growth, particularly in mature markets. Finally, nonusers sometimes have little or no category knowledge and cannot offer much insight, but they often can tell why they are not in the category. For relatively new and developing categories, converting nonusers to users is essential for brand growth, so their beliefs must be understood.

There are two types of loyalty classifications—loyal to a brand and not loyal. One way to define loyalty is the consumer's individual brand consumption frequency or volume divided by the individual's total category consumption. For example, a loyal user of brand A can be defined as someone who consumes brand A at least 75% of the time. Non-loyal users, or brand switchers, can be defined as consumers with no more than 50% of their total category consumption being any one brand. Other loyalty classification schemes are last brand purchased (e.g., for automobile buyers), intended brand of purchase (e.g., for first time computer buyers), and brand-family usage (e.g., for line extension or umbrella-branding research).

A combination of usage and loyalty can be specified to ensure that the dominant discriminating beliefs are represented in the sample and that sample groups include consumers who represent future increased sales for the brand. For example, in a frequently purchased consumer goods category where most people are in the category, key sample groups might be heavy loyal consumers, heavy nonloyal consumers, and light consumers. These groups would allow comparison of perceptual orientations that represent (a) why some people consume a lot of one brand, (b) why others consume a lot of several brands, and

(c) why some do not consume more of a brand. These comparisons are relevant to management if research goals include (a) maintaining the current core consumer group, (b) increasing switching among other frequent users, and (c) increasing volume from current light users. Once usage groups are determined, demographic criteria can be specified for the sample if there is reason to believe that consumer perceptions will differ by demographics. Gender, age, and geographic location are three variables that often reflect differences in beliefs and attitudes. Other demographic variables such as socioeconomic status, ethnic background, or education might discriminate for some categories.

Because laddering is often used to compare perceptual orientations between groups of consumers, groups can be defined so that distinct gaps exist between the defining group characteristics. For example, using age as a sampling criteria, one group might include 18- to 24-year-olds, whereas the other group might be 30- to 38-year-olds. Leaving a 5-year gap between groups ensures that perceptual differences by age, if any exist, are not obscured. Brand usage and loyalty criteria and other demographic criteria can be specified in this manner as well.

Minimum sample size for laddering research is a function of sample criteria. As a general rule of thumb, a minimum of 20 respondents should be included in any single subgroup. Because each respondent provides at least five ladders for the brands in the category and ladders include, on average, five elements, ladders from 20 respondents can include a minimum of 500 data points. Thus, a relatively small sample size can provide considerable insight about consumer choice and brand distinctions. Also, 20 respondents can provide the full range of attributes, consequences, and values associated with the key brands in the category, when the respondents are carefully specified and screened.

Laddering is not limited to solving products- or brand-positioning problems. Laddering research applications have included such issues as increasing church enrollment, changing public opinion about a social issue, selling a political candidate to voters, increasing sales force recruitment and retention for a direct sales organization, identifying effective sponsorship opportunities, and creating a new corporate identity. In all cases, the general guidelines for determining who are the relevant customers still apply, although customers might need to be reinterpreted as specific church members, ideological belief groups, voter constituencies, sales force or employee groups, and corporate stakeholders who not only customers, but investors, analysts, distributors, employees, and government regulators.

The second design question that should be answered is: What are the customers' relevant behaviors? *Relevant behaviors* are defined as those behaviors that the marketer wishes to understand and then encourage, reinforce, or change. Relevant behaviors are often associated with brand or product usage, so this question is frequently answered when defining relevant consumers. For some product categories, product purchase occurs at the end of a multistep

decision-behavior process; then relevant behaviors might include the different actions taken during the process. The sample might then contain different groups based on the primary variables in the decision-behavior process; alternatively, steps in the decision behavior process might be incorporated in the research instrument to frame questioning. For example, people buying a home computer might be classified as those who researched their purchase through multiple sources (magazine reviews and advice from other people), and those who relied exclusively on in-store sales personnel and information displays. For nonproduct or service positioning applications, relevant behaviors are again those consumer actions the marketer would like to reinforce or change. For example, relevant behaviors for a sales force include becoming a sales person, remaining a sales person, quitting as a sales person, and increasing or decreasing sales productivity. Corporate investors' relevant behaviors include buying stock and holding on the stock even during periods of decline.

The third research design question is: What are the relevant contexts of the behavior? The decision-making process people use when selecting a brand or exhibiting some other relevant behavior does not happen in a vacuum. The person will assign different relevance and importance to decision criteria as influenced by the situation or relevant context. For example, a beer consumer may drink Miller Lite at home with friends but will choose Heineken in a restaurant with business associates.

Context includes influential characteristics that, in part, determine the relevant behavior, so context can be defined in several ways. If the relevant behavior is brand choice and usage, then context refers to the physical or psychological occasions of purchase or usage or consumption. Physical occasions of usage or consumption are often described by time, place, activity, and presence of other people. Psychological occasions can be described by influential cultural, social, or personal factors such as the need to please guests at a party or the need to perform well in a business meeting. Context might also include personal life or lifestyle situations that influence the relevant behavior (e.g., fulfilling a parental role might be a contextual characteristic that influences a facet of behavior). Contextual variables in laddering can be represented in the sample selection criteria, or they can be included in the research instrument, either as prespecified scenarios or as elicited from respondents during the interview.

