

# Watch, listen and learn

How do you know when you have a new product opportunity? Observations can often suggest that new product opportunities are lurking in the collected data. The process of going from observation to insight is not an easy one. It requires a heavy dose of what Edward de Bono (1970) called lateral thinking, moving from rational calculation to imaginative leaps to the possible.

Consumers themselves are not always conscious of what new product innovations would actually address their own wants and needs. They often believe that the currently available product offerings are as good as anyone can find. When questioned directly about their wants and needs, consumers tend to offer complacent clichés - lower price, more per package, different colors - that hardly yield conceptual breakthroughs and revolutionary innovations.

This article describes the types of observations that should inspire researchers to think about the opportunities that may be revealed when we watch people in their roles as consumers. It suggests that people's behaviors may be better clues to what they want and need than their expressed opinions. Ten categories of observations or behavioral clues that should set innovators thinking are outlined here.

## Using ethnography to spark new product ideas

- *Observing a pattern of product usage reveals process steps.* When ethnographers pay close attention to consumers while the latter are using a product, the researchers can observe the stages through which respondents go from intention to satisfaction. The steps may begin when materials are assembled and homemakers change clothing

as they start a household clean-up, and they end as homemakers admire the shiny results of their scrubbing. The steps consumers go through from beginning to end usually reveal clues to expectations, fears, doubts and wishes.

Process steps in the laundry are exceptionally revealing. Before using their washing machines, consumers go through the task of sorting clothing according to anticipated problems and wishes. Whites are separated from colored garments because of fears about

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colors running and ruining the whites or because of expectations that white washables need extra attention with chlorine bleach. Some homemakers remove heavily-stained articles of clothing during the sorting process in order to treat them with additional products, such as stain removers or pre-soaks.

Paying attention to the process has certainly yielded more than a fair share of innovations, such as nonchlorine bleach. Continuing to seek possibilities in observations of process can take the category even further. QualiData ethnographers were surprised when a study of laundry practices in Turkey revealed that women, following Islamic custom, separated men's garments from those of women. This observation suggested innovations that could address the needs and expectations of consumers in this market, which we're not being met by available brands.

- *Consumers make mistakes.* People tend to blame themselves, Don Norman (1990) has noted, when they make mistakes while using a product. They naively accuse themselves of lacking experience, not reading the directions carefully enough, or just not having enough skill with technology.

Mistakes usually occur when the product does not make itself instantly understandable, when users' stock of knowledge creates contradictory expectations, or when their mental images of the ways things are supposed to work are violated by product operation. These problems with usability and a readable user interface do not happen only with computer programs, cell phones and VCRs. Consumers make mistakes when they use all kinds of products, and watching these usually provides fuel for new product adaptation and innovation.

Several years ago, when we observed consumers using insecticide baits, we were surprised to

watch as they used insecticide sprays at the same time, a huge mistake that in effect deactivated the product. Baits are supposed to work by attracting several ants or roaches to feed in their interior space and then walk out to their nests and contaminate the entire colony with the poisons that adhere to them during their visit to the bait. This operational process confused many consumers whose expectations were for the insects to become trapped inside the bait or to have such a powerful attractant in the bait that many ants and roaches would want to feed within. They also expected that the critters would be dying and injured as they marched back to their nests. The solution was a more easily understandable process for arming the baits.

- *Consumers combine products in novel ways.* When commercially available products do not perform as expected or do not provide desired benefits, consumers adapt on their own by combining products. When smart ethnographers see this happening, they should sense an opportunity for line extensions and product innovations.

When we were watching consumers clean their counters and floors several years ago, we noticed something interesting:

Homemakers were adding household bleach to their accustomed cleaning products. One woman combined liquid dish detergent with chlorine bleach to clean cutting boards and tabletops. When ethnographers probed for the respondents' goals and intentions, the response was not surprising, considering the context. Recent news reports had been filled with dire warnings about bacterial contamination of food preparation areas. Chicken infected with e. coli bacteria had recently sickened several people and homemakers were paying close attention to news reports recommending bleach as a

way to reduce the possibility of contamination.

