

## SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR CONDUCTING COMMERCIAL ETHNOGRAPHY

### A White Paper

Ethnography today (2009) has become a popular method of qualitative research. It offers in-context insight into the ways consumers live with products and services, and the ways their culture influences their actions -- insight not readily available to other forms of qualitative research. This paper has been developed as an overview of the methodology.

Many different practices have assumed the mantle of ethnography -- from an in-store interview, to 4-hours of observation on location, to living with a consumer for an extended period, to ethnography conducted on-line. Given the variety of practices, how can ethnography performed for commercial purposes be defined?

Ethnography can be considered a study of consumers' lives, habits and practices within the context of their culture -- that is, their values, beliefs, social attachments and goals. Most often, but not always, commercial ethnography is performed in relation to a product or service, or a product category. It can also be used to identify the culture of a particular group of consumers.

So what constitutes good, professionally-practiced ethnography? How do experienced, dedicated ethnographers go about their projects? We offer some suggestions:

#### **How Ethnography Differs From Other Forms of Qualitative Research:**

Despite the variety of practices, most ethnographic research techniques have some things in common. Ethnography doesn't depend on the consumer's selective memory of their experience. Ethnography is usually conducted in their everyday environments -- watching and recording while consumers live with, shop for, and use a product or service, observing how they conduct their everyday lives, seeing and hearing who they are and what they value. Nothing is missed -- neither the special ways a product is used, nor the mistakes consumers make with it, nor the way a product or service impacts their lives, nor the way their culture influences their choice of products or patterns of interaction.

Ethnography is reality-focused. The real relationship between the consumer, their culture, the product or service and the competitive sort that exists uniquely in each home is right there, before your eyes.

Ethnographers can be there when day-to-day life happens, in and out of the home. For example, at the time the product is customarily used. At six AM to watch consumers floss and brush their teeth. In the afternoon when kids come home and reach for a snack. In the evening to see how family members use their free time. At bedtime to observe a woman applying a night cream. With mom or dad as they're shopping for the weekly groceries, or with a group of twenty-somethings at a pub after work. Ethnographers try to be right there to record the crucial moment or moments of the product experience.

Ethnography takes more time than other forms of qualitative research. It requires a willingness on the part of the ethnographer to spend hours and days to understand a consumer's particular culture, to explore the ways a consumer lives with a product or service, to probe the levels of emotional involvement, to understand the context. It provides a unique opportunity for perception, insight and in-depth analysis that often leads to advances in marketing strategy and execution.

As practiced today (2009), most ethnography can be described in two different (but not mutually exclusive) ways. While this paper deals primarily with commercial ethnography, some researchers practice anthropological ethnography. A word or two about the latter:

### **Anthropological Ethnography**

Anthropological ethnography, as the name suggests, is usually performed by practitioners who have been trained in anthropology. They explore the whole product experience -- how brands fit in and relate to the consumer's life. What is the cultural context -- the values and rituals that touch on the product or service category? What does the brand mean to consumers? What place does the product have in the kitchen, the bathroom, the home office or the car? What is the social significance that consumers attach to products or services? What hidden clues are conveyed?

Moreover, anthropological ethnography is sometimes used to find or describe a niche market -- people with special forms of behavior or characteristics in common. For example, people who work at night. How does their schedule affect the rest of their lives? In what ways are their day-to-day lives different from people who work nine to five? What are their special product or service needs?

Some ethnographers like to use classic projective techniques to explore the unexpressed emotional motivations of their respondents. Among them are archetypes, first developed by the psychologist Carl Jung. Others use Tarot cards, and some have developed their own projective devices. Respondents tend to identify with a specific image or character in a particular context, which can give ethnographers an insight into their true feelings that may have been previously unavailable.

On site, others see themselves as part of the woodwork. They resist intrusion into the lives of their respondents, and that includes interviewing. They prefer to tag along, watching and listening, hardly even making eye contact.