The fourth design question is: What are the competitive choice alternatives? Competitive alternatives are the entire range of options considered by the relevant customers. For example, before settling on a Heineken, our beer drinker may have considered several different beers, along with a glass of wine, a soda, and even an imported mineral water. This example illustrates that competition is best identified on the basis of consumer choice criteria, which include the elements of means-end chains—attributes, consequences, and values. Because elements that determine choice occur at all levels of cognitive abstraction,

competition can be classified based on specific elements at different levels. In-kind competitors are products with similar attributes and are usually in the same category. Functional competitors are products with different attributes but similar lower level consequences. Ego-emotive competitors are products that do not provide similar attributes or functional consequences but are still in the choice set, often competing at the psychosocial consequence or value level.

An important result of a laddering study can be identification of primary competitors from the customer's perspective. For positioning research concerning nonproducts or services, other competitors might include opposing candidates (for voters), other work opportunities (for employees), other ideological points of view (for social issue advocates), and other financial opportunities (for investors). Identification of competitors prior to conducting laddering research usually is necessary for specifying the sample. Users of in-kind competitive brands are frequently included in sample designs because these competitors are often the biggest threat, and their customers represent potential sales. However, most categories also face significant competition from one or more functional or ego-emotive competitors, so these should not be overlooked.

Competition can also be defined relative to levels of competition, such as megacategory, category, subcategory and specific product. For example, the megacategory of medicinal drugs includes both over-the-counter (OTC) drugs and prescription drugs. The different subcategories of OTC drugs include cold, flu, allergy, analgesic, stomach and intestinal, topical, and many others. Forms of OTC medications include capsules, caplets, liquids, tablets, ointments, and sprays, which often operate both within and across subcategories. Brands operate both within and across subcategories. Because individual products are unique combinations of layers, studying the attributes and benefits that are associated with each layer can be an efficient way to understand specific products.

Answering the four research-framing questions discussed here—Who is the relevant customer? What are the customers' relevant behaviors? What are the relevant contexts of the behaviors? What are the competitive choice alternatives?—might involve simply putting on paper what is already known, or it might require preliminary research. If additional research is used, the four questions usually can be answered by collecting a detailed consumer diary across a broad sample. For many packaged goods, the diary would focus on brand purchase and use by time of day, day of the week, activities, other people present, intended purpose for the product, considered alternatives (both in-category and others), and other occasion or situation details considered relevant. For durables, the diary might begin with questions about current brand and product usage, then require respondents to describe the steps taken during need recognition, information search and the final product (brand) choice decision. Frequency of use and brand loyalty sample criteria can be determined based on

these diaries, along with the behaviors, contexts, and alternatives associated with each sample group.

Preliminary research can be done apart from the laddering research by using a separate sample, or it can immediately precede each laddering interview to provide a tailored, personal basis for the interview questioning. For example, a respondent could be asked to complete a diary during the week or month prior to a laddering interview, and then answer questions based on the diary during the interview. Answering the four framing questions is important to laddering research, because they focus interview questions on the specific bases for brand choice during most product decision occasions. Without proper framing, laddering research might not provide accurate information that can lead, in turn, to an effective positioning strategy.

Once the framing questions have been answered, the research sample can be specified, the research instrument can be created, and pilot interviews can be conducted. Pilot interviews identify questions that respondents might not understand and provide a dress rehearsal for interviewers. During and after completion of pilot interviews, the research instrument can be revised as needed. Then, the sample can be recruited and the actual interviews conducted.

THE LADDERING INTERVIEW

A *laddering interview* is an in-depth, one-on-one process that elicits the means-end chains of attributes, consequences, and values associated with a particular brand, product, or category. The interview should take place in a room free of distractions, with an interviewer who has been trained in laddering methods. Laddering interviews are structured to last anywhere from 45 minutes to 2 hours, so it is recommended that they be tape recorded to ensure that no respondent nuances are missed during the interview. The length of the interview is a function of the complexity of the positioning problem and the need to focus the respondent on their reasons for brand choice during the interview. Brands with a complex decision-behavior process, many different relevant contextual variables, or several strong competitors will require a longer interview to elicit means-end chains associated with the multiple differentiating criteria. Such would be the case for OTC medications, automobiles, and restaurants, to name a few.

Focusing respondents to reveal their true beliefs, feelings and goals requires warm-up questioning to put them at ease with the interviewer and to force them to think about the brands of interest. Warm-up questions also provide an opportunity to elicit nonladdering information that can provide valuable insight into the brand-positioning problem. If not already known, detailed preference and behavior information can be collected, consumer knowledge about

competitive brands and perceived availability can be assessed, and price-quality issues can be addressed.

The laddering method differs from typical qualitative research in that laddering is structured to uncover more abstract but personally motivating reasons behind brand choice, in addition to attribute and functional consequence (benefit) reasons for usage. To this end, laddering must begin by identifying the most important distinguishing characteristics of the brand for a given context; then laddering seeks to move the respondent up the levels of abstraction. Moving up levels is done by asking a form of the question: "Why is that important to you?" Said another way, the qualitative results from a laddering structure are deep and focused while a typical qualitative structure are shallow and broad. When done well, laddering allows little room for error because the initial distinctions must be important to the respondent's choice process, the entire ladder is likely to be important to the participant and, therefore, relatively easy to articulate.

