ZMET

Idea In Short

The goal of the ZMET interviews and analysis is to uncover the relevant fundamental structures that guide people's thinking about a topic. These deep structures are unconscious, basic orienting frames of human thought that affect how people process and react to information or a stimulus. They manifest themselves in surface metaphors used in everyday language and conversation; when grouped they point to the deeper frames or structures a person is using to understand a topic (see framing). These frames can be used in a marketing context to help marketers communicate more effectively to consumers about a brand, product, or topic.

Harvard Business School Professor Gerald Zaltman, the Joseph C. Wilson Professor of Business Administration and Co-director of the Mind of the Market Laboratory developed the ZMET technique.

Origins

Professor Zaltman began thinking about the power of imagery during his research in Nepal in 1990. He gave local residents disposable cameras and asked them to take pictures that explain village life. When he analyzed the images, he noticed that in nearly all of them, the subjects'' feet were either cut off or obscured. Later, he learned that bare feet and old shoes were a symbol of poverty. The villagers unconsciously chose to hide them when they shot their photos. The imagery revealed ideas that would have been difficult to put into words. This insight spawned an entirely new field of research - the use of imagery to facilitate deep probing into people's true thoughts and feelings. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RlUuIlB5ciA

How ZMET works?

As Zaltman described it:

> A lot goes on in our minds that we''re not aware of. Most of what influences what we say and do occurs below the level of awareness. That''s why we need new techniques: to get at hidden knowledge-to get at what people don''t know they know.

An interviewer collects metaphors, verbal descriptions of the thoughts and feelings represented by these images during a ZMET interview to help understand their meaning. Research suggests that verbal descriptions are far more complete and more because they were stimulated by images or metaphors. A ZMET interview gives consumers a safe place to explore the deeply personal feelings and beliefs that unconsciously shape their behavior.

Why ZMET works?

People usually don't know why they do what they do. ZMET uses visual and non-visual images gathered and / or generated by consumers to elicit and probe the metaphors that represent consumers‘ thoughts and feelings about a topic. A metaphor is the representation of one thing (a thought, feeling, action) in terms of another thing (a picture of someone screaming, a swimming pool, the color blue, the sound of a breeze).

Applications in consulting

For consultants, ZMET is an invaluable tool during research. ZMET employs qualitative methods to elicit the metaphors, constructs and mental models that drive your clients‘ thinking and behavior. In addition, this technique also provides quantitative data for decisions and strategies. Hence, this technique is very adaptable and you can use it in field research, stakeholder surveys, or even online. Your study participants [interviewees] collect images that represent their thoughts and feelings. This activity happens in response to a strategically crafted topic prompt. Those images form the basis for an intense, soul-searching conversation. The interview taps a bottomless well of unconscious beliefs, experiences, and emotions. Careful analysis of your clients' images and metaphoric language reveals the unconscious mental orientations that guide their choices. Metaphors get deep; and when you get deep, you can influence perceptions and behavior; and when you can influence your client stakeholders, you win. To that end, you can directly apply these high value insights to architect strategies or steer change programs.

Conducting ZMET interviews

A ZMET interview should last approximately two hours. The steps involved in the ZMET interview process are:

1. Preparation
2. Storytelling
3. Missing Images
4. Triad task
5. Metaphor Probe
6. Sensory Metaphors
7. Vignette
8. Digital Imaging

Preparation

Give the interviewees the questions you wish to interview them about. For example, the topic may involve brand perception, product or service you are analyzing, or it may be a more open-ended question about how they interpret the world. Instruct the interviewees to collect eight to 10 photos, advertisements, drawings and other visual media related to how they interpret the question. Allow the interviewees a few days to think about the question and select their material. If there is more than one interview, schedule the interviews for different times so that you can speak to each interviewee individually.

Storytelling

Encourage the interviewees to describe how each picture they brought to the interview represents their thoughts and feelings. Because much of our knowledge and memory takes the form of stories, stories are excellent sources of metaphors and important sources of insight about the interviewees. So, get active and solicit stories related to the pictures. Probe the interviewees to ascertain the key concepts in the stories they tell. Ask the interviewees to describe any ideas related to the question that they were not able to find pictures for. Encourage them to describe what types of pictures would represent those concepts.

Missing images

In this step, ask the interviewees whether they had important ideas they wanted to express, but could not find relevant images. When this happens, explore the kind of image that might represent those thoughts and feelings.

Triad task

The triad task seeks to identify concepts and distinctions at a higher level. Select three random images from the images the interviewee provided. Ask the interviewee to tell you how two of the pictures are similar and how the third is different than the first two in how they relate to the topic or question. Ask why the pictures are different and how these distinctions relate to his conception of the topic. For example, the participant might have said that two pictures were similar because they reflect feelings about closeness, while the third picture represents protection. Probe the reasons why these distinctions are relevant to the interviewee using laddering techniques.

