

54 The Love Letter & the Breakup Letter

A personal letter written to a product often reveals profound insights about what people value and expect from the objects in their everyday lives.¹

The love letter, and its counterpart, the breakup letter, are two methods that allow people to express their sentiments about a product or a service using a medium and a format that are immediately understood. Instead of writing to a person, however, participants are asked to personify a product and write a personal message to it. The results are often unexpectedly deep and revealing about the relationships people have with the products and services in their lives.

The Love Letter gets at the heart of what people feel during those magical moments of connection with a product. Descriptions of what elicits delight, infatuation, and loyalty are common themes. As researchers, you will hear about what those first moments of connection are like, and insights into why people stay with a product, even as other products compete for their attention.

The Breakup Letter alternatively provides insight about how, when, and where a relationship with a product turned sour, and can be used to gain insight into why people abandon a brand or a product. People will share information about what new product they are now happy with, and what the new product has that the abandoned product does not.

Both exercises in letter writing are great techniques to use in a group dynamic, such as in design workshops, group interviews, and even icebreaker sessions. Ask participants to spend no more than ten minutes writing a letter (usually, longer timeframes will make participants over-think its contents) and then ask for volunteers to read their letters out loud in front of the other participants.

It is important to capture recordings of participants reading their letters on video: both the participants' expressions and voices provide nonverbal cues that the letters alone do not, and video editing sessions with project stakeholders can also create thoughtful conversation on multidisciplinary teams. The physical, handwritten letters are also important to preserve as research artifacts. Surprising care often goes into their construction, which conveys people's sentimentality and depth of emotion toward a product that they either love or that has disappointed them.

Traditional marketing campaigns used to build brand loyalty are slowly becoming less effective, as they are no longer the only "voice" people will hear when considering whether to buy or stay loyal to a specific product or service. Methods like the love letter and the breakup letter build our empathic knowledge base of how people experience and personify designs. By using them, we can understand what creates moments of connection and delight.

1. In 2009, Smart Design created this method based on a familiar format in which to express thoughts and feelings about a product or a service in an informal, accessible way. The collective insights in the letters continue to influence and inspire the designers at Smart Design on both new and ongoing design projects.
www.smartdesignworldwide.com

See Smart Design's video at <http://www.vimeo.com/smartdesign/breakupletter> for an example of Love and Breakup Letters.

Behavioral
Attitudinal

Quantitative
Qualitative

Innovative
Adapted
Traditional

Exploratory
Generative
Evaluative

Participatory
Observational
Self reporting
Expert review
Design process