ADVANTAGES OF LADDERING

After a series of warm-up questions lasting between 5 and 15 minutes, the interview moves to laddering. Laddering probes begin with the distinctions made by the respondent about perceived differences between brands or products (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). Distinctions made with respect to different choice situations and specific sets of competitive alternatives provide the best results for laddering because they allow the respondent to examine the choice process in its naturally occurring contexts.

By eliciting consumer beliefs and attitudes within the context of behavior, laddering overcomes a major pitfall of most attitude research. If research is not framed by the appropriate context of choice behavior, respondents are likely to bring out distinctions not necessarily connected with choice. Such a procedure potentially mixes important choice criteria with less meaningful distinctions. Perhaps this explains why attitudes toward an object do not often predict brand choice, but attitudes toward choice behavior concerning the object frequently do.

In order to understand the multiple distinctions that are the basis for purchase and use decisions made by a consumer, different elicitation techniques are required.

METHODS TO ELICIT DISTINCTIONS

Laddering research must be designed to uncover the reasons underlying purchase or consumption decisions, made with respect to competing products and brands across different choice occasions. Both the positive reasons for

choosing a brand and the negative reasons for rejecting a brand should be determined. Simply asking what is good about brand A is not enough. The marketer needs to understand how brand A is perceived to be better than, and worse than, the competition. The relative balance of positive and negative associations can provide substantial guidance for positioning strategy development during analysis of the laddering data. Therefore, questions for eliciting distinctions should give each respondent the opportunity to mention positives and negatives.

Following are several methods for eliciting distinctions between brands. Each of these methods can be used in conjunction with defined consumption occasions. For example, frozen waffle distinctions might focus exclusively on breakfast occasions with other breakfast foods as competition. Also, methods can be combined to focus the respondent in a more tightly defined context. Breakfast might be further defined as hurried or leisurely. We can classify the three primary elicitation methods for brand distinctions as: (1) unconstrained general brand relationships, (2) brand relations constrained by current usage differences, and (3) brand relations constrained by potential usage differences. Figure 4.1 summarizes the three primary classifications and shows specific techniques for each.



FIG. 4.1. Laddering methods: Eliciting distinctions.

ELICITATION METHODS: UNCONSTRAINED GENERAL BRAND RELATIONS

Distinctions based on unconstrained general relations between brands can provide broad category analysis, although they often must be augmented with other methods that focus more on brand preference and choice. Two specific research designs to elicit brand relation distinctions include Top-Of-Mind Imaging and Grouping Similar Brands. A third method, the Repertory Grid, was discussed by Reynolds and Gutman (1988), although in practice it is seldom used because it requires many comparisons that take a lot of time. Each method relies on preidentified competitive brands for analysis.

Top of Mind Imaging

The respondent is asked to give one or more first-thought associations for each of several brands or product types. The respondent states the polarity (positive or negative?) for each association. Then, the respondent is asked why the characteristic is a positive or negative, and those responses are further probed to uncover the ladder. Top-Of-Mind Imaging identifies the most conspicuous characteristics of a brand but not always the characteristics that differentiate it from close competitors. For example, both Mustangs and Camaros might be identified as performance cars, yet one might be preferred over the other. This technique is used primarily to distinguish between brands in different subcategories, such as juices versus carbonated soft drinks.

Grouping Similar Brands

This method uncovers respondents' top-of-mind product groupings and reasons for groupings. In Grouping Similar Brands, respondents are asked to group brands and products in like categories based on perceived similarity. Then, the primary reason for forming a group, either a positive or negative characteristic, can be elicited and ladderred. Additionally, the respondent can be asked to identify the brand or product that best represents the group. Important traits and trait performance for the most representative brand can be elicited and ladderred as well.

Two potential problems must be considered when using this technique. First, groups are often based on attribute level distinctions, whereas the brands in the group might provide vastly different consequences. Therefore, brand groupings might not provide insight into actual brand preference or choice criteria. Second, the grouped brands may or may not be in the respondent's consideration set. For example, a respondent might combine Minute Maid orange juice and Minute Maid fruit punch in the same group, even though fruit punch is never considered for purchase.

ELICITATION METHODS: BRAND RELATIONS CONSTRAINED BY CURRENT USAGE

Brand relations unconstrained by current usage differences are a second type of method for eliciting brand distinctions. Focusing the respondents on their perceived behavior allows the researcher to directly probe the reasons for the behavior. This makes brand comparisons and distinctions relatively easy for the respondent. Questions in the research instrument can be crafted so that distinctions are recorded based on reported behavioral differences, on rank order or scale methods, or on constant sum-allocation methods. Three of the methods used in this design are contextual environment; preference, usage, and preference-usage differences; and timing of purchase or consumption (also discussed by Reynolds & Gutman, 1988).

