

# Paying more to get more

Focus groups are cheaper. Online chat groups are faster. Online bulletin boards can be done without travel. Why then are marketers and research directors willing to spend the extra money and time to study their consumers through ethnography? Are ethnographic findings deeper and more actionable – and do the efforts justify the extra time, cost and miles?

Here are a few reasons many clients and research practitioners find that they do:

- Ethnography is reality-based. It can show you exactly how consumers live with your product, not just what they say about it or how they remember using it.
- It can reveal unexpressed needs and wants.
- It can discover unexploited consumer benefits.
- It can reveal product problems not even your R&D department knew about.
- It can show you how, when, why and where people shop for your brands – and how they perceive it compared to competitive products.
- It can show you who in the family actually uses your product and uncover a whole new potential demographic target.
- It takes advantage of consumers' experience with the category and their hands-on creativity as they demonstrate their ideas for new products and product improvements.
- It can test new products in a real context.
- It can reveal advertising execution ideas that derive directly from consumer experience.
- It can help you form a better relationship with your consumers, based on an intimate knowledge of their lifestyles.

Is ethnography worth the higher cost?

## Selective memory

Ethnography works differently from other forms of qualitative research. It doesn't depend on the consumer's selective memory of the product experience. Ethnography is where the action takes place, on-site, watching, recording and probing while consumers actually use and react to your product. Nothing is missed. Not the special ways your product is used, nor the mistakes consumers make with it. The real relationship between your consumer, your product and the competitive sort that exists uniquely in each home is right there, before your eyes.

Ethnographers can be there at the time your product is customarily used. At 6 a.m. 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



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family members use their free time. At bedtime to observe a woman applying a night cream. Ethnography is right there to record the crucial moment or moments of the product experience.

Moreover, ethnography explores the whole product experience – how brands fit in and relate to the consumer’s life. What place does your product have in the kitchen, the bathroom, the home office or the car? What hidden clues does it convey about itself? How does your product impact family life, day-to-day routines, consumers’ sense of who they are?

Because ethnography takes place on familiar ground – the consumer’s own turf: their home, their car, their office – responses can be more spontaneous and less guarded than in an unfamiliar facility. They have no sense of being on stage or being judged by their peers.

Ethnographers work differently than moderators. While leadership and control are necessary in other forms of qualitative research, ethnographers are chosen for their ability to enter easily into the lives of the people they interview, to encourage intimate personal revelations. They become the consumer’s instant best friend. Often, consumers will take the lead in an interview, leading the ethnographer into unexpected insights.

### **Everyday lives**

Some examples are in order, culled from our firm’s experience videotaping and interviewing consumers as they use products and services in their everyday lives:

#### **A product problem discovered and fixed**

During a study of users of hearing-aid batteries, we visited an older woman in her home and asked her to show us how she inserted a new battery into her hearing aid. She had no trouble inserting it, but the short paper tab on the battery had to be removed completely before the battery could work. She tried to pull off the tab for 10 minutes, and then ended up with half of it still on the battery. “It won’t go if you leave any of it on,” she said. Noticing that this happened to a few other people we interviewed, we made a simple suggestion to the battery maker: extend the tab. It did, and the battery is now demonstrably easier to insert.

#### **A new positioning discovered at the dinner table**

A new line extension of a familiar packaged side dish wasn’t doing too well in the marketplace. We visited home of consumers who had bought the line extension and watched while they served it at dinnertime. A funny thing happened on the way to the mouth. We noticed that while the adults were eating the new product as a side dish along with the meat, the teens ate the line extension first, and then went back for seconds before they even touched their meat. A typical aha moment!

We suggested the client should consider positioning the product to families with teenagers as a main course. After digging back into a quantitative study that showed the line extension did better with families with teens, the company tested the new positioning and went on to reintroduce the product as a main course to these families – and gained an almost immediate sales uptick.

#### **An advertising execution right out of consumer experience**

A study of young people’s use of disposable cameras (before the days of the cell phone camera) revealed that many shared the camera among a small group of friends. Among the group-camera users we videotaped, we recorded college girls shooting a sleeping student in the dorm. Our research became the basis for a highly successful TV campaign in which young camera users passed along their camera from one student to the other. Each commercial ended with someone taking an embarrassing photo of a sleeping person.

#### **A shopper who couldn’t find the product**

During in-store ethnography for a toothbrush manufacturer, with our hidden camera opposite the toothbrush shelves, we watched shoppers spend more time there than at most other shelves in the store. One woman spent seven minutes looking for a brush she never found. We watched on our monitor as she walked away empty-handed – in fact clutching her hands in frustration. The problem was clear. Our client’s product needed bigger, bolder visibility and a better-organized rack system to display the various toothbrush offerings.

#### **A market differentiated**

A food manufacturer wanted to know how the lifestyles in the Northeast and the Northwest impacted the perception of its product. We explored the habitats and prejudices of consumers in the Seattle and Boston areas. Our ethnographies discovered that many Seattle-area consumers were highly cognizant of organic foods and could define organic accurately. They bought organic foods whenever possible. It was an ingrained part of their lifestyles. Many Boston-area consumers, on the other hand, were confused about the difference between organic and natural, and some tended to think that organic foods might be a little dangerous to buy and eat. The client was able to segment its product line accordingly.

#### **Wrinkled noses and a small formula change**

Videotapes of consumers using a bathroom cleanser showed them wrinkling their noses when they opened the bottle and used the product. Later they were questioned about this reaction. Consumers explained that the product’s harsh, acidic smell when they opened it made them think the cleanser would be unsafe to use in a bathroom frequented by children. Because the product truly was safe, it was a simple matter to add a pleasing aroma that modified the harshness.

#### **A new use for a hand and body lotion**

Traditionally, women use body lotion either to prevent skin damage or to repair it. We found another use. Watching them apply the product in their homes, many women seemed unwilling to stop rubbing it into their hands and legs. When we probed to find out why, they told us they use the lotion to relax. Something they did for themselves, away from others and their obligations. It was the emotional benefit usually offered in connection with bath salts – translated by our respondents to a hand-and-body lotion.

#### **Be verified**

As these examples have shown, ethnography can give marketers a depth of understanding that is often representative of a consumer segment. While these insights are indeed valuable and useful, we always counsel clients to verify any findings using quantitative research before acting on them. |Q