### **Commercial Ethnography**

While the suggestions below apply primarily to commercial ethnography, some anthropological ethnographers follow them as well.

## Preparing For Ethnography

Some of the preparations qualitative researchers make for a focus group will be similar to preparations for ethnography. Some will be different.

### *Appropriate Objectives:*

Perhaps the most important part of an ethnography project is setting clear, well-defined objectives. Here are some of the potential objectives ethnography can fulfill:

- . To understand a cultural context – how the emotional, symbolical, or social network informs the lives of consumers
- . To gain insight into a particular consumer niche
- . To identify a lifestyle
- . To learn how consumers actually use a product or service in their everyday lives
- . To discover product decision points
- . To reveal unmet needs
- . To find and document the real benefits of consumer experience
- . To probe problems and opportunities associated with a product or service.
- . To understand and document the quality of suffering and relief offered by a medication
- . To uncover consumer language, cues, and signals for potential advertising use.
- . To learn selection and purchase behavior at the store
- . To seek consumer-generated new product ideas
- . To test new products in context
- . To identify interactional patterns that help to describe a consumer segment

There are potentially many more objectives ethnography can fulfill.

### *Inappropriate Objectives:*

. Ethnography is not a substitute for quantitative research. It takes place among a limited number of respondents.

. . Packing a proposal with multiple objectives. Resist issue greed. The fewer the objectives, the more focused and in depth the findings will be.

. Ethnography is not suited to scope a wide market. Findings often suggest strategic and tactical direction, but the findings may or may not be representative of a broad market category. It would be wise to verify the results with an inexpensive quantitative test.

### *What You Will Need Before Fieldwork:*

. A clear, concise statement of objectives. When writing the objectives, consider the ultimate purpose – how the ethnography findings will be used. Fuel for strategic marketing? Fodder for advertising executions? Direction for a quantitative study? Each purpose will call for different objectives. And the objectives will help you focus your fieldwork.

. A screener. Any qualitative researcher who has developed a screener for other kinds of qualitative research will be able to write a screener for ethnography. The principle is the

same – narrowing down the qualifications until the exact respondent needed is defined and found. However, the ethnography screener should put somewhat more emphasis on articulateness and willingness to participate in the research. You are going to partner with each respondent for hours, if not days. You want their words and their behavior to be productive. And neither the recruiter nor the screener should reveal the focus of the research to a potential respondent.

. An interview guide. The interview guide exists primarily for the ethnographer to organize the areas of observation and inquiry and to highlight key issues. It should not be a laundry list of questions. It should be a blueprint for exploration. And it should include triggers designed to unleash a respondent's feelings about themselves, their families, and the product or service at issue.

The guide should not be considered as fixed. There are times when it should be ignored. In the best of all possible worlds, the consumer should lead the observation and whatever discussion ensues. Some of the most surprising and productive insights come to the surface when a respondent takes off on a tangent, departing from the subject at hand. Or when an ethnographer makes an aha! connection between a respondent's behavior and his or her cultural context. The ethnographer should be prepared to be led into uncharted waters, where an unexpected insight may be waiting.

However, part of a guide's reason for being is to answer the concerns and soothe the anxieties of clients and others involved in the project. The issues of interested parties should be honed and distilled by the ethnographer.

It should be noted here that some ethnographers believe in performing fieldwork without any interview guide. They feel that the ethnographer's mind should be a blank slate, open to whatever they see and hear during the interview.

#### *Recruitment:*

Who recruits? Recruiting is often done by focus group facilities that have had experience finding respondents for ethnography. There are also firms solely dedicated to recruitment. Visit their websites to see if ethnography is included. And then ask them how many ethnography recruitment assignments they have had over the course of the past year. Establishing a trusting, professional relationship with the person or persons responsible for recruitment and scheduling your respondents is vital.