Contextual Environment

The contextual environment includes predetermined physical or psychological occasions of brand purchase or use. Physical occasions are generally described by the time, place, and people when usage occurs. A psychological occasion is a mental need or inner desire that can span many physical occasions. Psychological occasions are also called need states. As an example, a need for higher level fulfillment, such as social acceptance, can occur across many different physical occasions including work, home with family, or an activity with friends. Other psychological need states include relaxing, rejuvenating, building relationships, reducing stress, and saving time. All brand purchase and usage occurs within physical and psychological occasions. Oftentimes, the researcher has hypotheses about consumer perceptions during specific occasions, so this design allows these perceptions to be investigated. For example, during a laddering interview, brand questioning would be prefaced with a predefined need state or occasion, such as, "Think about those times when you wanted to impress someone" or "Imagine that you have just completed a tough job or accomplished something that was important to you."

Preference, Usage, and Preference-Usage Differences

Comparing consumer's reported brand preferences and usage is one of the most direct and commonly used methods for eliciting brand distinctions. Brands can be ranked or scaled on both preference and usage frequency. Then, brands can be directly compared against each other based on these scales using questions such as: "Why did you give brand A a higher preference rating than brand B?" and "Why do you use brand A more often than brand B?" Investigating the disparity between preference and usage evaluations is another useful technique. For example, a consumer might give brand A a higher preference rating yet use

brand B more often. The interviewer might then ask why. When using this technique, selecting the appropriate set of considered brands to include is an important step to avoid overemphasis on price criteria. For example, it may not be helpful to match a Porsche 911 with a Honda Prelude.

Timing of Purchase or Consumption

Timing issues can affect product choice and usage for some products. This technique is similar to that described by Contextual Environment except that time is the primary criteria that determines the occasion. For example, a consumer might be asked, “Why do you use brand A during the initial stage of a flu, but you use brand B during the full-blown stage?” or “Why do you use brand A only in the morning, but you use brand B at any time of the day or night?” Of course, using this technique, as well as the previous two, assumes the researcher has a good understanding of the step-by-step behaviors associated with product purchase and consumption.

ELICITATION METHODS: BRAND RELATIONS CONSTRAINED BY POTENTIAL USAGE DIFFERENCES

Brand relations constrained by potential usage is a third type of method for eliciting distinctions. Distinctions elicited in this manner can be helpful in identifying future brand growth opportunities based on current brand perceptions. These methods can highlight directions to proceed and potential barriers for growth. Elicited distinctions can also help the marketer understand the goals and aspirations of the consumer, resulting in positioning the brand as a part of the desired lifestyle, by tapping into major value trends in society. The methods used in this approach are usage trends, brand or product substitution, and alternative usage occasions.

Usage Trends

Respondents are asked to quantify their beliefs about both past and future brand usage. These beliefs can be based on brands currently used or on new or unused brands. Reasons for past- and future-perceived brand usage trends are then identified and ladderred. If the trend is toward increased usage, the ladder will be positive. If it is toward decreased usage the ladder will be negative. Although not meant to provide quantitative measures or predictions about future brand use, this technique provides important insight regarding current purchasing or consumption patterns that consumers see in themselves but that do not match their ideals.

Product or Brand Substitution

Distinctions between brands can be directly assessed based on the ability of one brand to be substituted for another. The brand to be substituted can be a brand currently used by the respondent, if a goal of the research is to increase consumption, or it can be a brand not currently used, if a goal is to increase trial. For an unfamiliar brand, the respondent first can sample or be given a description of the brand. Follow-up questioning might include “How likely would you be to substitute this new brand for your current brand for this occasion? Why (or why not)?”

Alternative Usage Occasions

A third technique to elicit potential usage distinctions involves altering or adding new usage occasions for the respondent to consider. Alternate occasions can be either predetermined or provided by the respondent. For example, the respondent might be asked, “Think of a new situation or occasion in which you might use brand A but that you do not currently. Why would you consider using brand A during this new occasion? What is keeping you from using brand A during this occasion now?” Both positive reasons why a brand fits a new occasion and negative reasons why it does not fit are elicited and laddered. This method can be used without direct brand comparisons, as the example demonstrated, or with explicit comparisons between brands, depending on the goals of the research.

In practice, multiple elicitation methods are frequently used during a laddering interview to capture the full range of meaningful distinctions between a brand and its competitors. For example, a laddering interview might first utilize Top-of-Mind Imaging to understand general category-level beliefs, then include a Contextual-Environment approach to focus on in-kind brand competition. The study might also include Alternative Usage Occasions or Usage Trends to gain insight about expanding the market. We recommend a minimum of 5 to as many as 12 ladders be elicited from a respondent for a given brand or set of competitive brands. The market environment and goals of management will determine the appropriate mix of methods.

LADDERING TECHNIQUES

Once distinctions have been elicited, laddering must move the respondent up and down the chain of abstraction to uncover the salient higher level elements in the decision-making process and the specific cues that communicate important product or service characteristics. Laddering consists of the interviewer asking a series of questions similar to “Why is that important to you?” The specific questions in laddering are based on the respondent’s last answer given, which

explains why different questions sometimes are used at different levels in a ladder. The ability of the respondent to verbalize his or her thoughts and feelings also influences the form of the questions asked. Some respondents can provide detailed and in-depth answers effortlessly with only minimal probing, whereas others require the interviewer to ask multiple questions for every response. Following are a few examples of questions, summarized in Fig. 4.2, that can be used to elicit functional and psycho-social consequences based on lower level distinctions:

- “Why is that important to you?”
- “How does that help you out?”
- “What do you get from that?”
- “Why do you want that?”
- “What happens to you as a result of that?”

