



GO-TO-MARKET & PRICING

Van Westendorp is a survey boundary, not a price

Van Westendorp can map how respondents describe price discomfort. It cannot replace observed demand, a reference-price record or a decision about value.

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MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

The Van Westendorp price sensitivity meter is attractive because four questions appear to turn price perception into a chart. The chart is useful as a boundary around a conversation. It is not a market-clearing price and it does not reveal what a customer will buy when the product, reference point, competitor or contract changes. This article treats the instrument as a disciplined survey input. It explains what each question can expose, why the crossing points should not be read as demand curves, and how to connect stated price discomfort to observed transactions, retention and contribution margin before a pricing decision is made.

Keywords: Van Westendorp price sensitivity meter · Willingness to pay · Pricing research · Price perception

The Van Westendorp price sensitivity meter can map how respondents describe price discomfort. It cannot, by itself, prove the price that will maximise revenue, the price a customer will pay in a contract or the price at which a market clears.

That is not a criticism of the instrument. It is a boundary. A survey answer is a statement about a respondent's interpretation of a prompt. A transaction is a choice made under a product, a budget, a reference price and an alternative. The two can inform each other without being treated as the same observation.

The evidence boundary matters here. Kloss and Kunter (2016) are a secondary source, not the original 1976 paper. They describe the meter as a direct, hypothetical four-price-point survey and report one field experiment on a low-priced chocolate product. In that study, the meter's optimal pricing point was close to the incentive-aligned Becker-DeGroot-Marschak result. The authors also warn that hypothetical bias and the meter's focus on minimum customer resistance may have cancelled each other out. That is evidence about one study, not a general guarantee.

What do the four Van Westendorp survey questions actually measure?

Kloss and Kunter (2016) describe four prompts: when a product becomes inexpensive but is still a bargain, when it becomes expensive but remains worth considering, when it becomes too expensive to consider, and when it becomes so inexpensive that quality is in doubt. This article uses that 2016 secondary description. It does not claim to reproduce the exact wording of the original 1976 paper. The responses are cumulated into distributions and crossing points. In the account used here, the crossings approximate an acceptable price range rather than establish a market price.

The first useful output is not the crossing point. It is the spread. A tight range can suggest that respondents share a reference frame. A wide range can reveal a segment, a product-definition problem or a prompt that does not carry enough context.

Table 1 What each Van Westendorp prompt can and cannot do

Prompt	It can expose	It cannot establish
So cheap that quality is in doubt	A lower-bound perception and quality signal	The minimum viable price
A bargain	A favourable comparison point	The price that creates profitable demand
Expensive but still considered	A discomfort boundary	Price elasticity in a live market
Too expensive to consider	A stated upper boundary	The churn threshold after a real increase

Author's worksheet based on the four prompts described by Kloss and Kunter (2016), a secondary source. No market estimate is implied.

Why does a survey crossing point fail to represent a market demand curve?

When two curves cross, the chart looks like a market mechanism. It is still a summary of stated answers. The respondents may be answering about a different product, a different competitor or a different budget from the one the company will actually sell into.

The reference price is especially important. Reference prices are made from history: the last transaction, the list price, a concession, a competitor's offer or a remembered promise. If the survey gives every respondent the same artificial price frame, it may reduce the very variation the pricing decision needs to understand.

The same issue appears with product scope. "The platform" can mean a seat, a workflow, a service level, an implementation promise or a bundle. A respondent can give a coherent answer to an unclear offer. The resulting chart is precise about an object nobody will buy.

Kloss and Kunter's (2016) single-product experiment is a useful caution. Its optimal pricing point was close to the Becker-DeGroot-Marschak result, but the authors say that hypothetical bias and the minimum-resistance framing may have cancelled out. Similarity in one setting is not proof of a universal demand curve.

How can pricing teams use Van Westendorp boundaries to design transaction tests?

The disciplined use of Van Westendorp is to turn the spread into a test plan. Segment the answers by the buyer, use case and current plan that the commercial decision actually concerns. Then compare the stated boundaries with realised price, renewal, expansion and margin in the closest existing cohort.

If stated willingness is high and realised price is low, the question may be sales confidence, reference-price inheritance or an approval rule. If stated willingness is low and realised price is high, the surviving customers may be selected by a mechanism the survey did not capture.

This is where pricing is a positioning decision. The price communicates what the product is, who it is for and which trade-off the buyer is being asked to make. A survey can show where the message creates discomfort. It cannot decide whether the message should change.

Table 2 From stated price sensitivity to a pricing test

Step	Evidence	Decision
Define the offer	Product, term, service and buyer are explicit	Remove ambiguity before asking a price question
Read the spread	Four responses by segment, not only one crossing	Identify the boundary worth testing
Match the cohort	Similar plan, customer and use case in realised data	Compare perception with behaviour
Test the change	Hold a price, scope or message constant where possible	Separate price response from packaging response
Read the outcome	Conversion, margin, retention and expansion	Keep the price only if the economics improve

Author's operating worksheet. The sequence is a decision protocol, not a validated statistical model.

Which four analytical mistakes distort Price Sensitivity Meter survey interpretations?

First, do not call the crossing point an optimal price. It is a point in a stated distribution, not an optimisation over contribution margin and survival.

Second, do not compare two charts if the offer or the sample changed. A new bundle, a new segment or a different explanation can move every crossing point.

Third, do not use the survey to justify a number that the sales system cannot enforce. If the deal desk, a salesperson or a contract term creates a different reference price, the survey has described a world that the organisation did not implement.

Fourth, do not ignore the customers who refused the new price. A surviving-customer survey is a selection of people who stayed. The full response includes the people who chose another option.

The instrument is most valuable at the edge of a decision. It helps the team see what “cheap,” “expensive” and “too expensive” mean to different people before a new price is announced. The transaction record then tells you whether the boundary mattered.

Keep the boundary. Do not mistake it for the market.

REFERENCES

Kloss, D., & Kunter, M. (2016). The Van Westendorp price-sensitivity meter as a direct measure of willingness-to-pay. *European Journal of Management*, 16(2), 45–54. <https://doi.org/10.18374/EJM-16-2.4>

END OF ESSAY

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