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The Revolution is at hand

Moen designs new showerhead after ethnographic research uncovers host of innovation opportunities

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The shower is many things to many people. For some, it's their own personal Lincoln Center, with an audience of one (perhaps two if you count the cat). For others, it's a day spa, even if that "day" lasts only as long as it takes to lather up, rinse off, and towel down. But we all pretty much seek the same experience: a chance to get clean, to wake up a bit, and maybe massage a sore neck or shoulder - all without sustaining life-threatening injuries.

Trouble is, most showerheads don't do much to help us reach our goal. Their slippery dials are hard to adjust; the water either pelts you painfully or dribbles on you weakly; and that soothing flow never seems to hit just the right spot in just the right way.

Plumbing product maker Moen had long suspected that the showerhead market was an area of opportunity. But while the North Olmsted, Ohio company knew a lot about what a plumber was looking for in a fixture, it needed to increase its understanding of consumer behavior in order to seize that opportunity. "We were looking for the big idea but we felt that our discovery had to go back to basics," says Jack Suvak, Moen's director, marketing research. "We wanted to get a better understanding of consumers' motivations in use of the shower. To start with, we had to understand behavior. Because the obvious isn't always apparent. And a lot of the aspects of things that are really most important to us tend to be hidden because they are either simple or too familiar to us. So we wanted to spend a little more time at discovery, taking time to look at the same things most people see or do but think about them in a different way."

Moen conducted depth interviews, in-aisle research, and even interviewed hydrotherapists to understand the beneficial effects of water on the body. But some of the most interesting findings came from ethnographic research in which consumers were observed showering in their own homes.

Only natural

When developing a new product, it's only natural to consider watching consumers use existing products as a way to uncover unmet needs. But does that reasoning apply to shower fixtures? Moen decided yes. "You aren't going to launch a product and not spend some time trying to understand how people use the products in the marketplace today. I think there were things we had to consider, but in the long run, we thought that the best place to start was to do observational research. We had done some of it before, and this project raised obvious challenges, but we felt we clearly wanted to do discovery work in the context of the shower. That was key for us," Suvak says.

"We wanted to get at it from the consumer's perspective without them having to express what they were doing. If I were to ask someone, 'How do you shower?' they might give me maybe 30 percent of what they do. If I were to take them to a facility and have them shower they might give me 40 percent - it's not their shower, after all. But if I can do observation in their own home I'm going to get maybe 70 percent of what they do, and that gives you a much richer understanding of what's going on."

Big idea

The goal of the research was to find the big idea, the "wow." It could be something that solves a problem in a unique way, or a thoughtful execution of an idea that hasn't been thoughtfully executed in the past. "Depending on which of those you are looking for, you are going to employ different kinds of research to get that information," Suvak says. "You are going to fish a little bit deeper if you are trying to find the 'wows.'"

In fishing terms, Moen landed a lunker. The Revolution showerhead is one of those "Why didn't I think of that?" products: an adjustable showerhead that's easy to adjust. Drawing on findings from the ethnographic research, Moen put the controls for the Revolution below the water stream. No more need to reach in and around the stream of water and turn a balky dial with wet hands. With the FreedomDial, bathers can customize the flow to suit their needs as patented technology spins oversized droplets of water and twirls the entire shower stream on its way to the body, giving the sensation that more water is flowing and with greater pressure than regular showerheads.

Tiny camera

The ethnographic sessions involved a warm-up interview to get some basic information about the person and understand their job and their daily life. Video diaries were also made of the respondents' bathrooms and shower areas. During the warm-up interview, technicians placed a tiny camera near the respondents' existing showerhead to give observers a water's-eye view of the proceedings. After the shower, respondents were re-interviewed.

Recruiting for these sessions wasn't as tricky as you might suspect, says Hy Mariampolski, managing director of QualiData Research, the New York and San Francisco-based firm that assisted Moen with its ethnographic research. Using ads in alternative papers, QualiData was able to get a surprisingly normal cross-section of the population who were willing to let researchers observe them showering. Granted, some did claim to be "social nudists," but most were just run-of-the-mill folks who were comfortable with the idea of being watched while they shower and also interested in the being part of the research process.

"People always assume that this was impossible to recruit," Mariampolski says. "The only thing that was tough is that we were trying to get a wide range of average everyday people - men and women, different body shapes, ages, etc. - and we also wanted to get a variety of showering environments - the upscale suburbanite, as well as the inner city apartment dweller."

Privacy issues

While this ethnographic project presented obvious privacy issues, Mariampolski says the researchers' job was the same as in any observational project: gain trust, build rapport, and make it clear they aren't there to judge the respondents or evaluate their behavior or their home. "We put a lot of emphasis on partnering with the respondents. We give them the chance to opt in to what we are trying to achieve and what their role is and what we are trying to do for the client. It's all a matter of the quality of the rapport. If people are willing to take part in something like this in the first place, they are going to go into it wholeheartedly. The first barrier is just getting them to agree, but once they agree and you treat them with dignity and with respect, and you are not judgmental, they relax and open up.