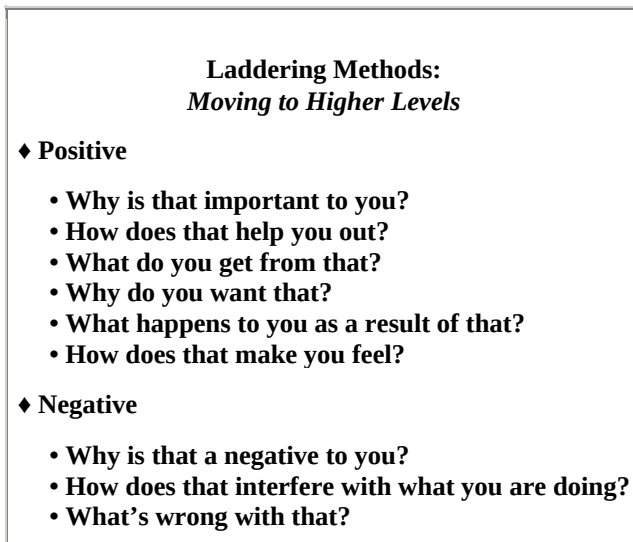


FIG. 4.2. Laddering methods: Moving to higher levels.

Higher level psycho-social consequences and values are most often feelings or personal beliefs. Thus, asking “How does that make you feel?” is appropriate at these levels. However, this question does not work well at lower levels because it forces the respondent to make too great a leap between levels of abstraction.

Negative ladders require, of course, stating the question in negative terms. At the consequence levels, the interviewer may want to ask: “Why do you want to

avoid that?” This effectively turns the discussion from negative to positive. Most respondents are better able to discuss feelings about obtaining a value rather than avoiding one, so laddering is facilitated by talking in positive terms before reaching the value level. Examples of negative questioning are:

- “Why is that a negative to you?”
- “How does that interfere with what you are doing?”
- “What’s wrong with that?”

During laddering interviews respondents can become blocked at one level and unable to proceed higher. Although the temptation is strong, the interviewer should at no time put words in the respondent’s mouth or give examples to the respondent. It is the job of the interviewer to guide the respondent up the ladder and to record responses accurately, not to fit responses into preconceived patterns or to encourage desired responses. Even when the interviewer has successfully put aside preconceptions about the research results, respondents quickly key on what they think the interviewer wants to hear. Suggestions made by the interviewer risk biasing the response.

**Laddering Methods:
*Overcoming Blocking***

- ◆ **Reiteration of Occasion**
- ◆ **Alternate Scenario**
- ◆ **Absence of Product**
- ◆ **Abstraction From Product**
- ◆ **Negative laddering**
- ◆ **Age Regression Contrast**
- ◆ **Third Person Probe**
- ◆ **Silence**
- ◆ **Reiteration of A-C-Vs**

FIG. 4.3. Laddering methods: Overcoming blocking.

To avoid biasing an interview, several interviewing techniques, have been identified for overcoming blocking (most of these can be used with nearly any type of qualitative interviewing method). Most of these were discussed by Reynolds and Gutman (1988), but they are sufficiently important to warrant a review. More than one technique can be used during the course of one ladder, as the need might arise to combine techniques. Occasionally these techniques will fail and the interviewer will feel that no further progress can be made on the ladder. Then the interviewer should move on to finish the interview and possibly

come back to the incomplete ladder later. These techniques are listed in Fig. 4.3 in no particular order.

Reiteration of Occasion

When the respondent appears to have forgotten or lost track, the interviewer can remind the respondent of the occasion that is the basis for the ladder. To provide a more vivid basis from which to respond, the interviewer might ask the respondent to provide further information about the occasion (With whom? Doing what? Where?)

Alternate Scenario

The interviewer can ask the respondent to think of another situation or scenario, similar to the one currently being discussed, in which the brand is used in a similar way and for similar reasons. This technique might be used after first trying to reiterate the occasion.

Absence of Product

The interviewer can ask the respondent to describe his or her feelings, responses, and the potential consequences assuming that the brand is unavailable in that situation.

Abstraction From Product

Occasionally, respondents will not be able to leave the brand at the attribute level and will wonder how the brand itself can “make me feel good about myself” or can “improve my relationship with my spouse.” The interviewer should ask the respondent to ignore the brand and only consider the last consequence that was mentioned. Reiterating the last consequence often helps keep respondents focused.

Negative Laddering

Negative laddering seeks the respondent’s reasons why they do not want to do certain things or feel certain ways. The interviewer can ask the respondent what would happen if they were not able to achieve a certain positive consequence.

Age Regression Contrast

The age regression contrast forces the respondent to compare usage or consumption in a previous time period with the current time. For example, the

interviewer may ask the respondent if he or she used the product 5 years ago and then ask why or why not. This technique is similar to the trends method of eliciting distinctions, but here it is used during the actual laddering process to overcome a blockage.

Third Person Probe

The third person probe places the respondent in another person's shoes, which may facilitate a response when the respondent might feel threatened or uncomfortable discussing personal reasons behind behavior. For example, the interviewer could ask the respondent how others might feel in similar circumstances. For example, an overweight respondent might feel uncomfortable talking in the first person about why they use a diet product.