Metaphor Probe

This step is also called Expand the Frame. ZMET employs several other probing techniques to encourage participants to elaborate their thoughts and feelings more deeply and completely. This enhanced involvement serves to uncover hidden meaning as well as to validate ideas surfaced in other steps. Use a sequence of probes to explore selected visual images more deeply. First, asked the interviewees to widen the frame of one or more selected pictures. Then, ask them to describe what else might enter the picture that reinforces the original idea. For example, select one of the pictures and ask the interviewee to describe what other actions might be going on in the scene that are not included in the picture. Ask the interviewees to imagine themselves in the scene pictured. Ask them what they would do and how they would feel. Then, ask the interviewees to imagine other individuals or other objects involved in the scene. Ask them who the others would be and what they would do. Probe how the others may help accomplish the task or overcome a challenge with a paradox or dilemma. Ask the interviewee why these other people or things are significant to them. Repeat this step with two to three images.

Construct elicitation

Ask the interviewees to express their ideas, questions or concepts using various sensory, non-visual metaphors. Ask them to describe sounds, smells, tactile perceptions and feelings related to the concept or question. For instance, ask the participants what is (and what is

not) the color, taste, smell, touch, sound and emotion of the topic. Explore each answer to uncover further dimensions of the person's thinking.

Vignette

People engage different segments of the brain when they think about time sequence and motion than they do when thinking about still pictures. For this reason, we involve motion, time and further storytelling by asking participants to create a movie or one act play that expresses important ideas about the topic. Ask the interviewees to describe a short movie or scene relating to the concept or question. Ask them who would be in the scene, where and when it would take place, what the weather would be, who the characters are and what kind of tone the scene would take. This step provides additional perspective and understanding of the participant's thoughts and feelings.

Digital Imaging

Finally, at the end of the interview, ask each interviewee to select five to seven of the images which you feel are the most important to the interviewee. Scan these into your digital imaging software. Work with the interviewee to create a digital summary collage of the images. You may need to enlist the skills and assistance of a computer graphics expert. Most digital images are based on a subset of the pictures the participant initially brought to the interview. While the digital image summarizes many ideas expressed earlier in the interview, new ideas frequently emerge from this creative process. Usually, participants modify pictures in size, color, shape, etc. to more fully convey their thoughts and feelings. Note the placement of the images in relation to one another, their sizes, shapes and how the interviewee modifies them. Use this information to further your understanding of how the interviewee relates to the concept or question. When the collage is finished, ask the interviewee to give a verbal description of the collage. This serves as an interpretative tour through the summary image.

Additional concepts

In addition to these steps, you may want to ask the interviewee to identify the Most representative picture and /or the Opposite image to provide additional insights into his / her thinking patterns. The ZMET technique relies heavily on three additional concepts:

1. Metaphors

2. Constructs,
3. Interpretation, and
4. Consensus maps

Metaphors

A metaphor is the representation of one thing in terms of another. Metaphors are fundamental to human thought — without metaphor learning and thinking cannot occur. They occur in different forms in ZMET analyses, such as visual images, sensory images, metaphors, etc. Specifically, deep metaphors reveal the fundamental thinking patterns as well as interviewees' latent and emerging needs. They highlight their basic perceptual and behavioral pre-dispositions. Metaphors can be either, umbrella or focal concepts around which you can architect strategies. Consultants can leverage deep metaphors by making sure that all elements in a strategic plan are consistent with and reinforce the focal strategic positioning defined by the deep metaphor. In that sense, deep metaphors serve as fundamental criteria to design, development and present critical recommendations to client stakeholders.

Constructs

A construct is literally a construction of meaning that represents important thoughts and feelings among interviewees. In other words, constructs represent the idiosyncratic language that interviewees used to describe the topic. Constructs reveal more about a demographic segment. People of similar lifestyle, social class, and cultural background share thinking patterns. Each individuals‘ perceptions are influenced by those around them. In short, constructs represent the mental terrain of interviewees‘ minds. Consultants can leverage constructs as design criteria to ground strategies in their client stakeholders‘ personal constructs and the interrelationships among their ideas.

Interpretation

Interpretation is everywhere in the ZMET process. Raw data have little meaning and very little strategic value for consultants and client stakeholders. You should interpret the data before they are useful. This applies to both, quantitative and qualitative analyses. You should understand the meaning represented by a number, a quote, or a picture — and what you can do with that understanding. Creativity and the ability to find meanings that others miss are characteristics that define the intellectual capacity of great consultants. ZMET

provides useful building blocks and tools for consultants to create transformational outcomes for their client organizations.

Consensus maps

Consensus maps help identify mental models — networks of interrelated constructs — and the consensus among them. People possess mental models that help them navigate the world. Understanding these models helps develop and implement effective business strategies. The resulting consensus map helps consultants understand how a strategy can affect one construct. Extrapolating that construct reveals its impact on other constructs. Understanding the pattern of relationships among constructs shared in common by client stakeholders is a source of insight in developing strategies and re-engineering future thinking.

Summary

The Zaltman metaphor elicitation technique [ZMET] developed by Harvard Business School professor Gerald Zaltman is a patented market research tool that elicits both conscious and unconscious thoughts by exploring people's non-literal or metaphoric expressions. A ZMET interview aims to discover how individuals and groups react to the materialistic and metaphorical world on a practical level. Interview participants are usually asked to collect a set of pictures that represent their thoughts and feelings about the topic of interest. The goal of the ZMET interviews and analysis is to uncover the relevant fundamental structures that guide people''s thinking about a topic.