However, the ethnographer should be personally involved in recruitment. Be in touch with the recruiter at all times and let the recruiter know how everything is going. If at the beginning of the project there are some unfortunate events (e.g., wrong scheduled time, bad address), it may prompt the recruiter to confirm the rest of the information is accurate. If you are using a national recruiter, insist on a local contact.

Be prepared to deal with last minute cancellations. The floater approach (recruiting standbys) used when conducting IDIs in facilities should be also used during ethnographic research.

Costs: How much you need to pay for recruitment and how much for incentives depends on how difficult it is to find respondents, and how long you need to be with them. Will you spend a couple of hours with a respondent? Obviously, consumers who are being interviewed about high incidence products like toothpaste are going to be easier and less costly to find than early adopters of a new mountain bike. And once you find your mountain bike respondents, you may want to stay with them a whole day, or even a weekend. In that case, be prepared for hefty recruitment costs and incentives. And if you are observing physicians with their patients, incentives can run up to four figures for a half day.

Recruitment and incentive costs will also vary regionally. More in large areas like greater New York and Los Angeles, and less in smaller areas (although other factors such as an area's level of affluence can also influence the cost.)

Contact recruited respondents: It's a good idea for the ethnographer to vet the consumers personally by phone after they have been recruited. Not only do you want to feel comfortable with their level of responsiveness, but you'll also want them to feel comfortable with you. The phone call will also give you an opportunity to explain any homework assignments you may want them to complete before the actual interview. Some ethnographers believe in establishing familiarity by visiting them before the actual interview.

Respondent homework: Respondent homework prepared before the interview may often – but not always -- be appropriate. It might include a collage pasted together from magazine clippings to suggest a consumer's feelings about an issue. Some practitioners ask consumers to complete various questionnaires before the interview. Or you could ask consumers to photograph or videotape a family activity, or the inside of their medicine cabinet or pantry. In certain circumstances, you might want a family, a couple, or kids to perform their own interview on videotape and send in the raw footage when they're done.

*In the field:*

Number of Respondents: While you can develop insight from fewer respondents, it's a good idea to recruit no less than fifteen for almost any project. You will probably want a range of incomes, ages and genders. And no matter how careful your recruitment has been, and no matter how thoroughly you've vetted your respondents, you will come across a couple of duds in the field. Fifteen respondents give you an opportunity to see a pattern, if there is one.

We suggest the upper limit should be no more than forty respondents – except when you're conducting short in-store interviews in conjunction with longer interviews. When you're dealing with more than 40 long interviews, it becomes cumbersome to analyze the

material in the kind of depth required for ethnography. Additionally, some people may tend to look at a greater number of interviews quantitatively – a dangerous practice.

Scheduling: Your recruiter will have scheduled respondents so that you have plenty of time to drive from one respondent to another and conduct an informal debrief with a client in between. If your interviews are going to be 2-3 hours long, plan on seeing no more than 3 consumers each day you're in the field. Some interviews will require an entire day or longer. In either case, your recruiter should give you a complete, printed set of directions showing you how to get from one respondent to another, and how long each drive will take. It's also a good idea to have GPS along – just in case.

Interview length: Much depends on the product or service involved, and what your objectives might be. For example, your objective might be how a family's culture or way of life affects their packaged food purchases. In this case, you may want to be with them when they shop and then spend a day or two observing the place of the products they bought in their lives: preparing and eating breakfast, lunch and dinner, snack times and munching on the go. You'll want to explore the pantry, the refrigerator, the freezer in the basement and any other food storage areas. And you'll want to probe their values, their feelings about each meal, the products they used to prepare it, and how they enhance or impede their everyday lives.

In certain circumstances you may want to perform repeat interviews with the same respondents. For example, trying to understand how consumer behavior changes when adolescents got to college, or how home owners take care of their lawns as the summer progresses.

On the other hand, if your objective is as simple as observing a respondent's dental routine in the morning, a two-hour interview may perhaps be sufficient to probe the psychological and social motivations that impinge on dental care.