"What you are trying to catch is that moment where consumers become aware of something that they usually take for granted, something they haven't thought about before. They say, 'Gee, I've never done anything about this. Gee, there should be something done about this...' That is when it gets really exciting and you know you are discovering an opportunity."

More than just getting clean

The research showed that though everyone approaches a shower with the goal of getting clean, people have many additional aims. Probably the most common one is to shake off the cobwebs from a night of sleep and get ready for the day ahead. Those with achy backs and muscles use showers as therapy sessions, relying on the warm air and the pulse of the water to loosen creaky joints. Many see showers as a transition from one psychological state to another - for example, from a long day at work to a relaxing evening at home or a fun night out. Once you shower away the worries of the day, the night is all yours.

Others just want to stand under the water and decompress. "People want the showering experience to be relaxing. When you time it out and see what people are really doing, they're only soaping themselves down and rinsing through about half to two-thirds of the process. The rest of the time they are doing things for psychological reasons, to get relaxed, to calm down," Mariampolski says.

During the research, however, the showering gods appeared to be conspiring against the relaxation-seekers. "You watch the way people shower - they are struggling, moving their bodies all over the place to get under the water - and it's just so inconsistent with the idea of being relaxed. You see people literally dancing all over the place to get parts of their body washed and struggling to get clean. If you have to do this dance you can't be relaxing," Mariampolski says.

That dancing probably wouldn't be necessary if showers offered consistent water flow and good coverage. Respondents talked about improving the water flow, expressing the belief that a higher flow is better, while at the same time acknowledging that they didn't want to waste water, Mariampolski says. "That presented a paradox because on one hand, people were unhappy with their water flow - the shower is too weak/too strong - but at the same time, they had concerns about water conservation. They said, 'I want to do more with what I've got.'"

The respondents also tended to have a hard time seeing in the shower. Showers are often dim places, and people squint or close their eyes to avoid soap suds. "We were surprised at just how blind people are in the shower. That got us wondering how we could do a better job of working with that fact, making the product more intuitive, easier to use. Also

there were some things we learned about people putting themselves at risk in the shower - balancing themselves on things that aren't made for that purpose, holding onto the hot water handle, etc. People don't think about how slippery the surfaces are," Suvak says.

These findings pointed toward dropping the water flow control mechanism out of the stream of water, and giving it a knob that's easy to locate and easy to adjust.

Watched them shop

Prior to developing Revolution, Moen also watched consumers shop for showerheads in home improvement stores, talking with them about the purchase process and in some cases following up weeks later to see how satisfied respondents were with their purchases. "We were trying to get an understanding of how they shop for the product," Suvak says. "We found that shoppers were concerned with water flow and strength of spray. Also, a new showerhead isn't a heavily considered purchase for a lot of people. Unlike a kitchen or bathroom faucet, where people spend more time thinking about it - it has to have a style impact - the shower is considered a more functional area. That doesn't mean that there are no style considerations but it obviously has to deliver a certain experience and it's difficult to know at the point of sale what a showerhead can do. There has to be some leap of faith that people make with it," Suvak says.

The in-aisle research showed that 90 percent of consumers want a chrome or white finish on their new showerhead; 41 percent are replacing a worn or broken unit; 32 percent are replacing to add new functions; 64 percent are looking for a showerhead that provides greater water flow; 59 percent want greater force of spray; and 69 percent end up buying a showerhead that has a massage setting.

Bathroom makeovers

The introduction of Revolution dovetails with the trend of turning bathrooms into retreats where people can de-stress and re-energize, using aromatherapy, music, candles, etc., to engage the senses and indulge the soul. But while bathroom makeovers are popular features in home and decorating magazines, Moen realized that most people don't have the spacious, dream bathrooms with loads of ambient light found in the magazines. More often, it's a 3x3 shower stall or a tub with a shower curtain. "People aspire for more and our goal with Revolution is to give them more within the constraints they have today," Suvak says.

"The bathroom is turning into an entertainment center," Mariampolski says. "People are looking for small luxuries that have a big impact on their quality of life. This is one of them."

Strong work

Not to be overlooked is the strong work of Moen's engineering department, which took the research recommendations and created a product that met a variety of needs. To do so, they had to overcome some challenges, Mariampolski says. "The first was: make something that really relaxes people, that enhances a sense of well-being, and something that offers wider coverage. And engineer something that makes it feel like more water is coming out."

Their efforts appear to have been quite successful. Moen won't release sales figures but anecdotal evidence and industry buzz point to a winner. "Moen made a decision early on to run with the research," Mariampolski says. "They weren't just trying to do the research to confirm a preconceived idea; they really wanted to find a way to make a difference. This was a category that was primed for this sort of thing. Part of the reason that the product has been so successful and the marketing positioning so effective is that there was a real opportunity for innovation. Moen's intention was to bring something new to the category and that's just what they did."

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