

CONSUMER PRODUCT
INNOVATION IN 2026



7 Trends in in-home usage testing

Highlight™

In theory, in-home usage testing (IHUT) for consumer packaged goods is simple: send products to your target demographics, and have consumers take a survey about their experience using it. In practice, however, IHUT execution is far from simple. You're spending days and weeks homing in on study design, ensuring clean data collection and robust questionnaire development. You're tracking down addresses, printing shipping labels, repacking boxes, and hoping that products get to testers on time. You're hoping the testers are reliable, the feedback is actionable, and internal stakeholders are bought in along the way.

But new IHUT platforms are upending this old paradigm, overcoming these executional complexities and delivering fast, efficient, and valuable data, to product development and insights teams.

“**New IHUT
platforms
are**



**upending
the status
quo.**

The growth of in-home usage testing

As companies move more towards more representative, hyper-targeted, and organic methods of product testing they have increasingly adopted in-home usage testing. And, during a pandemic when physically getting people together became close to impossible, IHUTs shot into the spotlight, quickly becoming the preferred, feasible, and safe method for conducting research on physical products. At a time when it was impossible to run in-person focus groups or central location tests, CPG innovators could continue to develop products and gather relevant data via the IHUT methodology.

“ IHUTs are now the preferred, feasible, and safe method for conducting research on physical products.”



While COVID-19 may have been a catalyst and accelerant for this wave of IHUT popularity, we continue to see sustained adoption of growth of the IHUT methodology. Even without the need for socially-distanced product testing, companies are increasingly turning to in-home testing for a variety of reasons.

Using a product in the home leads to more organic feedback

Rather than being limited to consumer bases near testing facilities, in-home usage tests are a more organic and far-reaching research methodology. Purely from a geographic research perspective, IHUTs span U.S. demographics and access a broader audience. Anyone can participate, regardless of where they live, enabling a more inclusive, far-reaching, and diverse pool of product testers. By broadening the pool of reachable consumers, IHUTs also enable researchers to access targeted consumers or niche audiences, allowing for more specificity of testers and therefore data.

IHUTs also allow CPG companies to test their products in a more organic environment. Brands often need to understand how people would genuinely use and react to their products upon purchase, and this is where IHUTs excel. Giving consumers control over the usage experience means that they have more of a say in how to use a product as they normally would. In turn, they are able to give more honest, contextual responses about a products' performance and, therefore, a better indication of how that new product might be received in the real world.

Several trends in IHUT are driving an explosion in the adoption of in-home usage testing for physical products by companies of all sizes.

A more human focus

Traditional market research methods can sometimes be so laser-focused on data collection and outputs that the actual consumer or tester experience is overlooked. Studies are designed based on the information researchers need to extract, without consideration for the human providing the feedback.

“You need an experience that is equitable, human-centered, and fun.”

But research designers need to keep the human at the center, not just grab as many data points as possible. To retain engaged respondents who actually complete surveys, you need an experience that is equitable, human-centered, and fun.

So, today's well-executed IHUTs flex from rigid research methodologies when they can, phrasing questions in more organic, natural language. Researchers have begun to recognize that they get better responses when they respect the boundaries of human attention and find ways to craft more intuitive questions that reduce the mental load required: shorter surveys, no industry jargon, and proper compensation for respondents' time.

Keeping the user experience in mind is even more critical to success in in-home usage testing, when you may not only be asking someone to take a survey, but also to cook a meatless burger two ways, or test a new facial serum for 14 days. A well-designed IHUT is long enough to gain actionable insights but short enough that it won't frustrate or exhaust the respondent. Being transparent about "total trial time," how long trying the product and giving the feedback will take, is key to on-time survey completion and high response rates. Proper incentives to motivate the respondent to complete the tasks are equally as important.

Even small shifts in language can infuse humanity into the experience in subtle but important ways. For instance, rather than saying, "Thanks for being a respondent in our trial," which may feel cold and impersonal, researchers might begin a survey by saying, "We can't wait to hear what you think!"

This human-focused trend has enabled successful IHUTs that provide trustworthy feedback without losing people (and the human touch) in the process.