Silence

Silence and patient attention can signal to the respondent that the interviewer is awaiting a more thorough or detailed response. Often the respondent will elaborate on a vague or incomplete answer with no further prompting by the interviewer.

Reiteration of A-C-Vs

To help the respondent maintain a complete train of thought during the ladder, the interviewer can reiterate the answers given up to the blocked point. The complete ladder should also be repeated back to the respondent after a value has been reached allowing the respondent the opportunity to verify his chain of thought. In addition, the interviewer can use this technique to refocus a rambling respondent who has strayed from the ladder.

In the course of a laddering interview, the respondent will not always provide whole or complete responses. The interviewer must be able to identify incomplete responses so that additional probes can draw out useful information. These incomplete responses primarily fall into 6 categories, as listed in Fig. 4.4.

Generic Statements

Respondents sometimes provide very generic answers that have no specific meaning. For example, "satisfied" can be either physical (feeling full after a meal) or emotional (feeling content with oneself). Likewise, "happy" can have multiple meanings such as feeling happy about something accomplished and feeling happy for another person, as well as varying intensity, ranging from mild to ecstatic. Slang words are particularly susceptible to multiple meaning. For example, "cool" to one person might be completely different from "cool" to

someone else. The interviewer must identify generic responses and probe for more detail or clarification. Often, simply asking the respondent “What do you mean?” or “Could you describe that feeling?” will lead to a better understanding. Specific details concerning attribute or functional consequence elements are needed for strategy development because they sometimes tell management exactly how to communicate an important element. For example, friendly service can be further described as a smile from the cashier.

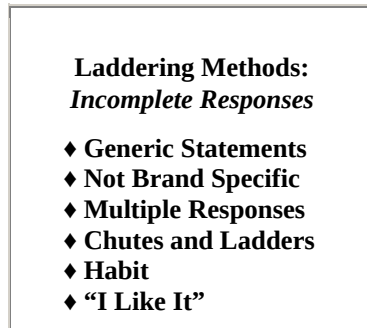


FIG. 4.4. Laddering methods: Incomplete responses.

Not Brand Specific

Differentiating characteristics should be brand specific and unambiguous. Distinctions that apply to many brands equally well, or even to the entire category, are not useful for positioning. For example, “ice cold” does not distinguish between carbonated soft drinks, although “carbonation” distinguishes quite well when prefaced with a degree of intensity.

Multiple Responses

Respondents may give more than one answer when providing distinctions or during laddering probes. In these cases, the interviewer should ask which characteristic or idea is most important for the given situation and then continue probing from there. It is possible to ladder multiple “branches,” although this can confound analysis and takes extra time during the interview. Prior to interviews, the researcher should decide how to handle multiple responses.

Chutes and Ladders

Distinctions are most often product attributes, but respondents may sometimes mention an upper level element as a basis for differentiating one brand from

another. The interviewer can “chute down” by asking: “What is it about the brand that makes it that way?” Occasionally, a respondent might ladder directly from an attribute to a value or appear to leave an important element out. Again, the interviewer can ask, “I’m not sure how (lower level element) leads to (upper level element). Is there something about the brand that makes you feel that way?”

Habit

Respondents tend to say “It’s a habit” or “I’ve always done it that way” when they cannot think of a more rational reason for their usage or consumption behavior. The interviewer should try to uncover when and how the habit started, and why they do not change the habit. Answers from these questions can become a basis for other laddering probes.

I Just Like It

Similar to the generic statement, this phrase occurs frequently in laddering and can almost always be handled the same way. The goal of laddering is to understand why, so the interviewer should ask why the respondent likes something or what specifically the respondent likes.

SUMMARY

This review has covered the most common difficulties and problems that occur during a laddering interview. Other problems will arise that require the interviewer to take appropriate action. To best prepare for these contingencies, laddering interviewers should be selected for their ability to empathize and interact with respondents, they should be adequately trained in both the methods and the theory behind laddering, and they should practice with the instrument before fielding the research. At a minimum, interviewers should understand the means-end theory that is the basis for laddering, and they should be familiar with the elicitation and probing techniques mentioned here and by Reynolds and Gutman (1988). Also, the interviewers should be briefed on the research goals for each part of the interview. With this knowledge, they can listen to respondents’ answers objectively to ensure that the information provided will answer the positioning questions outlined in the brief. A rule of thumb for interviewers is to ask themselves: “Do I understand all of the personal reasons why this respondent chooses and uses the brand?” and “Is there anything that I do not understand?”

LADDERING ANALYSIS

Once a representative sample of consumers from a product category have been ladderred for their means-end chains, the full range of relevant perceptual orientations for the brands in the category can be summarized graphically in a Consumer Decision Map (CDM). Previously, this graphic was termed a Hierarchical Value Map (Olson & Reynolds, 1983), but because it represents how people make decisions rather than just how their thoughts are organized, the term *Consumer Decision Map* more accurately describes the graphic. A CDM includes the most frequently mentioned elements (A-C-Vs) from the means-end chains as well as the most common associations between the elements. The process of analysis for developing a CDM (see Reynolds & Gutman, 1988) includes three main steps: (1) organizing the ideas found in the ladders into summary codes, (2) creating a frequency matrix for associations between codes, and (3) constructing the CDM from the most common pairs of associated codes. These steps can be performed by Laddermapping™ software (Gengler & Reynolds, 1995) or by a manual method. Alternatively, Valette-Florence and Rapacchi (1991) suggested a slightly revised procedure for constructing the map based on graph theory.