The importance of context: Whether your interviews are a matter of days or hours, the context in which you find the respondent can be a vital piece of information. For example, what are the family's goals in life? How do they see themselves in relation to their community? How do their beliefs impact their purchase habits?

Look for the telling clues. The kind of bathroom, contemporary or old-fashioned – does it say something about the toothpaste brand the respondent prefers and why? A senior's dishwasher used for storage instead of dishwashing, what does it say about that consumer's values and habits? A little girl's room, electronically up to the minute, from her computer to her iphone, to her personal home theater – what is her next birthday present likely to be? Note the things and activities that help to define who they are, such as photos, collectibles, books, magazines, décor, prominent symbols or signs of accomplishment, the music they play, watching TV, using their computers, kids playing, and more.

Who Comes To The Interview? Ethnography is an intimate experience. Ideally, try to confine the number of people visiting with a consumer to no more than three: an interviewer, a cameraperson, if you use one, and a client. Any more, and the respondent can feel on stage. It's important to have a client present at the interviews. The client will know more about the product or service than you do, and will have a different perspective than yours. If more than one client wants to be present at the interviews, apportion a number of interviews for each client.

Ethnographer's Style How do ethnographers relate to their respondents? What is their personality posture? There are two schools of thought on the subject. Some believe ethnographers should present themselves as non-reactive, pure, dispassionate observers – presenting an entirely neutral manner and letting the respondent fill in the many moments when the ethnographer is silent.

The other posture some ethnographers have adopted is engagement, or participant observation. The ethnographer enters into the lives of their respondents and participates with them whatever they may be doing -- at the table, in front of the medicine chest, in the car, or elsewhere. The interview becomes a dialogue, and the interviewer – in so far as possible – observes and probes as part of the family.

Both personal postures can be productive. Both can open respondents and elicit in-depth responses and authentic actions. Which one the ethnographer adopts will depend on his or her own personality and comfort level with either approach. Some use a combination of both.

No matter which stance you adopt, the tone and path of the interview will be determined in large part by the consumer you are interviewing.

You and your client should wear neat clothing that does nothing to call attention to yourselves.

Client stance: If a client has had ethnographic experience, he or she may know not to intrude into the intimate relationship established between the ethnographer and the respondent. The client will observe unobtrusively, listening, taking notes, and waiting for the ethnographer to offer an opportunity to ask if he or she has any questions.

However, you may encounter a client who has never been part of an ethnography project before. The uninformed client may break into an important conversation between the ethnographer and the respondent. The client may even correct a respondent's "mistaken" idea about the company's product or service!

Ethnography training: In any case, it's a good idea to offer ethnography training to any of the client's personnel who expect to be part of the fieldwork. A day at the client's premises explaining and illustrating the do's and don'ts of ethnography is a day well spent.

Options for recording interviews: Today, more people are using a small camcorder, operated by a cameraperson, to record their observations and interviews. The advantage of video recording is that nothing is missed. Everything is available to go over again and again, to show to others who weren't there, and to extract clips for your final report and presentation.

In fact, some ethnographers prefer to go over the video together with each respondent, so that the respondents observe their own behavior and comment on actions they might not have been aware of while they occurred.

However, there are others who feel the camera is an intrusion, and that makes the interview less than natural. They prefer still photos and note-taking, or an audio recorder at most. The issue is a matter of personal interview style and preference. There is much to be said for both methods.

However you record the interview, Create backup files every night you are in the field. Upload the files to your website every night or send a copy of backup files to the office.

Release or waiver: Be sure you have a carefully-worded form for the respondent to sign, releasing the material of the interview for research use and absolving you from certain responsibilities. Best to develop the form with your lawyer.

Cameraperson's posture: If video recording is your method of recording the interview, the cameraperson should be like a fly on the wall: silent and unobtrusive. Inside of five minutes, the respondent will ordinarily be able to ignore the camera. You can see it happen when the respondent looks directly at the interviewer instead of at the lens -- easy to achieve with today's cameras, which are small, light, make no noise, and use natural light.