Multimedia responses for “ethnographic” depth

“Images or videos capturing how consumers use products in the home provide valuable qualitative texture and bring researchers “into the home”.



Quantitative data is valuable, but it serves a limited purpose. As more stakeholders are brought into the product development process and researchers crave more “colorful” datasets, qualitative feedback has increased in value. Images or videos capturing how consumers use products in the home provide valuable qualitative texture and bring researchers “into the home,” at a time when ethnographic research isn’t always possible. And, thanks to the widespread use of smartphones, it’s now easy for users to add video and images to their feedback submissions.

For example, a product test might ask someone to take a video of their toddler drinking an oat milk smoothie, so the product team can see how the child reacts. Or a user might record their first steps in using a new hair dye and narrate their unfiltered reactions to the product texture and ease of use. In another application, a tester could visually explain their interpretations of the settings on a new electric toothbrush to help designers test comprehension and resonance.

The applications for multimedia in IHUTs are limitless, and brands have only begun to scratch the surface of what's possible. Expect these elements to add even more depth to product research in the future.



TREND 3 Applications beyond R&D

In-home usage tests have traditionally been used during the product development process to ensure that sensory measures like taste and feel appeal to consumers. These sensory tests generally involve shipping products in unbranded packages for blind test where testers focus on just the product (or products) inside.

“Marketing teams use IHUTS for competitive intelligence, to understand product performance against competing brands and products.”

But IHUTs add value beyond R&D. Research and development teams have leveraged IHUTs for pre-launch data collection, and we're seeing the use cases expand. Marketing teams use IHUTS for competitive intelligence, to understand product performance against competing brands and products.



Longitudinal tests (or week-long diary studies) and testing of category-adjacent products can also be helpful in diagnosing usage patterns and use case expansion for messaging optimization. Consumer insights help fuel consumer claims in marketing, provide user generated content (UGC) for marketing campaigns, and even funnel directly into ratings and reviews on e-commerce product pages. IHUT results can also be used as sales collateral for retailers when making a case for a product to have more shelf space. The applications beyond R&D are clear and expanding.

Rooting out fraud for cleaner data

Market research studies typically offer gift cards, points, or other incentives as rewards for participation, which can invite fraud. Some respondents make a profession of deception, becoming full-time survey takers and creating fake personas to maximize gift card opportunities. Even worse are click farms or bots that answer surveys and collect rewards.

In addition to the obvious drain on research budgets and the obfuscation of what is valid data that “sample fraud” introduces, the risk for IHUTs is arguably even greater. Prototypes are often in short supply for innovation-stage products, so sending shipments to fake addresses or having them fall into the wrong hands can cause irreversible product and value loss.



As a result, IHUTs are following the industry trends of fighting sample fraud and implementing all security measures possible, with multiple layers of authentication, filtration, and validation. These tactics can take the form of articulation screeners, which weed out people who won't take the time and effort to thoughtfully answer questions (and therefore probably wouldn't provide helpful IHUT responses). IHUTs use digital fingerprinting and other identification tools to root out fraud at the speed of the bots. Allowing only one participant per phone number, email, and U.S. address (and verifying all) is another way to prevent survey fraud.

“They are reaching who they want, and can feel confident that those folks are really who they say they are.”

For instance, to join [Highlight's tester community](#), or “become a Highlighter”, respondents must be verified by our QA team, get an invite code based on qualitative articulation screeners, answer a survey with red herrings, validate their address and email, and then fill out their entire profile.

These thorough verification processes ensure brands test products with the precise demographic they're targeting—they are reaching who they want, and can feel confident that those folks are really who they say they are.

Democratization of data

Small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs), usually emerging or local brands, often don't have the luxury of conducting robust research due to resource constraints related to budget and time. Therefore, they sometimes roll out new products with little or no formal market testing because of the lack of access to democratized tools and capital-efficient testing.

However, as new product testing providers and platforms have introduced technology, innovation, and process optimization to the product testing space, costs have decreased, and testing has gotten faster and more accessible. SMBs are increasingly sophisticated in their product testing and development processes, building out their research capabilities with tools such as Highlight's Agile IHUTs. In addition to improving the odds of a successful product launch, product testing data can act as a proof of concept to attract early investors, retailers, influencers, brand evangelists, and more.



