what would make me change my mind?



01 / THE DECISION

Write the possible change first

Before arranging research, write the decision it could change. Will you revise a claim, choose between two actions, clarify a booking step or stop an expensive production route? If every possible answer leads to the same decision, the test may be providing reassurance rather than useful evidence.

The question "Do people like it?" is often too broad. A person can like a film and misunderstand the offer. They can understand an instruction without finding it entertaining. They can remember a joke and forget the advertiser. Decide which uncertainty threatens the work, then investigate that uncertainty with an appropriate method.

A test does not have to settle the whole campaign. A small, careful check can reveal that a button suggests an ongoing subscription when the offer is a single session. That is a useful finding even if it tells you nothing about market demand. The problem begins when a narrow finding is promoted into a claim that the campaign will succeed.

This guide helps you write a proportionate plan and an honest decision record. The methods are practical editorial and creative tools, not a substitute for specialist research design when a decision requires population estimates, causal evidence or a reliable forecast. Every example and response in the guide is invented teaching material, not a reported study.

02 / NAME THE UNCERTAINTY

Different questions need different evidence

Separate the desired business result from the immediate question you can investigate. A campaign might aim to increase bookings, while the current uncertainty is whether a first-time visitor understands the offer. A comprehension check addresses that uncertainty. It cannot tell you how many bookings the campaign will produce.

+ Meaning: what does a person think the message offers or asks? Use open retelling and clarification questions before supplying the intended interpretation.
+ Task: can someone find the relevant information or complete the intended step? Observe the attempt in a realistic prototype without coaching them through it.
+ Recognition: which brand or service do people connect to the execution? Avoid giving the answer in the question or showing the logo again before asking.
+ Response: do people take the desired action in real conditions? Define the action carefully; a click and a completed, suitable booking are different outcomes.

Choose only the questions that affect the present decision. Testing everything at once can create a long report with little guidance about what to change. Also ask whether the prototype is capable of answering the question. A script read aloud cannot establish how a visual reveal will play, and a still frame cannot establish a film's pacing.

Write the limit beside the measure: "This check can expose a misunderstanding of the offer. It will not estimate how common that misunderstanding is in the whole market."

03 / MAKE THE PLAN

Set the rules before seeing the answers

Record the current hypothesis and a credible alternative. "People may interpret Join as a membership commitment" can compete with "the page already makes the single-session offer clear". Then decide what observation would make you revise the work. This prevents you from inventing a convenient interpretation after hearing the answer you prefer.

01 Recruit for the relevant circumstance. Find people who could plausibly encounter the offer and include meaningful variation. Availability in your office is not the same as suitability for the question.

02 Use a realistic stimulus. Show the words, layout or sequence at an appropriate size and level of finish. Tell participants what kind of rough they are seeing without explaining the intended answer.

03 Ask neutral questions. Begin with "What do you think this offers?" or "Show me where you would start." Save specific probes until after the first response.

04 Record what happened separately from what you infer. Preserve confusing, negative and unexpected responses, including anything your own prompt may have influenced.

05 Agree the action rule. A serious misleading interpretation may justify a copy review even after one occurrence. That is a risk-based editorial choice, not a statistically validated threshold.

For consent, privacy and compensation, follow the arrangements appropriate to the actual research setting. Collect only what the task needs. Never treat a prototype check as permission to publish somebody's image or personal account.

04 / WORKED EXAMPLE

Test the meaning of the invitation

> INVENTED TEACHING CASE
>
> Bench Room is a fictional woodworking workshop. Its introductory offer is one paid session with no ongoing membership. The material and responses below are invented.

The current page headline is "Start making at Bench Room". Its button says "Join us". The single-session details appear lower on the page. The team suspects that the invitation may sound like membership. The decision is whether to change the button and move the offer description before spending money promoting the page.

The check

Show the current page to relevant first-time visitors individually. Ask: "What would you be signing up for here? What would you expect to happen after pressing the button?" Then ask them to find the session price and any continuing commitment. Do not begin by asking whether they are confused about membership; that would introduce the interpretation you are investigating.

Invented response A: "I think I am joining the workshop, then choosing how often I go." Invented response B: "It looks like one class, but I would check whether I have to keep paying." These answers identify a possible ambiguity. They do not tell you what proportion of future visitors will misunderstand.

The pre-agreed action is to review any wording that creates an unsupported expectation of continuing payment. The team has a reason to revise the page without pretending it has measured demand or established a winning campaign.

05 / READ THE RESULT

Keep the finding the size of the evidence

The Bench Room revision puts "One introductory session. No ongoing membership" beside the price and changes the button to "Book one session". The team then checks the revised page with fresh relevant participants, so familiarity with the first version does not do the work for the new copy. It asks the same open questions before specific probes.

