

Eye tracking



Standardised eye tracking tests are a quick, affordable way to pre-test different creative executions, says **Robert Stevens**, Think Eye Tracking



YOUR EYES were maybe the first thing you ever learned to use. You could focus on a rattle long before you could put it in your mouth. You learned how to use your eyes at such an early age that you don't even remember that you ever had to learn.

Moving your eyes is so ingrained in your subconscious behaviour that you rarely use your conscious mind to move them. This is useful to researchers because it offers a window into the subconscious mind, and this can be observed and recorded with great fidelity and accuracy with modern eye trackers.

Eye trackers work by shining very low levels of infrared light on a person's face. By marking the pupil and creating reflections on the cornea, some clever mathematics is used to determine where the person is looking. The accuracy is one degree of visual angle; that is approximately a centimetre at arm's length. There is no head gear or chin rest required and the calibration process takes less than 30 seconds. In practice, over 90% of all people can be eye tracked, regardless of whether they wear glasses or contact lenses.

Sample size

The minimum sample size for eye tracking studies is 30 people. This is smaller than traditional quantitative approaches because eye tracking measures fixations and saccades. Fixations are the points at which our eyes stay still and take in information, and saccades are the movements between fixations. In contrast, the focus of traditional conscious-mind techniques is opinions and attitudes. Because eye tracking involves quantifiable measures, reliable statistical analyses can be performed on data derived from samples as low as 30 participants, although we do advocate collection of explicit data within the same interview.

Your mind is a mass of mental models that subconsciously guide your ordinary actions, such as walking, driving a car and moving your eyes. Good creative directors know this at an intuitive level and use it to their client's advantage. A feature of an effective advertisement is a creative pun that plays with your mental models to draw your attention in. Once the creative director has gained the viewer's attention, they will then use the flow of the creative to lead you to the key message.

A good example is the 'Great minds like a think' 48-sheet for *The Economist*. This is often misread as 'Great minds think alike'. When this happens, a part of the reader's mind has a mental hiccup, and this makes them pay particular attention to what they just read by reading it again. When the viewer then notes *The Economist* logo and puts together the two concepts of great minds liking to think and the connection that *The Economist* has with great minds, the pun is explained and the advertisement has successfully completed its job: 1) it gets attention; 2) it passes that attention to the key message.

Eye tracking is particularly well suited to diagnosing if this subtle but important sequence of events has taken place. If you ask a participant in a focus group if they understood a pun, social pressures may lead them to say that they did, even if they did not. Because eye tracking shows the actual engagement, not a self-reported one, it is more reliable than traditional approaches in some circumstances.

In the past, the time and cost of eye tracking research has been a significant barrier. Ten years ago, an eye tracking pack design pre-test cost over £70,000 and took three months. This is no longer the case. Standardised eye tracking tests are now quick and affordable. To pre-test three different creative executions of a pack or an advertisement, you will need a budget of less than £5,000 and less than one week.

Complementing traditional methods

It is important to understand that eye tracking is another tool for the researcher's kit, not a replacement of other methods. It is a powerful diagnostic tool, but it doesn't provide all the answers and should never be used in isolation. We frequently want to explore a combination of conscious and subconscious behaviour. Thus, a combined approach of implicit and explicit measures is best.

Eye tracking can be incorporated as a qualitative or quantitative tool, and is most useful as a combination of both. It can provide experienced eye tracking consultants with qualitative information about a single subject when a gaze pattern characteristic of some cognitive state (such as confusion or engagement) is produced. This use of eye tracking adds an implicit measure to a more traditional in-depth interview, and the cognitive insights gained can be used by the interviewer to more effectively probe and explore the consumer's attitudes in the interview.