

# Step-by-step guide to CONCEPT TESTING

Here's how we used concept testing in Bangladesh, before diving in to write scripts for TV spots. Concept testing is a great addition when designing any type of program activity or material.



What is a  
concept?

A single, distinct  
approach to a storyline  
that conveys  
the same message  
in several different ways

## Concept Testing: Exploring the emotional appeals that “work”

Alive & Thrive's challenge is to help families adopt optimal feeding practices – “at scale” – that is, with enough people changing behaviors to have a real impact on children's health and intellectual growth. In a huge country like Bangladesh, TV spots could reach into millions of homes and help change the whole environment. Our on-the-ground nutrition counseling would be even more effective with support from mass media.

### Challenge: Getting people's attention and moving them to action

In a crowded media environment, A&T's TV spots must compete for people's attention and go up against some powerful advertising. We wanted our ideas to “stick” and be remembered. And we wanted to play them over and over, so we needed something with entertainment value and that people wouldn't tire of over time. High production values, an appealing “look and feel,” and good stories with an emotional punch would “break through the clutter.”

We knew that playing to emotions would not only get people's attention but would also do a better job of delivering our messages. We had learned a lot about the factors that may help mothers overcome barriers to exclusive breastfeeding and ideal complementary feeding. But what stories and what emotional appeals would both entertain and help people take up the behaviors?

### Concept testing: A way to pick the most moving appeals

We thought we were ready to jump into writing the scripts for 6 TV spots. But before settling in on a particular storyline for each, we needed to try out a variety of emotional appeals on the people we wanted to touch. We inserted a “concept test” phase. We knew that just asking audience members what motivates them was unlikely to be revealing. People believe that they act in rational ways and may tell us that facts and information are what will sway them. But we know that the reason so much commercial advertising works is that it strikes an emotional note. We needed to harness that power, too.

Watching how people respond to a sample visual and verbal message – or a “concept” – would give us a much more reliable measure of what would “work.” Concept testing is a lot like product testing. The program planners mock up an idea and watch how people react to it.

Concepts can be tested at many points along the design process. For Bangladesh, we tested concepts after we had selected the priority behaviors to promote and the themes for the 6 spots but before we wrote the scripts.

We wanted to use the concept testing phase to learn:

- What storylines and emotions work best
- Which characters would be persuasive
- One or two “facts” that make the case for people to practice the behavior
- The most compelling positive benefits of doing the behavior

### Where did we get our ideas for the emotional appeals to test?

We knew enough about our audiences – and about human nature – to take some guesses about what might appeal to people. We knew we should test a broad range. They didn’t have to be perfect – our concept tests would help us sort out the best. We could learn a lot by watching how people respond to a “bad” concept, too.

We began by viewing a lot of local TV spots for commercial products related to infant and child feeding, and for other consumer goods. We talked with experts experienced in monitoring media campaigns. This gave us a good sense of the range of appeals at work: humor, fear, “warm-and-fuzzy,” confidence, authority.

From all we knew about families in Bangladesh, about commercial approaches that gain attention, and about the kinds of approaches that have been shown to change health behaviors, we started with some ideas like this:

- Baby’s father is proud of his wife for being modern and educated
- Baby’s grandmother stands up to a neighbor who is giving bad guidance
- New mother is proud (for example, that her milk is the first food – and plenty good enough)
- Doctor knows best
- The behavior is modern and scientific
- Fear element: baby is in danger
- A comical treatment
- A celebrity appeal
- Suspense
- Drama
- Pride in child

We knew from social marketing principles that an appeal to people’s fear may backfire, so we made sure that any concept designed to create fear would be tested against a positive version.

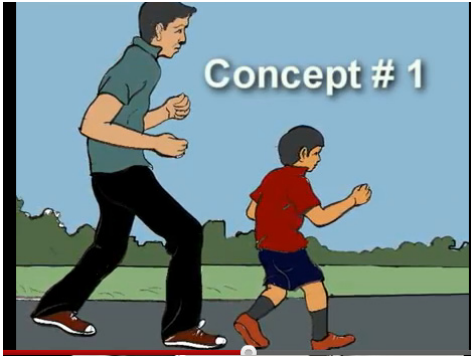
For each concept we would ask about the feelings it evoked – and its appeal, credibility, persuasiveness, and emotional punch.

### What information and facts would “work”?

From our formative research, we knew that mothers and other family members – even



We tested our initial concepts with our target audiences: mothers, fathers, grandmothers, and community health workers.



For the theme “father’s involvement,” we tested 3 distinct concepts

health workers – had wrong or incomplete information about some of the feeding practices. In a few cases, the facts alone – especially if stated by a doctor or other authority – may be enough to convince people to try the behavior.

