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The Consumer Anthropologist

September 24, 2001

The problem with focus groups? They take consumers out of their natural habitat. So welcome the idea of ethnographic market research, which uses the anthropologist's tool kit of methods and theories.

by Jennifer McFarland



When a new product needs testing for consumer reaction, companies traditionally turn to that old market-research mainstay, the focus group. Today, however, alternative techniques offer deeper insights that can inform the product development cycle like never before. Ethnographic market research—somewhat new to

marketers but as old as the science of anthropology—is increasingly being used to provide new information about consumers. Using the anthropologist's tool kit of methods and theories, ethnographers are giving corporations an inside look at the cultural trends, attitudes, and lifestyle factors that influence consumer decisions about everything from bathtubs and toothpaste to insurance and batteries.

Such research can give companies an advantage in learning not just what customers want, but what they will want, says Eric Arnould, professor of marketing at the University of Nebraska. "Ethnography is a way to get up close and personal with consumers," he says. "As the cycle time for new product development goes down and its cost goes up, and as competition becomes fiercer, many firms are trying to get closer to the consumer to try to figure out the context of use for new products."

The science of consumer research

Whereas focus groups often work in artificial settings for short periods, ethnography situates consumers within the larger social and cultural context, explains Donna M. Romeo, Ph.D., an in-house corporate anthropologist at Whirlpool (Benton Harbor, Mich.). Ethnography looks not for opinions but for a 360-degree understanding of how a product might resonate with the consumer's daily life.

For instance, Whirlpool recently asked Romeo to conduct a study for a line of luxury jetted bathtubs. Using a sample of 15 families from four different markets, the methodologically thorough Romeo conducted in-home interviews and even filmed participants (who were wearing bathing suits) while they soaked. She also asked them to respond to questions such as "When you think of your tub, what images come to mind?" by creating a journal of images—photos participants took themselves or ones they cut out of magazines—that came to

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mind. What emerged was a consumer picture of bathing as "a transformative experience," says Romeo. "It's like getting in touch with the divine for 15 minutes. Those learnings—the emotional, cultural, symbolic meanings—are quite powerful." They also validated Whirlpool's working concept for the luxury tub. Prior to Romeo's research, the tub had been christened "Cielo," meaning "celestial" or "heavenly" in Italian and Spanish—an image that the study participants often called upon to describe their bathing experience.

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— Donna M. Romeo, Whirlpool

The real power of ethnography, however, lies at the front end of product development. The beauty of the methodology, says Patti Sunderland, an anthropologist and partner in B/R/S Group's Chicago office, is that it's inductive rather than deductive. "Part of the idea of going into peoples' homes or wherever it is that a product is important," she explains, "is that you're discovering from them what the meaningful categories are." Toothpaste marketing, for example, used to be about fighting cavities and whitening teeth. But ethnographic research found that consumers' concept and concerns had changed, explains Sunderland. "People are really concerned with gums, their tongue—the whole mouth," she says. "When they're putting the toothbrush in their mouth, it's not just cavities that they're interested in anymore." Toothpastes such as Colgate Total, which purports to "continue to work even after you stop brushing," are designed to appeal to this broader concept of dental care.

Tom Maschio, Ph.D., vice president of Cultural Dynamics, a Westport, Conn.-based market research firm, says a study his organization conducted for an insurance company helped reshape the company's image of its services. Using ethnography, Maschio's team found that most Americans don't see insurance as some kind of silver bullet. "That conflicts with the American sense of autonomy and independence," he explains. "Instead, insurance is supposed to get people back to where they belong, to restore the symbols of success and hard work, which are ultimately replaceable." Ethnographic research "gave us a way of positioning this particular insurance brand as getting you back to where you belong."

Similar research helped AC/Delco reposition its advertising. Maschio's team found that as men grow older, they link car maintenance and repair with the sense that they should provide a "mantle of protection" for their families. So AC/Delco came up with a new ad campaign "extolling men's role in car maintenance, in taking care of the family, and their concern with good honest car parts," says Maschio.

Buyer beware

Ethnographic market research is quickly reaching fad status. To help you distinguish the bona fide practitioners from the wannabes, experts offer the following advice:

Get the real deal. Any firm offering ethnographic research should have an anthropologist with graduate-school training on staff, says Whirlpool's Romeo. "A lot of people out there say they're doing ethnographic research. But if they're not versed in the methods and theory of anthropology, you're getting just another market research method." Also, examine their track record of translating experience to successful business models, product positioning, and product design, adds Maschio.

Give yourself sufficient time. Eric Arnould says that your suspicions should be raised by "people who tell you that they can do ethnography in a week. It typically takes a longer period of repeated interactions," he says, "to gain the kind of insights that ethnography is able to offer." However, these "Rapid Assessment Procedures" can be completed relatively quickly—say, in a few weeks—if you have a number of people working on multidisciplinary teams. "But it requires a significant level of expertise," Arnould warns, "and an up-front level of knowledge."

Triangulate your findings. "Let's say you start with the focus group," says Romeo. The learnings from that help inform the ethnography. Then you create a quantitative survey to help you understand the ethnography on a broader, more generalizable level. When the same messages are coming from different research venues, you have something powerful."

Get cross-disciplinary involvement. Firms learn a lot by watching their customers from behind the two-way mirrors in a focus group room, says Sunderland. "The same thing can happen with ethnographic research," when the firm commissioning the research sends along representatives to witness the process. Romeo agrees and encourages a cross-disciplinary team approach for

in-house anthropologists. "You'll have people in brand, usability, and design that are going out to the field with you. They may have looked askance at this kind of research at one time," found it too touchy-feely. "Then suddenly the consumer becomes alive to them and they become huge advocates of the research within the organization."

Don't skimp. "Avoid doing research with a few customers, friends, or employees," the B/R/S Group's Web site warns. "You won't get the truth, it will be unrepresentative, and it's just too easy to misuse the findings. If you think you'd like to do some research, get a proposal from an experienced researcher." When it comes to costs, Arnould says you should expect ethnographic work to cost more than focus groups but less than a national sample survey. "You need to spend \$25,000 to \$50,000 to do good ethnographic work, with multiple people working in multiple settings over a reasonably extended period of time," he maintains. According to some, you can't afford not to do this research because of the problems and opportunities it can help you uncover.

Consider your needs carefully. Will ethnographic research serve your needs? That depends on the questions you're trying to answer, says Sunderland. "If you want to test advertising, a focus group is a good way to go. If you've done a lot of *in situ* research and you're now refining your concept, you can find out great things by having people look at it in a focus group room." But when you have no idea how consumers are using your product, when you're exploring a new market, or when there's very little understanding of how a product is integrated into daily lives—dust off your pith helmet.

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