The debrief: What insights have you gotten out of the visit to a consumer's home? What insights has the client arrived at? The ethnographer and the client should exchange observations and insights directly after each interview. In addition, on the basis of what you learned during the last interview, how should the next interview be changed or adjusted? Remember to allow enough time in between interviews for a thorough debrief.

Respondent-performed ethnography. There are times when it's better to have a respondent video themselves without an ethnographer or cameraperson. For example, if you want to understand the way kids play, an adult presence could be very inhibiting. Give them a camera and ask them to videotape their favorite playtime activities. Want to know how people decide where to stop on a road trip? Ask one of the passengers to video record the trip and elicit the comments of the other travelers as they go. The material you get back may be unexpected, even surprising to the client.

In-store ethnography: There are a number of ways to perform in-store ethnography. If you're lucky enough to get permission to set up a hidden camera opposite the aisle you're interested in, you can video the spontaneous actions of random customers as they pass by,

pause, or put a product into their shopping carts. And for a small incentive, you can interview the customers you spot for up to fifteen minutes right there in front of an open camera (making sure not to block store traffic.) Although this is not technically ethnography, it should give you very specific insight into consumer behavior at the shelf. If you plan to spend say a weekend doing this, you might get significant numbers of respondents. This is the only time that ethnography approaches quantitative research. The permission required is usually accomplished through the client's sales department, twisting the arm of the store's national or regional office.

However, if permission is not forthcoming, consider the shop-along – in conjunction with ethnography involving other aspects of the consumer's life. You follow pre-recruited consumers as they shop, noting their actions and comments as you interview them. You might want to use an audio recorder to take down what you see and hear, and a small still camera.

Role of focus groups in ethnography: You may want to bring some or all of your respondents together after the fieldwork for a focus group. Particularly if the fieldwork has centered on a specific product or service. Respondents who had been interviewed in their homes will have been encouraged to think about their attitudes towards the product more deeply and in detail. Exchanging their attitudes and product experiences can lead to provocative new ideas and insights for the ethnographer and the client.

*Ethnography among patients in a medical setting:*

Ethnography involving patients and doctors has special requirements. Here are a few do's and don'ts:

- . Acquaint yourself with the literature on physician-patient communication.
- . Don't recruit through hospitals or medical school. (Too complicated, too long.) Recruit through the physician's office manager.
- . Assure physicians you will have minimal impact on their practice. Offer generous incentives to the physician and the staff.
- . HIPAA laws require that patients participate voluntarily, that their medical care will not be affected, that they must sign a document specifying what you may do and may not do in the interview and with your notes and recordings. Best to check out your research design and documents with an attorney familiar with HIPAA laws.
- . Once patients have expressed interest in the study, phone them and explain the study to them.
- . Arrange to see participating patients on the same day – up to five patient-physician encounters in a three-hour period.
- . Ask patients to arrive early to sign the consent form.
- . Limit observers during the encounter to two people – you and your videographer.
- . Avoid clothing, fragrance, body language, eye contact that would draw attention to you.
- . Follow-up interviews elsewhere at a later time can reveal what the encounter meant to the patient.

## Analyzing the Material

The way for an ethnographer to become most familiar with the interviews is to go through the videoed interviews, one by one, and log every relevant action, and every relevant verbatim into your computer. Admittedly, an arduous exercise. But as you log, you will begin to detect insights, threads and connections you might not have seen before. And you'll find your final report will begin to spring directly out of the material.

There are analytic shortcuts. For one thing, you can have the raw footage transcribed by one of the many transcriptions services around. They'll put time codes opposite the verbatims so you can go right to the portions of the videos you want and highlight the verbatims that are useful. Much easier. But one disadvantage of transcriptions is that transcribers are not usually trained to look for and record relevant non-verbal actions, or to perform cultural analysis – a vital part of ethnography.