The deeper understanding that emerged from these observations made it clear that consumers were seeking antibacterial benefits. Until that point, antibacterial products were a relatively small niche, confined to infant care or associated with sick-room clean-up. A soap marketer had recently introduced an antibacterial product promising enhanced deodorant benefits. Our observations convinced the client that a broad spectrum of products promoting antibacterial outcomes could capture considerable consumer attention. Moreover, the client's brand equity and product formulation already were consistent with the sanitizing benefits consumers were seeking. They had only to remind shoppers that products currently available for cleaning countertops and floors had the antibacterial benefits they wanted.

- *Consumers use home remedies or create products.* If available products do not satisfy consumer needs, some creative homemakers invent their own solutions. They might have some extra facility with wire coat hangers, rubber bands, and folded paper; they are sometimes inventive with cooking ingredients or cleaning solvents. Regardless, they like to show off when ethnographers come to visit, and their products provide clues to imaginative marketers who can commercialize these inventions.

Home barbecuing is a category that seems to release inventiveness. Entire regions of the United States, not to mention the male half of the human species, appear to take unusual pride in their grilling skills. Ethnographers observing a home barbecue during a lazy summer weekend are usually treated to a host of native inventions: a favorite ingredient such as brown sugar, pickle juice, wine, or Worcestershire sauce in a marinade; special woods, such as

mesquite, gathered in the backyard and added to the charcoal for smoking or enhanced flavor. In several homes, we watched men start their fires by placing their charcoal along with some strips of paper into an empty coffee can with holes punched into the bottom. This adaptation appealed to consumers who wished for a safer nonchemical means of starting the fire. Most of the observations reviewed here have been turned into viable and profitable product innovations.

- *Observing usage reveals benefits you did not know about.* The consumer's experience of product benefits is highly subjective, a psychological state shaped by factors as diverse as personal expectations, product features, brand image and life stage. Like all qualitative researchers, ethnographers are challenged to understand the consumer's personal experience of product usage and to shape innovations around those feelings and emotions that constitute benefits.

Prior to conducting research for the Moen Revolution shower head, we believed that the benefits consumers seek in the shower were both functional – for example, cleanliness, thorough rinsing, hair and skin care – and psychological – a state of relaxation. Careful observation of showering and extended interviewing about associated feelings added to a deeper understanding of the psychological dimension. We had severely underestimated the emotional benefits sought in the shower. Soaking, interaction with water in isolation, and the state of nakedness were relaxing to some and invigorating to others. Respondents were observed praying, meditating and inhaling steam deeply as though they were involved in aromatherapy. Despite confined circumstances, they lingered in the shower as though they were involved in a purification ritual. The end result of our thinking

about what we saw was an advanced showerhead design that appeals directly to the emotional benefits sought in the daily shower.

- *Observing usage reveals frustrations or complacency about results.* Consumers reveal themselves most acutely sometimes when there is a divergence between verbal expressions and body language or when what is visible to the ethnographer is contradicted by what the respondent says. In either case, we have clues to new product opportunities.

We have seen this repeatedly in observational studies of home cleaning. As a homemaker completes her scrubbing of the bath and shower area, stains and caked-on particles of soap scum remain fixed on the tile surface. Her unhappy frown, slumped shoulders, and distracted glance disclose more than what she says: "It's OK; it's done." Putting up with unsatisfactory results suggests that new approaches to solving problems of daily living are warranted. The homemaker may feel that the effort has been committed and that products work as well as can be expected; she may not want to achieve some ideal of perfect cleanliness. Nevertheless, the product innovator should not confuse complacency with delight. Just because complaints are not verbalized does not mean that the customer is satisfied.