The first and possibly most important step in the laddering analysis is to develop a set of summary codes for the strategic elements at each level of means-end theory. These elements must accurately reflect all of the key concepts or beliefs that were mentioned in the ladders from the interviews. Respondents' verbatim statements are grouped based on similarity of meaning under code-word headings, which are then identified as attributes, functional consequences, psychosocial consequences, or values. For example, "tingling taste" and "sparkling fizz" might both be categorized under an attribute-level code word of *Carbonation*. Likewise, "able to work harder," "can perform my job better," and "can get more done on the job" might be coded as *Improves Work Performance*, a psychosocial consequence. Care must be taken at this stage to ensure that codes accurately reflect the respondents' reasons for brand choice, while keeping to a manageable number of codes and not losing the language of the consumer. Oftentimes, the coding process requires multiple iterations to yield 5 to 20 codes are retained for each for the four levels. To retain consumer language, researchers should identify key verbatim remarks that best represent the set of consumer ideas included in a code. Often times, these verbatim remarks can be included directly on the CDM so that managers involved in the subsequent strategy development are fully aware of the meaning represented by each code.

The second step is constructing a matrix that displays the number of times each coded element leads to another coded element. Every time an element precedes another element in a ladder, it gets counted. Both direct connections between elements (where one element directly precedes another element with no

elements in between the two) and indirect connections (where one element precedes another in a ladder but one or more additional elements are between them) are counted. Direct connections indicate a direct cause-effect relation between concepts, whereas indirect connections reflect a general association between concepts.

To construct a CDM from the set of connected pairs, one must literally build up the map from sequences of connected elements extracted from the frequency matrix. A criteria for evaluating the ability of the overall map to represent the data is to assess the percentage of all relations among elements accounted for by the mapped elements. In general, the map should account for at least 80% of all pairs that exist in the matrix. A completed map will include the most commonly mentioned coded elements and the most common associations between the elements. As such, it provides the foundation for developing a positioning strategy specified in terms of select elements and connections between them.

MEANS-END OUTPUTS FOR DEVELOPING POSITIONING STRATEGY

The CDM is a general perceptual representation; it does not provide competitive analysis or specific positioning guidance. Additional laddering analyses can be used to guide the development of effective positioning strategies, including understanding the perceptual strengths (equities) and weaknesses (disequities) of the key brands in the market and the relative salience of these equities and disequities in terms of brand choice.

Perceptual equities and disequities based on laddering are composites of the positive and negative elements associated with the brand in the market. Because brand distinctions and the associated ladders are elicited from choice comparisons, they are brand specific. Also, elements elicited in laddering can be positive or negative for a brand, depending on whether the elements are desired or undesired. Therefore, one can create a frequency data matrix with strategic elements along one axis and brands with positive and negative poles along the other, as shown in Table 4.1. Transforming the positives and negatives for each brand into ratios, and the frequencies into percentages provides the necessary information. A verbal description of this data is that elements mentioned more often overall in the ladders are considered more important in terms of brand choice, and elements that were mentioned more often as positive for a given brand rather than as negative are considered brand strengths or equities. Brand weaknesses or disequities are elements that were mentioned more often as negative than as positive for a brand. A summary analysis of this information, when overlaid on the CDM, provides additional insight into the consumer's brand choice process by highlighting each element according to its role in the

choice process. Thus, elements on the map can be classified according to their relative importance and their degree of positiveness for each brand.

TABLE 4.1 Frequencies of Elements (%)

<i>Attributes</i>	<i>Brand A</i>		<i>Brand B</i>	
	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Positive</i>	<i>Negative</i>
Attribute 1	18	5	5	17
Attribute 2	14	9	11	8
Attribute 3	9	9	5	7
Attribute 4	6	4	2	6
Attribute 5	5	8	4	5
Attribute 6	4	2	2	2
Attribute 7	2	2	2	1
Attribute 8	2	1	3	0
	60	40	54	46

The equity analysis provides the rationale for choosing a respondent sample based on differences in relevant behavior. Different sample behavior groups often have different perceptions that, in part, determine their behavior. Separate equity analyses for each sample group enables marketers to compare brand perceptions between groups in a meaningful way. For example, an important attribute to both heavy users and light users of a brand, that is an equity for heavy users and a disequity for light users is likely to be a key perceptual barrier that, to some extent, prevents light users from becoming heavy users. A positioning strategy meant to increase usage among light users must address this barrier element, along with other salient elements at different levels.

THINKING STRATEGICALLY

Laddering output, in particular the CDM, should stimulate strategic thinking and encourage creative solutions to positioning problems. To this end, the CDM offers many alternatives for developing a positioning, including the following:

- Create a new element for the map.
- Increase the importance of an existing element.
- Decrease the importance of an existing element.

- Create a new linkage between elements.
- Eliminate an existing linkage between elements.
- Change a disequity associated with one's own brand into an equity.
- Change an equity associated with a competitive brand into a disequity.
- Strengthen an association between one's own brand and an element.
- Weaken an association between one's own brand and an element.
- Invent new parts of a map, or create an entirely new map.