### *Interpretation:*

The way you interpret ethnographic fieldwork will evolve right out of your background, your experience, the point of view you bring to your respondents, and the objectives of the research. There is no set framework and no guidelines to follow. Yet many believe that interpretation is the most important part of ethnography. So how to start?

Applying an anthropological discipline to commercial ethnography is how some ethnographers interpret the fieldwork, always bearing in mind that the research should lead to or suggest actionable results. Anthropologists are interested in individuals and the social milieu within which their behavior and identity is supported, organized and constrained. And they will couch their inquiry concerning brand purchase and preference into a larger framework involving a consumer's values, assumptions, and social context.

If, on the other hand, you were an English major, remember the way you were taught to interpret a novel: analyzing the actions, the language and motives of each character in terms of their cultural background, their psychology, their rituals, and symbolic values. This discipline, too, is a valid approach to interpretation.

A marketing background is helpful. Some ethnographers have been trained in marketing practices, but are also familiar with anthropology. If you know marketing, you'll find it easier to communicate your findings and suggest forward action in the client's language.

No matter what your background, a key to useful, in-depth interpretation is the way you will have framed the questions. For example, let's say an automobile client wants to know how are Dodge, Chevy and Ford pickup owners different people? In addition to the psychological profile of each, an ethnographer might want to know, for example, what does driving a pickup truck communicate in our society? What does driving a Ford F-150 say to others? What social meaning does it have?

It's a good idea to share the interpretation – to bounce insights off someone else who has gone through the fieldwork. It might be the videographer who recorded the interviews. It could also be your client, if he or she is attuned to ethnography. Another person will bring another point of view to the research, along with insights you may not have thought of.

### *Synthesis:*

After you and interested parties at the client have had a chance to go through the fieldwork, many companies meet with the ethnographer in a synthesis session. The purpose is not only to exchange insights, but to begin to shape the meaning and tentative conclusions of the research. It's usually an all-day session, often run by a facilitator. The ethnographer will come away with a clearer point of view, and will be ready to start working on the report.

### *The Report:*

There are a number of ways of presenting a report. Your choice may depend on the way your client is used to, and feels comfortable with. Whichever you choose, the report should point to forward action – what is to be done with the findings.

The Video Report is in effect a documentary of the ethnographic experience. It is organized around the findings and illustrated with multiple clips extracted from the interviews. The video includes titles or bullet points and is sometimes narrated. Video reports can be anywhere from twenty minutes to an hour or more, depending upon the material and the audience's attention span. They are usually completed on a DVD, which can be duplicated for interested parties.

Although the Video report can be highly effective in making its points, it takes time to edit, and it can be expensive. Many feel it's worth the time and expense, but it has to be considered in the light of the overall research budget.

Power Point is often used to present the findings – particularly if the interviews have been recorded mainly with a still camera. A combination of bullet points, photos and verbatims can communicate the findings effectively. The presentation may also include a narration. Putting together a Power Point presentation takes about as much time as putting together a video presentation, but it is usually somewhat less expensive. Its disadvantage – it doesn't show the consumer's action.

Forward Action: Expectations for marketing-oriented ethnography usually include a new understanding of consumer behavior, and/or a suggestion for forward action. Depending upon the original objective, the suggestion might be a reconsideration of marketing strategy, an indication of a pose new consumer segment, isolating a cultural context, a potential advertising execution noted among interviewed consumers, emotional, psychological, or social behavior involving a product or service, a new insight into a competitor's hold on the consumer – just a few of the possibilities.

*Among the contributors to this paper:*

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*Books on ethnography:*

*Doing Anthropology In Consumer Research* by Patricia L. Sutherland and Rita M. Denny.

*Ethnography For Marketers – A Guide To Consumer Immersion* by Hy Mariampolski

*The Observational Research Handbook – Understanding How Consumers Live With Your Product* by Bill Abrams