Standardization & optimization

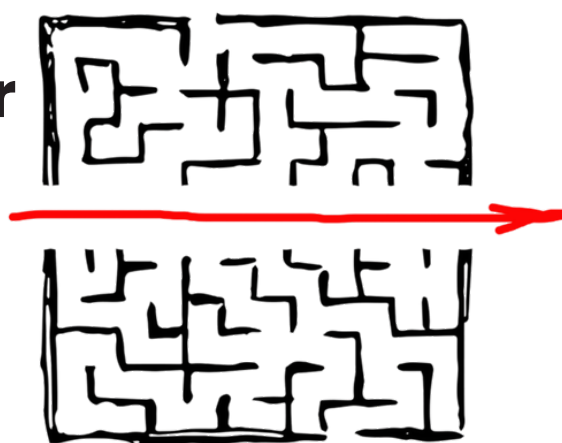
Traditional in-home usage testing can be a messy process involving multiple vendors, siloed and incompatible data, and lengthy lead times. Product development teams have to coordinate product warehousing and fulfillment, participant recruitment, and data analysis.

The elements of IHUT for physical products require disparate capabilities and suppliers (fulfillment companies, for example, will ship product but don't recruit survey participants). Some market research agencies provide IHUT coordination, but often just string together the disparate pieces of the puzzle.



But a CPG innovation company that focuses exclusively on IHUT, like Highlight, can consolidate the entire process into a single platform. Not only does that relieve product development teams of the burden of managing a stable of vendors, but it also creates the opportunity for process optimization and consistency in every step of the process. Turnkey end-to-end solutions eliminate room for error and reduce project management cost and time.

“Researchers no longer have to reinvent the wheel with each product they test...”



When a single IHUT provider manages the end-to-end process for a large number of clients, product developers and researchers no longer have to reinvent the wheel with each product they test, or worry about the nitty-gritty of testing execution. IHUT-focused platforms like Highlight build expertise in the methodology, and recommend frame-worked survey templates, incentive structures, benchmarks databases, research designs, and more.

Process optimization elevates in-home usage testing from a tool to acquire product data to a method with tested steps and guidelines that returns comprehensive and valuable consumer information. And that leads to more successful product launches.

Enabling agility in the development process

[Agile project management](#) has successfully reduced development cycles for various consumer products, most notably in the digital space. But for operationally-heavy, logistically-complicated physical product research, the slow-moving, manual processes haven't seen innovation or change in years.

Every year, companies launch 30,000 new products. Only 3,000 of those products (just 10%) succeed and 90% fail. That statistic would be grounds for a radical overhaul in most sectors, and that change is beginning to take shape for in-home usage testing. New platforms have emerged and found ways to vertically integrate and optimize the formerly clunky processes. Companies like Highlight are developing agile IHUT platforms that have the capability to deliver initial responses within days and complete research projects within weeks while lowering the costs, time, and stress associated with product testing. The infusion of technology has injected agility where it was formerly not possible; Agile IHUTs do match the pace of product innovation cycles today.



**“ Agile IHUTs
match the pace
of product
innovation
cycles today.**



Stay on the lookout for increasing adoption of Agile IHUTs, as manufacturers recognize the value that fast, actionable data can bring to physical product testing. And, with better consumer data perhaps we'll see the number of successful products increase, and the failure rate dramatically decrease.



ABOUT Highlight.™

Highlight is the definitive product intelligence platform enabling brands to create products people love. Powered by a proprietary community, seamless logistics, expert research methodologies, and AI-driven analytics, Highlight's platform is purpose-built for modern physical product teams and trusted by leading brands, top retailers, and emerging innovators alike. The Highlight platform delivers high-impact insights with unmatched quality across every stage of the product innovation lifecycle—from early ideas and prototypes to in-market renovation—empowering teams to act quickly and bring winning products to market with confidence.

For more info, visit
[LETSHIGHLIGHT.COM](https://letshighlight.com)