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 its utilitarian functionality 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 beers in bars; visiting homes and offices; 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 engaged 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. Plurking 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. 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 clear 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. 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 clear up commanded our wallets – all because we began paying attention to what consumers were really doing and not just saying they did.

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 insight that have profitable impact on the client’s business.

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