

Build An Optimal Product: A Novel Approach to Assess Attribute Trade-Offs in Qualitative Research

Observant LLC was retained to identify priority targets for drug development in the anti-infective space and to determine if a potential new compound was on track to meet unmet medical and commercial needs. In particular, the client needed to understand the trade-offs physicians would make between a large number of efficacy, tolerability, and dosing attributes.



Because it was not enough to identify what attributes were most important but to understand at a detailed level how physicians think about these trade offs, a qualitative approach was required.

In qualitative research, a common alternative to identifying priorities among attributes is to rate or rank each attribute. A common example is a card-sort methodology in which respondents sort note-cards on which attributes are written into groups corresponding to level of importance. Yet ratings, ranking, or sorting exercises can be tedious for respondents, especially when the number of attributes is large, as with the current project, and this can result in respondent fatigue and poor quality data.

To address the limitations of these more commonly used techniques, we employed a “Building An Optimal Product – Trade Off” technique, which was developed at Observant LLC as part of our R&D initiative to improve qualitative methods. This technique engages physicians to build an optimal product – in this case an optimal novel anti-infective – by fitting product attributes cards into spaces in an “Optimal Product.” Moreover the Optimal Product is sub-divided into zones that differ in their importance, with zones for Keystone, Second-level, and Third-Level importance – thus limiting the number of attributes respondents can assign to each level and forcing them to prioritize or trade-off between various attributes.

The data resulting from this exercise provided a wealth of information about trade-off decisions. A scoring algorithm provided directional reads on the relative importance of the attributes tested in the research. In addition, because physicians were asked to “think aloud” as they worked through the exercise, their comments provided a rich source of information about why they made various trade-off decisions. The task also provided a visual heuristic to direct our client’s attention to the points of overlap and disconnect between the new treatment and physicians’ “Optimal Product,” which the client used in combination with other forecasting and feasibility data to inform their go-no-go decision about the putative compound.

For more information about Observant LLC’s capabilities in the anti-infective market or our internal Research & Development program, please contact info@observant.biz.