

Observing people in their natural surroundings

Ethnography provides researchers and their clients the opportunity to watch people in their 'natural habitat'. Why is that so useful? And is it possible to generalise from observing the behaviour of just a few people? By Hy Mariampolski

Ethnography in the shower

I don't think there will ever be another study as meaningful and controversial as the one we conducted for the Moen Corporation that led to the development of their "Revolution Shower" – the winner of a 2005 IDEA Award for Innovation from *Business Week* and Moen's most successful new product introduction in its history.

We went from the behavioral observation that people spend most of their time in the shower interacting with water in a playful and relaxing way to the cultural understanding that the shower stall had gone beyond the utilitarian functionality of cleanliness to a place for indulgence, escape and sensual pleasure. We used this idea to plan and develop a showerhead positioned as the perfect tool for luxurious interaction with water.

The fact that we videotaped people while showering always attracts questions. Colleagues expect that it was difficult to recruit participants but that it was enjoyable to watch and analyze the tapes. Actually, the opposite was true: Participants were easily recruited among people comfortable with their bodies; however, the painstaking analysis of behavioral details, divided into 5-second intervals, made watching the tapes rather tiresome.

Engaging people in their natural habitats became a source of profound inspiration and excitement barely two decades ago among clients who felt alienated behind mirrored windows in viewing studios and remotely listening to phone interviews. Focus groups seemed like a scrum for recognition among respondents vying for their moderators' attention and approval. Plunging response rates and such devices as answering machines and do-not-call lists suddenly shattered the seeming mathematical precision of surveys.

Direct observation and deep cultural understanding appeared as the cure for these ills. Slowly developing rapport and trust with people; sharing beers in bars; visiting homes and offices; getting to explore the human condition in all its depth and complexity was the antidote to the artificiality that had infected much marketing research practice. Moreover, fitter well with the voyeuristic and exhibitionistic ethos infecting Western society; both users and participants accepted ethnography as a counterpart to "reality" television programs like *Big Brother* and *Survivor*.

Best of all, the successful marketplace innovations produced by attention to behavioral details and an

appreciation of the cultural underpinnings of our rituals and routines began to visibly multiply. Our retail environments became easier to navigate and shop; the brand experience within stores and restaurants suddenly grabbed our emotions and loyalty. We began to thoroughly understand the issues and opportunities stimulated by cultural differences in our minority communities and across national boundaries. New and improved products started proliferating; our software and cell phones became easier to use; innovative tools to help us at mealtimes and clean up commanded our wallets – all because we began paying attention to what consumers were really doing and not just saying they did.

Prophecies

Pioneering work like Amos Rapoport's *House Form and Culture* and Don Norman's *Design of Everyday Things* became prophecies of how everyday life could be radically improved by the application of thoughtful research and analysis. A new breed of creative social scientist began to deliver on the promise made by an earlier generation of

thinkers, like Robert Ezra Park and W. Lloyd Warner, that behavioral principles could actually be applied in pursuit of human benefits. A relatively small cohort of researchers generally working in complete isolation from one another – myself, Paco Underhill, Grant McCracken, Clotaire Rapaille, Rita Denny and Patricia Sunderland – started gaining public acclaim via articles, presentations and books.

Procter & Gamble CEO A.J. Lafley became ethnography's instant dream client by immersing himself personally, along with his researchers, in the daily lives of customers throughout the world and by publicizing the resulting improvements in his company's brands across a wide range of media.

It would seem that the advantages of the naturalistic approach for analyzing people's unarticulated needs and the emotional content of products would be unassailable. Nevertheless, some criticisms have arisen, notably questions about whether small sample studies can reliably predict behavior across the wider marketplace.

Prospective

This challenge is largely irrelevant. Ethnography is a prospective method – not a retrospective one – and seeks to anticipate the future marketplace rather than audit current behavior. Sometimes working with purposive samples of extremely loyal customers, or studying the behavior of disappointed users, as we did in our insect control studies, is necessary for radically changing products and brands.

Ethnography's popularity and possible faddishness, alas, not thoughtful methodological criticism, may lead to its spoliation by amateurs. Not everyone is a qualified focus group moderator; similarly, users cannot expect that any and everyone sent to a consumer household is a good ethnographer. Many clients eager to jump on what they see as a trend are, nevertheless, avoiding the use of outside experts in the belief that any interviewer or internal marketer can conduct ethnographic research. We are hearing about numerous disappointments based upon "quick and dirty" samples that do not permit comparisons or explore the category comprehensively. As ethnography has shifted from the margins to the mainstream over the last decade, many of its experienced practitioners are wondering where this method is moving. Both the popular and professional press have been filled with success stories in recent years yet many of the field's leaders fret about whether the momentum can be maintained.

What is certain is that good ethnography, like any other form of effective market research practice, needs consistency and commitment. It requires investment of capital and human resources. It demands the engagement of highly qualified, experienced professionals, empowered agents of change, who are granted the authority and credibility to move from behavioral observation to cultural understanding to strategic insights that have profitable impact on the client's business. ■

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