



Digital Sampling vs Traditional Sampling

A perspective on different approaches

Over the past couple of decades, we have reviewed hundreds of quantitative effectiveness studies comparing various targeted sampling programs. As the marketing landscape has evolved, many brands have moved towards digital (social media, micro-influencer, etc.) programs. These newer approaches have not been independently researched which makes it challenging to benchmark their true effectiveness. However, we have identified benefits and risks of both approaches to help brands make informed decisions.

Consumers consistently state they prefer product samples over other types of marketing tactics. Logically, the consumer wants to experience the product for themselves before making a purchase. The delivery method significantly impacts both consumer receptivity and purchase conversion. This is a critical factor that is often overlooked in sampling strategy discussions.

About the Author: Cindy Johnson is a product sampling expert for CPG brands. During Cindy's career with P&G, she worked with all brands in her role as Corporate Sampling Programs Manager. She now owns a specialty marketing and research firm, Sampling Effectiveness Advisors (SEA), which focuses on helping brands improve product sampling results. SEA's clients include brand marketers, promotion agencies, and sampling program vendors. SEA is the only company 100% focused on improving product sampling success rates and ROI.

Digital Sampling

To begin our look at digital sampling, we will give the broad definition of *any type of online sampling where the consumer can request the sample be mailed to them*. Brand marketers often opt for this type of sampling when they are interested in generating online ratings and reviews. As an example, a consumer may see an Instagram ad encouraging them to request a free sample of a new mascara product. The consumer completes the request and is later encouraged to give a rating and to provide feedback about their sample experience. Obviously, the benefit of this is getting other consumers to see the rating/review posted which might encourage them to buy it themselves. The brand hopes this tactic brings new users into the franchise without having to give everyone samples and aims to drive new customer acquisition through social media.

However, distrust of reviews and consumer skepticism challenges this model. Forbes 2025 Customer Experience research indicated that 85% of US consumers do say ratings and reviews helped them decide if they want to make a purchase. But that same number believe some ratings and reviews are fake. Research from Fakespot estimates 42% of reviews are fake. (Note: RetailWire's recent article stated Amazon is fighting back against fake reviews, waging war against them with more strict policies.) Another point they made was that 76% of consumers say they will question reviews if the brand received mostly 5-star ratings! This creates a paradox where the desired outcome undermines credibility.

These are some of the pros and cons of digital sampling. Sampling Advisors biggest concern is that there is no reliable way to measure how many consumers saw the online reviews, then as a result, went on to purchase the product. This makes calculating ROI a guessing game.



Traditional Sampling

The more traditional ways of sampling (hand-to-hand/venue based, instore, events, professional, etc.) are distinguished by direct consumer interaction. While responses may vary, we have observed that samples delivered through trusted intermediaries have higher purchase conversion for many categories. A healthcare provider handing a product to a patient, a daycare provider sharing samples with parents, or a fitness instructor recommending a product creates an implicit endorsement that digital channels cannot replicate. While traditional sampling does not have a direct tie-in to the digital world, some feedback can be gathered. For example, a QR code on collateral material can link to a request to post on social.

One of the downsides to traditional sampling is the lack of sample controls. If too many brand samples are sent to a fitness center for example, it can result in re-sampling some of the same consumers, having a negative impact on the brand's ROI. However, strategic partner selection and inventory management protocols can mitigate this risk.

To recap, these are the top-line pros and cons associated with the two types of sampling:

SAMPLING:	BENEFITS	Potential Issues
Digital	-One sample per HH -Can qualify the recipient -Can generate ratings & reviews -Good for hard-to-find niche target	-Fewer HHs get sample (due to higher mail cost) -Consumer skepticism about legitimacy of review -No endorsement -ROI Calculation unreliable
Traditional	-More consumers try samples themselves -Implied endorsement from trusted source -Lower per-unit cost (bulk distribution, no postage) -ROI more predictable	-Fewer sample controls -Can collect feedback but more limited

Examples of when to use each type:

Digital Sampling may work best when:

- Targeting niche audiences that are difficult to locate (allergy sufferers, contact lens wearers, hair color users, etc.) Self selection through sample requests ensures category relevance.
- New product launches where generating initial buzz and social proof is critical before scaling distribution.
- Distribution is limited or online-only. If retail presence is minimal but e-commerce is established, digital sampling with direct purchase links makes strategic sense.

Traditional sampling delivers superior results when:

- **Maximum trial is the objective.** Traditional programs cost significantly less per sample, enabling brands to reach more households. This is essential for categories requiring a personal experience (food, personal care, OTC products)
- **Targeting entry and change-points.** Consumers actively seeking category information (new parents, new homeowners, college students now making their own purchase decisions, etc.) deliver the highest conversion rates. Traditional sampling reaches these high-value audiences cost-effectively.
- **Product superiority is a competitive advantage.** Brands with demonstrably better products should maximize trial. The more consumers who experience the product firsthand, the higher the conversion.
- **Trial is achieved through trusted delivery.** When a pediatrician hands a parent a sample, that personal recommendation carries a lot of weight in purchase conversion.

From a data standpoint, there are more independent quantitative studies to show that traditional sampling has a more reliable way of predicting ROI. However, as the examples above have shown, there may be a place for both in a brands marketing plan!

WATCHOUTS

Product Sampling is expensive, regardless of the type. Consumers request free products regardless of purchase intent. Both digital and traditional sampling attract deal-seekers who may already use the brand or have no intention of buying. Proper targeting and qualification minimize this waste. Brands should resist using samples to generate awareness as there are other less expensive marketing options for that. Trial is essential for new product launches and only sampling can provide that.

For more information about Sampling Advisors or to read more of our white papers, visit us at

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