Perceptual mapping

A technique used in marketing to depict how brands are perceived relative to one another, when mapped in two or more dimensions. Also called ‘position mapping’. A list of brands is specified, e.g. say, ten brands of curry paste. Respondents are asked to say how similar they think these brands are to one another (A is similar to C, D is similar to E, etc.). It is respondents' perceptions of similarity that are captured — these might not accurately mirror objective similarities, e.g. people may think A is similar to C when, in fact, the two brands of curry paste have quite different ingredients. A statistical procedure is employed to obtain spatial positions of the brands in multidimensional space to reflect these perceptions. A common procedure is multidimensional scaling, for which there is off-the-shelf software, e.g. PREFMAP, INDSCAL. Output is depicted as a map. This conveys the relative position of the brands, but does not relate to any absolute measure of distance.

The number of dimensions (two, three, etc.) depends on how many are needed to plot the data without incurring an intolerable level of stress. The dimensions themselves are derived without labels, and great care must be taken in labelling them. A formal way to label dimensions involves the use of attribute ratings. At the same time as similarity data are collected, the researcher asks respondents to rate (on a [**ratings scale**](http://search.credoreference.com.ezproxy.apollolibrary.com/content/entry/6893108)) each brand for a number of attributes (taste, quality ingredients, price and so forth). Each attribute is assessed for how closely it corresponds with the dimensions (low-high price may be closest to dimension 1; thus, dimension 1 is labelled the price axis). Although formal, the selection of attributes is subjective.

In marketing, a popular alternative to the use of similarity data is the use of preference data, i.e. data where an evaluation of one item dominates another. Data may be in the form of paired comparisons (is A preferred over C?) or rankings (A is most preferred, followed by C, etc.). Similar procedures apply, but with preference data it is possible to investigate ‘ideal points’, e.g. by including a hypothetical brand X into the preference comparisons or ranking. The word ‘ideal’ here is misleading because X may be far from ideal. It is also possible to locate ideal combinations of attributes on the map — either for individual consumers or segments — and see which brands (if any) are close to the ideal. Various marketing implications might follow, including the possibility of designing a new product for an unmet market (seen as an empty quadrant on the perceptual map) or repositioning an existing product to be closer to the ideal point of a segment than competitors. This form of analysis is very beguiling but it can be very misleading, e.g. an empty quadrant may represent an unmet need or a phantom market, and a new brand may get closer to the ideal point of a segment but, in so doing, change the whole configuration of the map (including a relative shift in the ideal point). One of the most popular business games, MARKSTRAT, uses these facets of perceptual mapping to simulate the dynamic interplay of competing firms in established and new markets.

The technique is applied in product and brand positioning studies. [**new product development**](http://search.credoreference.com.ezproxy.apollolibrary.com/content/entry/6892842); [**positioning**](http://search.credoreference.com.ezproxy.apollolibrary.com/content/entry/6892988); [**segment-target-position strategy**](http://search.credoreference.com.ezproxy.apollolibrary.com/content/entry/6893237). Informally, the ideas behind perceptual mapping are reflected in the thinking of many marketing managers, even though they may never make use of the formal techniques.