Our early drafts of the concepts were loaded with facts. For our final TV spots, we knew we would have to cut back to one or two essential facts or bits of advice.

The facts we listed for each concept were designed to counter some of the misconceptions people held.

We would test them to see which facts surprise people, which grab their attention, which they find credible, and which match their understanding of the world.

### **And, finally, positive benefits**

Since the communication literature shows that positive emotional appeals are generally more effective both at garnering attention and at influencing behavior, we put extra emphasis on “compelling positive benefits” – not just health benefits, but emotional pay-offs like gaining your husband’s approval or feeling a close bond with your baby. Other benefits of feeding practices might be:

- It’s nourishing
- The child loves it
- It’s convenient and easy
- The child is healthy and growing
- It reduces mother’s bleeding
- You feel like a loving mother
- It will win your doctor’s (or mother-in-law’s) approval

This was a lot to watch for in the concept testing. But if we listened carefully to people’s reactions to several different concepts, we should see what stands out. The final spot would need to combine emotion, facts, and benefits.

### **What does a “concept” look like?**

To keep costs down and save time, the concepts were conveyed through some rough sketches and just a few lines

of dialogue. We laid these out on cards or heavy paper. Each concept included 3-6 frames, almost like a story board.

### **How did we conduct the concept testing?**

First we had to be sure we were listening to people who were really part of the audience for our campaign. That meant pregnant women and mothers whose babies were under 2 years old. We also wanted to test the concepts with others in the community who could influence mothers’ feeding decisions. After all, anyone might tune in to the TV channel as the spot is aired. Since we knew that they had tremendous influence over mothers’ feeding practices, we made sure we tested the messages with fathers, grandmothers, and health workers like doctors and traditional birth attendants.

In each interview (or test), we put the participants at ease and let them know that we wanted their honest responses to the pictures and words. We explicitly told them that they would not hurt our feelings if they had something negative to say.

We showed the participant the first concept, briefly describing the characters, the action, and the emotion in the story. Then we asked: “How do you like it? What do you think?” We noted their responses.

We then showed each of the other options for that theme.

About the behavior, we asked:

- Do you think this is possible? Can you do it?
  - Why? or Why not?

For each of the facts in a concept, we asked:

- What does the character mean when she (or he) says that?
- Do you believe that?
  - Why? or Why not?

About the benefits, we asked:

- What do you think?
- What did this character mean by saying that?
- Do you believe it?
  - Why? or Why not?



For our concept testing, we created visuals for each of the different concepts. We showed these concept cards to our target audiences, explaining the concepts, and getting their response and feedback.

After we had gone through all three concepts for a single theme, we asked, “Which one did you like best?”

For the preferred concept, we asked “How can we improve it?”

### How did we use the findings to improve the TV spot?

Since this was a fairly informal concept test, we did not write a full report. We set up a table to capture people’s responses for each of the concepts. For the 3 concepts for the spot on “father’s involvement,” our table looked something like this:

Theme #6: Father’s involvement, father shares chores				
Appeals tested	Feedback on appeals/emotion	Facts memorable?	Benefits credible?	Changes
Concept 1: Boastful celebrity father	Nice, okay	Yes	Yes	(Not applicable)
Concept 2: Drama – boy saves father from fire	Very real, most powerful, very strong story	Yes, but mother’s time spent on feeding of child not clear enough	Yes	Make the whole aim clear. More time for mother to feed child (not for cooking or general).
Concept 3: Boastful celebrity father	Nice, okay	Yes	Yes	(Not applicable)

A&T case study, February 2012

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Each of the concepts was acceptable. For each, the facts were understood and were memorable; and the benefits were credible. What distinguished them was the emotional impact. Concept 2, the dramatic scene in which a child saves the father from a house fire, was far and away the most powerful story. We would make some changes so that the messages were more clearly understood, but overall we had a winner.

### **On to pretesting and production**

Concept testing left us feeling confident that we had some really compelling stories that would grab people's attention and deliver the messages that would support the overall communication and counseling activities. The winning concept for each theme "worked" with mothers (the primary audience) and with other influential family members and opinion leaders in the communities (our secondary audiences).

Our next step was to create an animated storyboard for each of the 6 spots. Through pretesting, we would find ways to refine the materials and messages.

### **Concept testing: A valuable phase**

Our original design and production plan had not included a concept testing phase. But with the tremendous investment we were about to make in high-quality production and a costly, paid media buy, we wanted to be certain that people would be moved and persuaded by our TV spots. Our TV spots would have to compete for our audience's attention.

We are convinced that this concept test phase allowed us to choose the most effective concepts to develop into scripts for the TV spots.