- *Observing usage reveals a division of labor.* When the tasks associated with everyday life are divided by social category, we witness some underlying assumptions and attitudes toward those responsibilities. Particular tasks may be assigned to children instead of adults or to men rather than women. Some jobs may be reserved for a professional such as a plumber or dry cleaner; others may get assigned to someone expected to supply regular services within the household, such as the gardener or carpet cleaner.

Whenever we witness this division of labor while visiting a site, the ethnographer's imagination should start exploring marketing opportunities.

When consumers expect that a problem can be solved only by an expert, they are betraying the belief that current formulations do not have the requisite strength or tenacity. Following such observations, some brands have created "professional strength" line extensions. When a father assigns some cooking responsibilities to his son, it often means that they want to share a feeling of mutual accomplishment and shared success, to create common memories along with a meal.

- *Observations reveal a location for product use.* One of the pleasant surprises that greet ethnographers when they visit a home is discovering just where certain products "live" in the household. An indoor product may have moved outside or to the garage. Kitchen products end up in the bathroom and vice versa. Items destined for the playroom end up in the bedroom. Consumers simply defy the rigid confines that marketers often have in mind for product usage patterns. Observant research innovators should pay close attention to these shifts in location because they betray mindsets, expectations and un verbalized needs that can lead to successful new products.

In a recent ethnography regarding paper products in the home, for example, we witnessed that large formal dinner napkins had migrated to the bathroom. Homemakers concerned about spreading germs were avoiding the communal cloth towels of yesteryear, yet paper guest towels were expensive and too inconvenient to purchase. Observations such as these offer rich opportunities for line extensions.

- *Consumers adapt packaging or*

*shift containers before use.*

Observations of the ways in which products are manipulated before being dispensed or applied are important indicators of new benefits and uses that consumers are seeking. When consumers adapt packaging formats and materials, designers and developers should be alerted to potential new product innovations.

As they prepare and store meals ahead of time for their highly active and mobile families, homemakers create different-size portions for the various members of their families. Some frozen-food manufacturers have appreciated the benefits of offering products that reflect consumer practices of portion control.

Similarly, it is interesting to observe how consumers reuse the various types of squeeze and spray bottles that arrive in their households. In the laundry, they may use an old mustard dispenser for dabbing on bleach in a manner that focuses the product on stains without splashing. They may adapt smaller packages for distributing the giant-size products they buy at warehouse superstores such as Costco, for example, using small

plastic baggies to contain workable tabletop supplies of napkins. Astute marketers should always think about the potential for innovations in packaging and dispensing.

- *Consumers share wishes that they regard as unachievable.* Listening to consumers share wishes for the distant future while watching them use currently available products is rife with promise and opportunity. Somehow the act of free association while engaged in product use releases imagination and grounded thinking. Consumer wishes may seem utopian and unachievable, but these ideas should point innovators in the right direction.

Watching people with diabetes use blood glucose monitoring devices gives the ethnographer insights into the swirl of emotions associated with the product. Concerns about a potentially debilitating chronic disease, desires to maintain dietary discipline and self-control, worries and inhibitions about the act of pricking your finger to draw blood, anxieties about the capabilities of technology to support health maintenance objectives – all collide as the product is being used. At times like this,

it is not unusual to hear patients wishing for “bloodless” glucose monitoring devices or for devices that would operate passively and keep better records. The moment of direct confrontation with a product is pregnant with possibility.

### **New possibilities**

This article has reviewed a series of ethnographic moments that should be of particular interest to new product developers. When consumers are exhibiting a process of usage; when they make mistakes, combine products, or invent new ones on their own; when they reveal new benefits or complacency and apathy about results; when they divide up household responsibilities in curious ways or bring products to an unanticipated location; when they shift packaging or dream about possibilities while stuck in the present – all of these should be clues that alternative solutions, new possibilities and creative new products can satisfy consumer wants and needs. It takes insight and imagination to go beyond basic observations of behavior, but the effort can be amply rewarding. | Q