

THE LIMITS OF MARKET-RESEARCH METHODS



for, which is often next to impossible in this rapidly changing consumer landscape. Carl Sagan once said, “Cameras help us answer the questions we are too stupid to ask,” and thank God. With a skillful video-ethnography at the ready, we can actually uncover unanticipated insights. So with all the ethnography projects populating client-research plans these days, thorny target insight questions should be a thing of the past, right?

STUDY UP: Ethnography Is Often Misused. Here’s How to Use It Effectively to Get the Most Out of It

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WITH RAPID CULTURAL transformation happening all around us, one headline has been largely missed:

People Are Getting Harder to Understand (and You Thought it Was Just Your Spouse!).

While much has been written about shifts in the way people consume cultural content (from a “push” to a “pull” model, from monologue to conversation, from mass to niche channels), much less has been made of corresponding shifts in the way we express ourselves, and what that means for research.

And the fact is that the hordes of people who keep the networks on mute while they update their Facebook pages and IM their kids/colleagues/life coaches pose new dilemmas for research, as well as for creative and media. They’ve got screen names and “favorites” and avatars and “personal brands” and public blogs that differ from their private blogs (both of which they hope

to publish some day). There are simply more layers to this onion now, for all of us. The wider culture has changed. What used to be called self-presentation is now better understood as self-representation.

MULTIPLE PERSONALITIES

All of this means that people are not just harder to reach, but harder to understand. What’s available on the surface of things -- in conversation and interviews -- is sometimes richer than what preceded it, but it is also far more polished, self-conscious and potentially misleading. It’s not that people are lying to us in focus groups or in-depth interviews. On the contrary, they’re trying to help us, and that’s where the trouble starts. They’re trying to figure out what it is we need to know and give us the right answer. But if someone has different profiles posted on MySpace, Match.com and Wikipedia, which one are they going to share with you during the IDI, and what else are you missing?

In this environment, ethnography is more vital than ever in helping marketers understand what’s really going on in the subcultures where brands live, flourish, fade and regenerate. The method is ideally suited to shine a bright light on the gaps between what people say and what they actually do, capturing experience in action.

What’s more, it relieves us of the imperative to know exactly what we’re looking

TIME TO TAKE STOCK

Not so fast. While ethnography as a marketing tool has acquired great currency during the past 10 years or so, too often its results are somehow disappointing. The time has come to take stock of how ethnography is

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used and misused, and learn how to get full value from it when it’s done correctly.

First, let’s be clear about what it is. Ethnography is the study of culture. Not individuals (psychology) or populations (demography) or nations (politics/history) or trends (cool-hunting). And why should we care about culture? Think of it as the basic software we all need to navigate the world -- the operating systems that we carry around in our heads and use without really being aware that we’re doing any such thing.

Luckily it isn’t necessary to bury our

noses in Claude Levi-Strauss in order to grasp the fundamentals of the method: participant observation. It's an oxymoron at first glance, like many other powerful marketing ideas ("daily special" and "jumbo shrimp" come immediately to mind). But both halves of that phrase are hugely important if the method is to yield results, and I'd bet that much of what goes wrong with applied ethnography today boils down to an overemphasis on one or the other, at the expense of an integrated approach.

Let's start with observation. If we're going to get beyond what people say and find out what they actually do, then we've got to watch them doing it when they are in the flux of daily life. We must observe as they navigate hundreds of customer journeys, tagging along as purchase decisions are born, supported, interrupted, regretted, savored, repeated, rationalized, revised, retold and mythologized.

BEHIND THE SCENES

The trouble is, lots of observational research basically stops right here. We've observed the target in their natural habitat! We've recorded their rituals! We've coded their video diaries! But observation alone is dangerously inadequate. To see is not always to understand. Cultures need prodding to reveal themselves, and it's not the type of prodding typically found in moderators' guides, where the goal is to get the consumer to answer our questions.

Which brings us to participation. Instead of checking off boxes on our agenda, ethnological prodding is designed to help us understand what questions interest them, and it's tough to do well.

And yet participation on its own is just as problematic as observation. Filming an interview or conducting an interview in someone's home -- these techniques often fly under the flag of ethnography, but fall short of the actual method. They can be good at cataloging explicit values, rational structures and top-of-mind associations, but often shed little light on what lies be-

low the surface.

COMPETING VALUE SYSTEMS

Here's an example many may recognize: If you asked a group of successful, ambitious marketers to select from a list of values that define who they are and what they care about, a solid majority would likely put "family" at or near the top of that list. If you then asked their spouses or kids whether they would agree with that prioritization, you might get a different answer. It's not that the executives are lying; on the contrary, they are expressing something true about their value systems. But there is a bigger picture here: a set of competing value systems, a collection of behaviors and rewards that create tension with those values -- in fact, a complex web of cultural values and meaning -- that will never come to light if all we do is listen to people's explicit statements.

The trick is to combine observation with skilled participation ... and voilà: The insights begin to flow. Famous Footwear has used the method to good effect in developing a deep target profile for busy moms -- a group much discussed but often thinly understood (They're moms! They're busy! They need time for themselves! So what else is new?). But understanding them as a subculture with distinct values, identity structures, tensions and motivations opens up fresh ways to communicate. Similarly, DHL turned to ethnography to develop a target profile for small/mid-market shippers -- on the surface, an infinitely diverse group, but with surprising commonalities underneath. Getting to the core of decision-makers and distilling a personality type from patterns of emotion and behavior creates insights for both creative and media in a way that is tough to do with more conventional methods alone.

And it's not the fault of moderators or research subjects; it's about the limits of direct Q&A. Unfortunately, many of our market-research methods ask silly questions of consumers, hoping to get direct answers about things like unmet needs, deep moti-

vations, embedded value systems, evolving tastes and key influences in decision-making -- all critically important to a working knowledge of the target, but all driven by less than fully conscious levels of our experience.

All too often we are hoping to find an insight buried somewhere in a pile of consensus statements, rationalizations and recycled opinions.

So how do we do better? First, figure out what type of question it is we need to answer. Questions such as how many, how often, when/where/what, with whom, for how long, in what sequence -- these questions can be efficiently answered with traditional research methods. But questions about emotion, unconscious motivation, identity -- the why questions -- call for something different. Our best shot at understanding what makes people tick, getting under their skins and into their heads, is to mix observation with skilled participation -- ethnography. But realize that it's more important now than it was even five or 10 years ago to get your ethnography right, lest our research results -- and consequently our brands -- end up on the wrong end of a YouTube clip.

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