

IFST Sensory & Consumer Science Guidelines for Running Testing in Response to COVID-19

September 2020

The purpose of these guidelines is to enable anyone running food & beverage related Sensory and Consumer Research to be aware of how Covid-19 restrictions may affect their ways of working. Ideas and suggestions of how to work within these limitations are also given.

These guidelines have come from a number of sources including current best practice from:

- SSG members who are carrying out Sensory and Consumer Research fieldwork,
- the IFST Sensory Science Group webinar: [Conducting Sensory and Consumer Research during Lockdown](#) and taking into account current advice from international & national agencies on reducing the risk.

OVERALL CONSIDERATIONS

- **Most importantly – follow any overarching regulations or guidance that are in place from the government, your local authorities and/or your organisation or place of work.**
- Regulations vary but are likely to include guidance on social/physical distancing & use of masks. Panellists & research participants may also be required or encouraged to work from home.
- Take a risk assessment-based approach – for example if there is no alternative to people being in the same room for longer than 15mins, the risk should be mitigated by adhering to a suitable maximum number of occupants, physical distancing and/or wearing masks where appropriate.
- Other risk mitigation strategies to consider include forehead/body temperature monitoring, return to work procedure including declarations (from holiday or quarantine) and education on symptom awareness, increased number of hand-washing and sanitising stations.
- Think about minimising interactions – e.g. implementing a different or one-way route through the building for external panellists and participants, or creating a location for testing close to an entrance.
- For both Sensory & Consumer research, bear in mind that research will likely take more time & resources than would be typically expected.

SENSORY PANELS

- **Sensory panels** are typically 8-18 people. Their work is a combination of group discussion & alignment sessions in a room, plus evaluation sessions usually in sensory booths. As such, normal ways of working are heavily impacted by COVID-19.
- **Discussion sessions:** the room needs to be appropriate to the number of people in the panel to stay the appropriate distance apart – for example larger training or conference rooms could be utilised. Alternatives should be sought if this is not possible. These could include remote discussion sessions (products and references need to be sent, or picked up by panellists), remote sessions within the building but in different rooms/locations, or rotation of panellists.
- **Evaluation sessions:** for most booth set-ups, to ensure social distancing every other booth (alternate booths) should be used. If this means there are not enough booths, options include using a suitable overspill room such as the sensory discussion room or rotation of panellists



with thorough clean down in between. Using, for example, odd numbered booths for first set and even numbered booths for second set of panellists enables clean down to happen at end of both rotations. Panellists should also have clear instructions on any additional measures – for example being asked to wash their hands or use hand sanitisers prior to entering the booths or evaluation areas and being asked to wear face coverings until they are seated.

- **At Home Panels** are suitable for a surprisingly wide variety of products.
 - Consideration should be given to how to minimise variability - for example providing all necessary equipment e.g. cutlery, thermometers etc and giving clear and consistent instructions for preparation and assessment of samples. Distractions should be minimised as much as possible, and information provided on how to dispose of excess samples after assessment.
 - The technology platform should allow the panel leader to see all panellists both during discussion and alignment, and where needed during assessment – this should be tested in advance where possible.
 - Extra logistics (for technology & distribution of samples etc) should be incorporated into resource and timeline planning. Innovative solutions may be required e.g. the use of deep cups to mask visual differences in lieu of red light. The inclusion of samples that have already been assessed can help monitor consistency of scoring.
- **Engagement of panellists:** technology can bring benefits including allowing the panellists to interact via your chosen platform, having the ability to feedback directly to them by, for example, creating documents in front of them, and capturing panellists' questions and comments and being able to record them.

CONSUMER RESEARCH - QUANTITATIVE / CENTRAL LOCATION TEST (CLT)

- **Consumer panels** can vary greatly in number of participants. Typically, a quantitative / Central Location Test (CLT) style test would consist of large numbers of people evaluating a product in one location. As such, normal ways of working are heavily impacted by COVID-19.
- Much of the advice around **Sensory Evaluation** also applies to **Consumer Research**.
- **Evaluation in Sensory Booths:** Best practice is to use every other booth to ensure distancing, which is likely to mean less participants per session. There should be rotation of consumers with thorough cleaning of equipment (chair, table, keyboard, tablet etc) in between. Consideration should also be given to using an alternative location if this allows a safer environment. Panellists should also have clear instructions on any additional measures – for example being asked to wash their hands or use hand sanitisers prior to entering the booths or evaluation areas and being asked to wear face coverings until they are seated.
- **Hall (Large Room) Tests:** The room needs to allow the number of consumers inside at any one time to stay the appropriate distance apart, which is likely to mean less participants per session than the maximum capacity. Alternatives should be sought if this is not feasible, either in terms of location or increasing the number of sessions. Similarly, to testing in booths, panellists should also have clear instructions on any additional measures – for example being asked to wash their hands or use hand sanitisers prior to entering the booths or evaluation areas and being asked to wear face coverings until they are seated.
- **In Home Testing (or Home Use Testing):** One alternative is that the participants carry out the evaluation at home if the product is suitable.
 - Product to be evaluated is sent, or picked up by participants. All necessary equipment e.g. cutlery, thermometers etc and clear and consistent instructions for preparation,



assessment and disposal of samples after assessment should be provided. An additional risk mitigation strategy could be to send the product, equipment etc in good time to enable it to be “quarantined” before assessment.

- For some products, the methodology may have to be reconsidered e.g. the products may need to be assessed monadically rather than sequentially. Extra respondents (due to a change in methodology or to cover variation), resources and time will likely be needed.

CONSUMER RESEARCH – QUALITATIVE / FOCUS GROUPS

- **Qualitative Consumer groups** can vary greatly in number of participants, but qual research typically consists of fewer people (6 to 9) discussing and evaluating products (or concepts etc) over a longer time period (e.g. 90 minutes). As such, normal ways of working are heavily impacted by COVID-19.
- Much of the advice around **Sensory Evaluation** also applies to **Consumer Research**.
- **Face-to-face:** If this is the only option, the room needs to be appropriate to allow the number of people to stay the appropriate distance apart. This is likely to mean less participants per session than the room could usually hold. In the case of focus groups this will probably lead to running more groups with less people per group. The time taken per session should also be taken into consideration, with this kept to a minimum wherever possible. Alternatives should be sought if this is not feasible. Other risk mitigations strategies should also be considered where necessary e.g. face masks, or shields where facial expressions are important.
- **Remote/In Home Evaluation:** There are several alternatives in the case of qual research including evaluation at home if the product is suitable, either via remote facilitation or an alternative online method. These can give additional benefits including capture of data, and ability to use people from different geographical regions. If products are to be evaluated these need to be sent, or picked up by participants, and all necessary equipment e.g. cutlery, thermometers etc should be provided. If preparation of products is needed prior to the session, clear and consistent instructions should be given, and information provided on how to dispose of samples after assessment.

For further information & discussion on approaching sensory & consumer research under COVID-19 related restrictions, why not take a look at the IFST Sensory Science Group webinar: [Conducting Sensory and Consumer Research during Lockdown](#)

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