



Infiniti and Beyond: Laddering Up to New Product Success

How can you connect customer values to those of the brand when embarking on new innovations? That is the challenge Nissan faced recently when it was evaluating various technology features for its Infiniti brand.

Speaking at the Symposium on Excellence in Qualitative Research conducted by the [Qualitative Research Consultants Association](#), an AMA content partner, Rachel Nguyen, Director of Advanced Planning & Strategy with Nissan North America and Michele Zwilling, Chief Explorer, SnoopPro Research, discussed how they used the laddering research method to differentiate responses to various features based on actual and emotional benefits.

Nguyen explained that the Product Planning department in Japan wanted customer feedback on advanced technology features that would support the Infiniti brand Pillars of Peace of Mind, Driving Pleasure and Hospitality. The goal was to connect tangible features to brand values.

As part of the Renault-Nissan alliance brand identities for both Nissan and Infiniti were established in 2000. In order to identify customers with similar attitudes and values to the brand identities, a customer affluent market segmentation was conducted with a determination of the segment that best fit the brand values of Infiniti. Based on this research, the group called Passionate Curators was enlisted to help evaluate advanced features.

Nissan laddered the importance of one or several benefits/physical consequences to emotional consequences in order to identify the connection for the respondent between the feature and their own core value (i.e., from simple features like scratch-free paint to more complicated features like Around View Monitor).



The laddering process involved conducting 100 hour-long individual interviews (8 cities in 3 weeks) in which each participant evaluated an average of 10-20 features. Recruiting requirements included a proprietary screen for Passionate Curators, a range of ages; upper income; quotas established for car type and individuals who drove competitive brands.

The interview consisted of describing automotive features, gauging interest and determining both physical/actual and emotional consequences/core benefits of features.

The comprehensive data analysis involved evaluating more than 2,000 pages of notes, laddering each feature individually for each participant, collecting ladders for each feature and compiling the data in an Excel Spreadsheet.

Nguyen and Zwillinger explained that the resulting 200-page report contained the richness that the methodology of combining laddering and traditional questioning provided.

“Our goal was to identify an emotional connection between the automotive feature, the participants’ Core Values and the 3 Infiniti Pillars,” Zwillinger explained. “First, we showed the connection between the Core Values we developed for the features and the Infiniti Pillars of Hospitality, Peace of Mind and Driving. Then we mapped each feature to the values inherent in each of the Infiniti Pillars. Some of the features mapped clearly to one of the pillars; others overlapped, laddering to more than one core value. The majority of features laddered to Peace of Mind as safety was the strongest core value for the majority of the Passionate Curators.”

After presenting the research to Nissan Motor Limited, the features in development were evaluated based on the research results, competitor assessment, feasibility, and investment costs. The Around View Monitor feature was developed and adopted on Infiniti automobiles. The feature was well received and earned both a 2008 Popular Mechanics Breakthrough Award and 2008 Popular Science “Best of What’s New” recognition.