

“Ford’s secret weapon: Anthropology”

Jeff Green, *The Oakland Press*

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Tom Maschio cut his academic anthropologic teeth studying tribes in Papua, New Guinea. He's written for scholarly journals and is an expert on cultural behavior in remote areas of the globe. But these days, he's just as likely to be studying the athletic apparel habits of Chicago youths, the refrigerators of suburban housewives or learning the underlying cultural forces that drive people to choose one car or another. Ford Motor Co. used anthropologists to develop the marketing campaign for its new small car, the Ford Focus. Advertisements for the Chevy Blazer were altered dramatically based on input from anthropologists. Maschio also worked closely with campaigns for the Chevy Venture "Let's Go" minivan campaign.

As the consumer world gets more complicated, anthropologists are finding a whole new line of work far from the straw huts of the Third World in the pop culture deltas of the first world. It was probably inevitable.

In the olden days of U.S. capitalism, the captains of industry simply made huge numbers of gleaming cars, appliances and other items and people dutifully lined up to buy them. Advertising was about making sure people heard your brand name more than the other guys and using repetition to drill your jingle into the public consciousness. The vast middle class moved in lock step to do their part for the U.S. economy. But then American consumers discovered irony and cynicism. They lived through the Vietnam War and Watergate. They started watching cable television, subscribed to obscure magazines - or worse, stopped consuming mass media altogether. We fragmented into thousands of subcultural niches. It made things really inconvenient for companies and their advertising agencies.

So now they hire Maschio, vice president of Westport, Conn.-based Cultural Dynamics, and his contemporaries to try and rediscover what motivates people to buy a product. If you understand the bedrock motivating forces, explained Maschio, you can tailor your product to meet these needs. Footlocker used his team to figure out why kids choose the athletic apparel that they wear. He helped Amana design better refrigerators by studying how people were adapting their refrigerator space in their homes. "We analyze the way consumers attach themselves to goods," Maschio said. "We're filling out the symbolic dimension of consumer goods. We're learning why people connect with certain products." Anthropologists have the advantage of being able to step back and see culture from a distance. They take the same approach on the streets of Chicago or Detroit that they would in New Guinea.

In the case of athletic apparel, Maschio said he found that the core value people were seeking with their clothing and shoes was "vitality." African American youths tended to be on the cutting edge of the trends, looking for new ways to mix and match teams, colors, logos and styles to make a highly individual statement that would help them gain respect from peers.

Suburbanites fed off the African American fashions, but adapted them to their more homogenized style. Suburban culture rewarded the sense of belonging to teams and working hard to get ahead - which meant a more muted adaptation of the athletic apparel and more emphasis on having the right gear for every occasion. By understanding the motivation behind different consumer choices, even for the same products, advertisers and their clients can position their products more intelligently, he said.

If you know what truly motivates people, an advertising agency can highlight features of the product that meets that need or the company can add those features to future products. Maschio said that once the anthropologists identify the need, advertisers are very good at developing campaigns that adapt that knowledge. In the end, it's not the stuff that's important, but the values that it signifies.

An advertiser who can associate their product with that value can sell just about anything. While certain design elements such as shape and color are important, the product becomes irrelevant to the anthropologists and therefore to the advertiser and their client. "We give people the language they need to make the sale. They can seize on the feature that's most attractive. Advertisers are very creative, inventive people," he said.

[Back](#)