Every brand faces a unique positioning problem depending on its market share, the number and size of competitors, current perceptions associated with the brand and its competitors, the types of communication tools available to brand marketers, the characteristics of the category, and numerous other factors. The alternatives listed previously can be used singularly or combined as appropriate to achieve management's goals for its brand. Following are three common market situations that demonstrate how positioning strategy might be developed using these tools and options.

Remove a Barrier

The first situation involves dealing with a major barrier to consumer acceptance—for instance, a differentiating attribute of a new brand is strongly associated with a negative consequence that prevents consumers from trying the brand. One option is to discard the attribute, but this might not be possible if it is integral to the brand or is a key point of differentiation. An alternate positioning solution is to reduce the association with this negative consequence by selecting or inventing a positive consequence of the attribute that supplants the negative. This is essentially what Miller Brewing did with Miller Lite. The attribute was *Fewer Calories*, which led to the negative consequence for heavy beer drinkers of *Weight Watching*. The invented consequence that replaced *Weight Watching* was *Less Filling*.

A second market situation involves establishing an important point of differentiation for a new brand in a mature market. A new element can be created and linked to important existing elements, or an entire new ladder can be invented. This positioning strategy is more likely to succeed if the new brand focuses on an area of the map where the primary competitors do not have strong equities. Another Miller brand, Genuine Draft, became a leading beer in America based on a new attribute called *Cold Filtered* that led to the very important consequence of *Great Taste*. Miller's primary competitor at the time, Budweiser, was not closely associated with *Great Taste*, nor was much emphasis given to how Buds beechwood aged process might lead to *Great Taste*. Budweiser's advertising at the time was focused at higher levels, such as high quality.

A third situation involves a brand with equities in relatively unimportant elements. A positioning solution in this case is to guard against competitive

reaction by increasing the importance of these elements as well as strengthening the associations between the elements and the brand. During a time when athletic shoes were dominated by Nike hyping technology in their shoes and Reebok focusing on fashion aspects, Converse languished but hung onto market share with such equities as “the official NBA shoe” and nostalgia among middle-age consumers who wore the brand when growing up. Converse was able to increase consumer associations with both of these ideas to gain share.

INFLUENCING THE MANAGERIAL PROCESS

Designing and implementing a comprehensive laddering research study is an important but partial step to effective long-term results. Once the interviews are complete and the data and preliminary conclusions have been prepared, it is critical that all managers with responsibility for the brand get involved in the process. Presenting laddering results that creates managerial involvement is not difficult, but a few relatively sophisticated communication techniques can enhance the richness of the data.

The CDM is the primary tool for management decision making resulting from laddering research, so presentation emphasis should focus on the map. Laddering results are most easily understood when built from the component pieces. The CDM can be presented one piece (area) at a time either by A-C-V level or by major perceptual orientations or pathways on the map. This piecemeal presentation allows decision-makers to understand the map in manageable parts. Second, multiple maps for a category analysis are confusing if the structure changes for each map. Each category should have one overall map that contains all the elements and connections across different analyses. In this way, positions of the elements and their connections do not change between variations of the map, but the relative equities-disequities and importances of the elements can change and not be confusing.

Another graphical tool that can be used to illustrate both the relative importance and the positive ratios of elements is an equity matrix. An equity matrix is a two-dimensional plot with each axis representing the positive ratios of elements for a sample group. Plotting symbol size represents the overall importance of the element. For example, an equity matrix might represent a contrast between the beliefs of heavy users and light users of a brand. The most important elements from the CDM can be plotted on the matrix with each element's coordinates determined by the positive ratios for the two sample groups.

A third presentation technique is to color-code the elements on the map based on equities and disequities for different sample groups or for different brands. If two consumer groups are being compared, different colors can differentiate between elements seen as equities and disequities by each group. For example,

blue might identify equities for both groups, green and yellow might differentiate elements as equities for only one of the groups, and red might distinguish disequities for both groups. Similarly, colors can be used to signify the relative importance of elements or connections on the map.

A CDM and equity-disequity analyses presented in this manner provide the basic tools from which to think about the positioning problem and discuss possible solutions. If everyone involved in the process can read the map and interpret its meanings, brand positioning discussions can lead to more actionable conclusions.

SUMMARY

Brand positioning generally requires in-depth understanding of the consumer's decision-making process. Means-end theory through laddering provides a useful tool to fully explore the consumer's psyche in terms of brand choice criteria. But laddering, like any tool, relies on the craftspeople who use it. In this chapter, we provide useful guidance for designing and implementing laddering research that will yield actionable results for management.

We propose that laddering research begin by answering four key questions: Who are the relevant customers or consumers to be interviewed? What are the customers' relevant behaviors? What are the relevant contexts of the behavior? What are the competitive choice alternatives? Answers to these questions frame the research design including selecting methods to elicit distinctions, selecting the sample, and writing and piloting the research instrument. Interviews based on the laddering techniques described here can provide meaningful and accurate ladders and CDMs that, in turn, form the basis for managerial understanding and action. In sum, laddering is a tool that can help managers gain a clearer picture of consumer decision making so they can think more effectively about their brand positioning challenges.

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