An honest decision record reads: "The original wording allowed an interpretation of ongoing membership in this small qualitative check. We clarified the single-session offer and changed the action label. In a follow-up check, the reviewed responses described a single session. We have not measured the prevalence of confusion, the effect on bookings or longer-term customer expectations."

Do not turn that record into "the new button converts better". No conversion comparison took place. The revisions also changed both wording and placement, so the check cannot isolate the effect of one element. That is acceptable if the decision was to improve comprehension of the complete page; it is not acceptable if you claim to have discovered which individual change caused the improvement.

Sometimes the result should lead to more investigation rather than immediate revision. A response may reflect unfamiliar terminology, an unrealistic prototype or a recruitment mismatch. Inspect those possibilities before deciding that the creative idea itself failed. Record unresolved explanations so the next person does not inherit a cleaner conclusion than the evidence supports.

06 / TRY IT

Repair the research question

Invented exercise: a team wants to choose a poster for a new shared reading room. Version A shows the room; version B shows a reader entering. Someone proposes asking six colleagues which looks more premium and declaring the favourite the better campaign. The actual concern is whether people understand that they can book a quiet desk for a single afternoon. Design a more useful first check.

A model response

Recruit people who might need an occasional place to read or work. Show a realistic poster without explaining the offer. Ask what they think is available, who it is for and what they would do next. Inspect whether the poster and destination communicate the single-afternoon booking. If comparing versions, avoid letting the first explanation teach people how to read the second; choose a design appropriate to the available sample and decision.

A practical decision rule is to revise any version that implies a permanent office rental when the service offers a short booking. That rule is an editorial priority tied to a consequential misunderstanding, not a forecast of campaign success. A favourite-image vote could answer a taste question, but taste is not the stated uncertainty.

Explain what your plan leaves unanswered: how many people need the service, what they will pay and which poster produces more suitable bookings. Those questions require other evidence. A good plan earns confidence by stating its boundary, not by claiming to answer everything.

07 / WORKSHEET

The decision-led test plan

Complete this before recruiting people or showing the work. Keep the scope small enough to act on. If the decision does not depend on the answer, reconsider whether the test is worth running. Preserve this sheet beside the findings.

Which decision could change, and what is our current hypothesis?

What credible alternative explanation should we consider?

Who is relevant, and what realistic material will they encounter?

Which neutral question or task will produce useful evidence?

What observation would trigger revision, investigation or stopping?

What cannot this method establish, and who owns the next decision?

08 / ACT AND LEARN

Do not turn uncertainty into theatre

A result becomes useful when someone makes a proportionate decision from it. Keep the stimulus, question wording, participant context and interpretation together. A quotation without the question that produced it can become evidence for an argument the participant never addressed. A positive comment is not automatically endorsement of the entire route.

+ Separate observation from explanation. "The person could not find the price" is different from "people do not value the offer".
+ Report relevant contradictions and recruitment limits. Do not select only the comments that support the preferred route.
+ Treat small qualitative samples as ways to explore meaning and expose problems, not as reliable estimates of a population or commercial forecast.
+ For a consequential numerical comparison, seek a research design that addresses assignment, sample size, measurement and uncertainty. Do not choose a winner from tiny, uneven results because a dashboard displays percentages.
+ Name what you will change, what you will preserve and which uncertainty remains. Recheck only where the revision or stakes justify it.

Some creative judgments remain judgments. Not every line needs a study, and a test can cost more than a reversible correction. Use the simplest credible evidence for the actual decision. When a test cannot settle the issue, say so instead of adding more ceremonial measurement.

Your next action is to finish this sentence before reviewing another concept: "I would change this decision if we found..." Then ask whether the proposed method could genuinely discover that finding.

READING / PRACTICE / CONTEXT

Where the thinking starts

The methods, teaching scenarios, exercises and worksheets here are original synthesis. The books below inform particular decisions; their authors do not endorse this guide. Page references locate the supplied PDF editions and may differ from printed page numbers.

Jon Steel / Truth, Lies, and Advertising: The Art of Account Planning

PDF pp. 113-115

The warning against selective interpretation, ignoring question wording and extending findings to unsupported populations informed the decision record and limits. The test plans and fictional responses are original synthesis.

Paul Feldwick / The Anatomy of Humbug: How to Think Differently About Advertising

PDF pp. 15-19

The critique of narrow, all-explaining accounts of advertising informed caution about treating one measure as a complete verdict. This guide does not claim that Feldwick provides its research method.

Byron Sharp / How Brands Grow

PDF pp. 10-12

The distinction between recognition, memory and other marketing concerns informed separating test questions. No small qualitative check in this guide is presented as a test of Sharp's growth arguments.

Make the tools your own

Read the worked example, try the exercise before its model response, then use the worksheet on a real assignment. Print the worksheet at 100% or annotate a copy digitally. Check your actual product facts, audience context and production conditions before applying the advice.

THATCOPYADDICT / AHMED MOUSTAFA ELSHERIF / 2026