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Customer close-up: What insight is ethnography delivering?

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As organisations look for increasingly intimate ways to connect with their customers, the use of ethnography as a research method has gained momentum. Verity Gough explores case study examples of how it is offering businesses a unique insight into the lives of their customers.



By Verity Gough, staff writer

You can certainly appreciate the appeal of social anthropologists and ethnographers to the marketing world - not only can they provide deeper and more revealing research than quantitative methods, but they also can bring up new ideas and solutions about how companies can approach their customers to further improve their experience of a brand.

“Organisations are realising that it’s not just about the numbers,” explains Dr Saravjit Rihal from London-based research company, Amber Light. “Ethnography looks at the nature of the problem, how it impacts people’s lives, rather than how many people have it and because it

is in context, people are more likely to let their guard down and tell you how they really behave.”

The insights thrown up by ethnography can completely alter the way in which an organisation markets its products to customers and can even change how it communicates within its own ranks.

“Some companies become siloed,” says Paul O’Brien, founder of Gutsy, an ethnographic company specialising in film-based research. “They have to understand how to communicate within their own structure, and often the insight department will be tasked with trying to get across to the other employees what is happening with the customer. Film is a great way to do that – it’s very engaging, it explains things clearly and people relate well to it as a form of communication.”

In Gutsy’s case, having a background in brand and marketing also helps when it comes to providing additional research for a client. For example, while working on a project for DaimlerChrysler UK, Gutsy was asked to speak to some of the leading showroom sales teams to find out what made them so effective, the results of which were to be used for staff training. What started out as basic research evolved into a full-length commercial documentary which was eventually screened in a local cinema.

Proving and disproving the theory

For some companies, ethnography provides an opportunity to confirm what they already knew. But in other cases it can do the complete opposite. US-based ethnographers Portigal Consulting recently undertook a project for Shure, a wireless microphone system manufacturer based in the US which was developing new technology for installing their product into auditoriums and churches. The company believed that the new technology would help people because it would be quick to set up and enable the installers to get in, do the job and get out.

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"In fact when we talked to people about this technology and how it was going to be different, we didn't put the word 'fast' into people's mouths," says Steve Portigal.

"We let them talk about it and what they came back to us with was 'smart' – it was about reducing errors. This thing had lots of automatic guts in it therefore it would do it right and do it right the first time which would save them from having to go back and correct them."

The company realised that they needed to market the product on being smart, not speedy. "It was all about the marketing at that point, the product was fixed and they weren't going to redevelop it, they just wanted to learn how to talk to people about this product, and discover how it could provide value to them."

Similarly, Gutsy have recently worked with energy providers Eon, who were keen to prove the theory that small, local businesses have greater insights into their community and are a good source of word of mouth marketing: keep the high street happy and referrals will follow. "We ended up in a small village talking to businesses about how they choose energy providers and how they deal with the sales tactics. They told us lots of fascinating stories about how they switch and how they communicate with each other about it. It was nice to prove the theory right," says O'Brien.

A personal service

The one thing that most ethnographers agree on is that they have their own way of conducting the research. "It's crucial that the client comes through the process with us," says Portigal. "It gives them that exposure to the lives of real people and allows them that chance to participate while we structure it, lead it, analyse it and then deliver it back to them."

Portigal accepts that while there needs to be conditions, such as a ban on any logos being worn by the

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accompanying client, and an agreement to undertake some basic workshop training to introduce them to the principles of field work, he is happy to bring along a member of the client's team. "It's the 80/20 rule: we ask 80% questions, you ask 20%. It takes them a couple of practices and then I think they can make a really valuable contribution."

However, for O'Brien, the very thought of having a non-team member accompany out in the field is a non-issue. "We simply don't believe in it," he says. "The fewer people, the better. If you start crowding a room out, how is the participant going to feel comfortable? In fact, we have even lost jobs over it."

Finally, when it comes to actually delivering the results of an ethnography project, the information, whether it is film, photographic evidence or conversation transcripts, is presented as a 'story' to the client. It is at this point that patterns of behaviour or themes are identified and brought into the mix. Guided by the ethnographers, companies can then decide on the next step. "If we have identified a problem, we will provide alternative ways to solve it, or we will present our observations and suggest a particular business opportunity that can arise from it, or it can simply prompt further research," says Rihal.

With more and more organisations realising the power of ethnography, it looks set to become a more permanent part of the marketing mix, and the variety of companies exploring this method is testament to that. While Amber Light's clients are predominantly telcoms and technology providers, Gutsy's filmic approach appears to be attracting a wider spread. "It definitely appears to be getting more popular," reflects O'Brien. "We worked with [home improvement retailer] B&Q and Nestlé last year, as well as ongoing projects with American Express and Eon and only last week we got a call off the NHS."

Portigal agrees: "Companies seem to want to be reaching out to their customers more, to make new things for them, become more relevant - ethnography offers the opportunity to get fresh and in-depth customer insight. There is so much more beneath the surface, and those who fail to look deeper are going to miss out."

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Ethnography case study

As part of a strategy to “get into the living room”, a computer manufacturer had prototyped a portable home projector with a built-in DVD player and speakers. They posited this as an entry-level home theater product, to be used for occasional viewing (movies, sporting events, etc.). At this early stage of development, they needed to understand how and why this product might appeal to home users, what barriers they would have to overcome, technical performance expectations, and price targets.

Portigal Consulting took this prototype into homes, conducting two-hour sessions where current home entertainment behaviour was explored and then demonstrated the prototype, looking for an evaluation of the prototype but also projecting into the future and consider their usage of a productised version.

This prototype was an ugly, undesigned box using whatever engineering components were available. It offered no brand, no aesthetic, and no user-interface experience. But it delivered an effective home-theater experience, while bearing no resemblance to an actual product. Interestingly, its low level of refinement helped the participants to project their own interests and desires, unconstrained by the actual prototype itself.

There were many insights from this research. In terms of current behavior, Portigal Consulting found that viewing habits segmented into key types (with most households doing them all, but preferring only one or two):

Event (sports, family viewing, may include rituals such as turning off lights or lighting candles).

Regular TV shows (always watch or record every week).

Hunt – turn the TV on, flip to find something to watch, otherwise turn it off.

Wallpaper – the TV is always on, viewing may start and then stop, almost at random to

integrate with other tasks.

Based on the feedback from the research, the company was able to refine their prototype, and armed with some strategic insights about positioning and price, it was redesigned and engineered, and finally launched the next year.

Source: Steve Portigal, founder, Portigal Consulting.

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