The Experience Before the Proof

How Sensory Bot™ let the voice of a sunscreen be heard

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WHAT WAS THE CHALLENGE?

Sunscreen presents a unique challenge: its most important benefit cannot be seen or felt on application. Protection is invisible. Instead, consumers judge the product through what they can experience – whether they burn or not – but also through how it looks, smells, spreads and leaves their skin feeling. Usually, those sensory signals work alongside powerful brand cues such as the brand name, SPF rating, claims, packaging and price. Together they create confidence in the product's performance. Remove those cues, however, and an interesting question emerges: is sensory experience alone enough to signal effective protection, or does confidence disappear when the brand is taken away?

This pilot asked a deliberately hard question. Give a consumer an unbranded product in a plain pot, with no label, no claim, no number and no name, and guide her through the experience moment by moment. What can she still work out? Does the sensory evidence alone carry a product's case - or does the case simply collapse without a pack to lean on?

WHAT WAS THE DESIGN?

72 Thai women aged 18–50, all regular users of face sunscreen, took part in a blind central-location test in Thailand. Each received the same unbranded product: a fragranced, clear gel carrying suspended pink beads that break down into a cream when rubbed, and designed to give the skin a subtle brightening (colour-correcting) effect. No pack, no brand, no claims, no SPF number, no price. And a product previously unknown to this market.

Sensory Bot™ guided each participant through four touchpoints - appearance, aroma, a deep dive into application, and the feel on the skin afterwards - deconstructing the experience one moment at a time. Probing adapted to what each person had already said, pressing further where sensorial depth in response was thin.

HOW DID WE DO IT?

Sensory Bot™ is a virtual moderator trained by sensory scientists and qualitative moderators to seek out the heart of a product experience. It holds contextual memory, so each answer shapes the next question and the conversation compounds as a real one would. It is trained is to start from what the product did - what was seen, smelled or felt at a specific moment - and then probe adaptively from this observation to what it meant. In this way, meaning always arrives anchored to a sensation rather than asked about in the abstract.

72 conversations at once, each following its own route, each probed in the moment of experience, rather than reconstructed afterwards. This is a method for scale and in-the-moment immediacy.

After data collection, we following a deterministic approach, using a form of computational linguistic, built on domain expertise, to consistently extract value from the data.

Contextual memory in action



After applying sunscreen, how does it feel? Is there anything special you've noticed? 😊 **Since you've mentioned the feeling on your skin**, feel free to talk about this or anything else related to sunscreen

Sensory detail, and she quantifies it

After application, my complexion felt brighter and one shade lighter. My skin looked hydrated, glowing, and naturally radiant with dimension, without feeling dry.

Mechanism as proof - and an unprompted category crossing

When applied, the pink pigment breaks down quickly and is easy to blend, like applying foundation at the same time, and the skin looks brighter.

Laddering from the claim back to the cue



I'd like to understand **what you mean by brighter skin**. Can you tell me if there was any particular part of the product that made you feel that way?

Sensory cue, mechanism and role, in one answer

This sunscreen has a light peach and cherry blossom scent. It contains fast-dissolving pink pigments, is easy to spread, and absorbs quickly, acting like a foundation in itself. It's a sunscreen that brightens the complexion naturally, leaving it hydrated and glowing.

Asking her to synthesise, in her own terms



Now, think about everything you said about how your skin feels right now. What do those things say about sunscreen in particular?

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

With nothing to read, consumers did not describe less. They inferred more. Three things happened, and each one shows the women going further than the product ever asked them to.

1. With no ingredient list, consumers wrote their own

The visible cue took the lead. 78% spontaneously described the beads suspended in the gel, and 24% framed it as something never encountered before. The beads became evidence of active content - a second product hidden inside the first.

Aroma was decoded the same way, and more consistently than any other cue in the study: 90% named an ingredient at the aroma touchpoint - citrus, vitamin, fruit, herbal, floral - rather than describing the smell generally. 33% treated it as evidence of what the product is made of - natural, chemical-free, no alcohol.

So what: When there is no ingredient list to read or brand to borrow credibility from, consumers create their own specification, identifying the active ingredients and what those would do, before the product had done anything at all.

2. The change, not the texture, is the proof

Consumers didn't describe an isolated texture. They described a sequence with a mechanism - and they treated the change itself as proof that the product was working.

49% used temporal language. 25% narrated the whole sequence inside a single answer: the bead, the breaking down, and the named end state it becomes. 39% tied the change explicitly to their own rubbing, making themselves the agent of change. And 31% drew a conclusion from it - it changed therefore it is doing something.

> "When squeezed onto the palm and spread, the cream has a pleasant texture. The beads break down into the cream, and a lovely fragrance is released. When applied to the face, it feels comfortable on the skin. Initially, the face appears white, but it absorbs quickly. After application, the face feels brighter and the cream sets quickly.

Blind, with no brand to absorb doubt and no claim to be measured against, it was the transformation this sunscreen offered over the course of the journey that conveyed its purpose.

So what: Sun protection can't be felt, so it can't be verified by the consumer. But a transformation can be. This became the proof and revealed a key design principle: if a benefit is imperceptible, build a perceptible change into the experience and it will be read as evidence that the benefit is real.

3. The experience does not end on the skin

The conversations kept going. Unprompted, and often within a single answer, women moved from what the product did to what it replaced - and the value of that lay outside the product altogether.

26% brought brightening and makeup into the same answer despite the moderator never raising the subject and this being a sunscreen. Nothing asked about routines, other products, or what this might stand in for.

A further 15% described the product as doing the job of more than one thing outright. 10% reached for replacements in the form of foundation, primer or a makeup base; 6% reached for a serum or a skincare step. The same product, in the same test, sorted into two entirely different competitive sets - one a cosmetics rival, one a skincare rival.

14% of women reached a consequence - a step removed, a routine shortened.

So what: The consumer's experience of the product assigns the competitive set – not the manufacturer. If you only benchmark against the category you assigned, your might just be looking for a win in the wrong race.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE FUTURE OF PRODUCT EXPERIENCE

Design for meaning, not just messaging. Understand what the product already says before deciding what to say about it.

Study experiences in motion. The most important signals can emerge through transformation, not static moments. Research should follow how experiences unfold, not just capture snapshots.

Go beyond preference to interpretation. Knowing what consumers like is only the start. Understanding what sensory cues mean and how they shape judgments of desired benefits unlocks deeper insight – including what they be replacing.

CONCLUSIONS

It's the intersection of sensation and meaning that reveals the connective tissue of an experience, and it is where a product's role can be changed rather than merely rated. A brightening or protective score confirms the benefit lands. It cannot reveal that the benefit is being spent on deleting a step from a morning - which is what turns **a claim about tone into a claim about time.**

All percentages are of the total sample (n=72). Figures count participants, not mentions.

This showcases the impact of embedding domain specific sensory expertise within AI. Transforming moderation beyond the generic, and accessing the interconnected reality of a product experience.