

BLIND vs. SIGHTED TESTS – SEEING IS BELIEVING

Knowledge of the products that are being evaluated is generally understood to be a powerful source of psychological bias. In scientific tests of many kinds, and even in wine tasting, considerable effort is expended to ensure the anonymity of the devices or substances being subjectively evaluated. In audio, though, things are more relaxed, and otherwise serious people persist in the belief that they can ignore such factors as price, size, brand, etc. In some of the “great debate” issues, like amplifiers, wires, and the like, there are assertions that disguising the product identity prevents listeners from hearing differences that are in the range of extremely small to inaudible. That debate shows no signs of slowing down. In the category of loudspeakers and rooms, however, there is no doubt that differences exist and are clearly audible. To satisfy ourselves that the additional

rigor was necessary, we tested the ability of some of our trusted listeners to maintain objectivity in the face of visible information about the products.

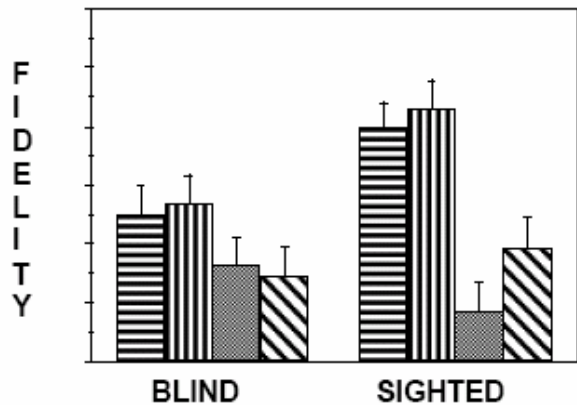


FIGURE 4: A comparison of blind vs. sighted evaluations of the same products by the same group of listeners.

The results are very clear, and strongly supportive of the scientific view. Figure 4 shows that, in subjective ratings of four loudspeakers, the differences in ratings caused by knowledge of the products is as large or larger than those attributable to the differences in sound alone. The two left-hand striped bars are scores for loudspeakers that were large, expensive and impressive looking, the third bar is the score for a well designed, small, inexpensive, plastic three-piece system. The right-hand bar represents a moderately expensive product from a competitor that had been highly rated by respected reviewers.

When listeners entered the room for the sighted tests, their positive verbal reactions to the big beautiful speakers and the jeers for the tiny sub/sat system foreshadowed dramatic ratings shifts - in opposite directions. The handsome competitor's system got a higher rating; so much for employee loyalty.

Other variables were also tested, and the results indicated that, in the sighted tests, listeners substantially ignored large differences in sound quality attributable to position in the listening room and to program material. In other words, knowledge of the product identity was at least as important a factor in the tests as the principal acoustical factors. Incidentally, many of these listeners were very experienced and, some of them thought, able to ignore the visually-stimulated biases [6].

At this point, it is correct to say that, with adequate experimental controls, we are no longer conducting “listening tests”, we are performing “subjective measurements”.