Business ethnography and the discipline of anthropology

Ethnographic research on consumers is booming. Marketing research firms that specialize in it abound. Major corporations like General Motors and Microsoft have ethnographers on staff. And well-known advertising agencies like BBDO and Ogilvy & Mather have departments that include or are headed by anthropologists.

With so much ethnography practiced in the marketing and advertising industries, it is disappointing that the technique is often misrepresented and misused.

Ethnography is the description of people's behavior and attitudes in natural settings - where they live, work, play and shop. For the vast majority of cultural anthropologists, ethnography is the principal method they use to gather data. Accomplished with a technique called participant observation over an extended period in the "field," ethnography entails more than simple description. It begins with systematic, intentionally naïve observation and inquiry, but it is informed by ideas about human culture: symbols, codes, myths, rituals, beliefs, values, rules for social interaction, and con-

ceptual categories and perceptions. Professional training provides anthropologists with the techniques to record what they see and hear as well as the analytical tools and scholarship that enable them to design their studies and interpret their findings.

Business ethnography that does not benefit from the guidance of professionally-trained anthropologists is typically in-depth, psychologically-driven interviewing in natural settings with some attention given to the physical environment, such as home pantry checks, for example. Although industry time and budgetary constraints do not allow for extended time in the field, many so-called ethnographic interviews occur over a 90-minute period, too brief for close environmental observation and questioning. (Three to four hours per ethnographic observation and interview is far more productive.)

Some research techniques labeled as ethnography do not even include ethnographers on site. There are virtual online ethnographies that consist of diaries and blogs written by consumers and digital ethnographies that provide con-

sumers with recording equipment and instructions to focus on what they feel is important in their brand experience. Diaries, blogs and first-person digital photography are useful for recording attitudes and behavior from a personal perspective, but reliance on what BBDO anthropologist Timothy Malefyt calls techno-methodologies is not a substitute for the penetrating insights that can be delivered by anthropologically-informed ethnography.

Fundamental questions

Anthropologists ask fundamental questions that can be revelatory when applied to consumer attitudes and behavior. For example, in their book *Doing Anthropology in Consumer Research*, anthropologists Patricia Sunderland and Rita Denny pose the question, "What is coffee?" They note that by stepping back

and making this query naïvely, one can see that coffee is revealed to be a beverage with multiple connotations about fashion, relaxation, strength, tradition versus modernity and much more.

To further understand the difference between ethnography-lite and ethnography that incorporates the discipline of anthropology, consider the following examples of questions and observations that a trained ethnographer would include in two different research projects.

In a study that focuses on the ways that doctors and their office staff interact with patients, a qualified ethnographer would ask these questions:

- What are the culturally-based definitions of and beliefs about illness, diagnosis, treatment and adherence to medically-prescribed regimens?
- How do culturally-defined status and roles impact interactions between doctors and patients and between support staff and patients?
- What hidden meanings exist in the language used in interactions?

- What unspoken messages are unveiled by observing body language and facial expressions?
- Are there rituals surrounding medicine use and non-use, e.g., non-adherence?
- Are there transformative experiences that professionals and patients have when they are successful or unsuccessful with treatments?
- What social and family factors impact adherence?
- Are there keys to understanding adherence by speaking to members of adherence and non-adherence "tribes"?

In a study on how consumers think about and use home printers, a bona fide ethnographer would ask:

- What are the meanings and processes of printing in their most elemental senses, as if the ethnographer had never seen a printer?
- Can we understand the symbolism of printing by exploring how respondents classify non-printed versus printed matter?

Anthropologists use a construct called binary opposition:

Binary oppositions

Non-Printed Matter		Printed Matter
Intangible	←→	Tangible
Ephemeral	←→	Lasting
Public	←→	Private
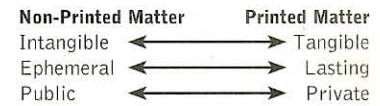
- What are the consumer myths, stories and beliefs about printing versus not printing and about different brands of printers?
- How do printing rituals serve as rites of passage that transform consumers from one state of being into another?
- Are people who print and save hard copies different in a "tribal" way from people who see printing as antiquated and wasteful?
- Are there social or business situations that demand or deny printing choices and, if so, why?

These questions and observations would undoubtedly enrich new-product development and marketing communications, helping shape product design, brand positioning and advertising content. Yet most of these lines of inquiry would not be generated by a researcher uninformed by the discipline of anthropology. As a result, an ethnography-lite approach would miss opportunities for marketers that anthropologically-informed ethnography would reveal.

Profound and valuable

A researcher need not possess a Ph.D in anthropology to conduct quality ethnography. However, knowledge and application of the design, concepts and, as Maria Gracia Inglessis notes, the "procedural rigor" of anthropology will produce more profound and valuable marketing and communications insights. | Q

References
Inglessis, Maria Gracia. "For Marketers or for Scholars?" *Quirk's Marketing Research Review*, Dec. 2006.

Malefyt, Timothy deWaal. "Understanding the Rise of Consumer Ethnography: Branding Techno-Methodologies in the New Economy." *American Anthropologist* (forthcoming).

Sunderland, Patricia L. and Rita M. Denny. *Doing Anthropology in Consumer Research*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2007.