

Living a Qualitative Lifestyle

I get paid to meet up with people I don't know. I set up these rendezvous at bars and restaurants, coffee shops and boutiques, and sometimes at people's homes. These brief encounters give me amazing insight into people. And they should: I am an in-field qualitative researcher.

Encounters with reality

Recently, my encounters changed my team's and my client's assumptions about a new product that bridges the world between personal accessory and technology device. The change started during a meeting with a 35 year-old male (an early adopter of technology) at the fine jewelry department at Bloomingdale's. This tech-savvy guy didn't shop with a list of specs or buy his "only brand" as he'd told me in our previous conversations. He started the way I had expected; he picked up and carefully reviewed all of the products. That continued until one sparkled and glittered in just the right way. I could see it in his eyes; he'd found the *right* one. He'd fallen in love. He bought with his heart. And he loves the product he bought.

Almost all of the men I met with on this series of shop-alongs were similarly drawn to something heart-driven during this point in the purchase cycle. When they saw the product—the right product—what they'd said earlier didn't matter.

This ethnographic insight revealed potential purchase drivers and pitfalls at the point of purchase—some of which my client could address

before a consumer enters a store. From these shopping trips my team created a check list of possible communications and design areas that would reinforce the new product and its brand before the point of purchase.

Stealing a play out of the anthropology playbook

Our ethnographic approach added richness and complexity that traditional research methods do

"Most of our assumptions have outlived their usefulness."

– Media Scholar Marshall McLuhan

not always reveal. For researchers accustomed to quantitative surveys and conversations viewed through one-way glass, there is something profound about observing respondents in their natural habitats, where they live, work and play.

In my experience, respondents are often surprised at the end of a shop-along when we play back things they said in the initial survey or pre-shopping interview. I've heard "Wow, I did say that, didn't I?" in one form or another many times.

In traditional forms of qualitative and quantitative research contradictions like this rarely surface.

These respondents are realizing their actual behavior during the shopping experience didn't line up with what they said they would do when thinking about it ahead of time in a more detached, purely cognitive way. That's why it's so valuable to do an ethnographic check as a part of the fact base for making customer and marketing decisions: New product launches, customer experience design/redesign, in-store marketing communications, floor staff sales training, etc.

While it doesn't use the usual playbook, ethnographic research is still very much research. The participants are carefully recruited and each encounter is well documented. There is also far more to this work than purposeful observation. A full cycle with a respondent typically includes an initial survey, a pre-shopping interview, communication during the experience, an immediate post-shopping debrief and at least one follow up conversation.

Ethnographic explorations of customers like this custom shop-along project give us a view of customers in their real worlds where they are influenced by their senses (sights, smells, sounds,) as well as by their interactions with people (and, in some situations, devices and machines). The results add context to **why** they prefer one product over another, or choose to pay more for a brand, or simply to understand what factors of brand loyalty ring true at the cash register. The goal is to suspend our assumptions at minimum, but also to

add richness and complexity to our understanding of customers. Often our ethnographic work goes beyond just adding richness but actually validates our traditional research findings.

Hansa pulls together the best of quantitative and qualitative

We all know, but sometimes we forget—we must view every point in the purchase cycle to gain a full understanding of how customers actually make their decisions and how they feel about those decisions afterward.

Consider getting a full-picture review of your customers. Are you making assumptions? Can you include both deep quantitative analyses and deep ethnographic analyses of respondents to better understand them? Combining different research methods often is the best way to get the full story. For example, consider **following** a quantitative survey focused on behaviors and attitudes with deep qualitative research to test assumptions and further understand **why** customers are motivated.

If you would like to discuss this article with the author, please feel free to contact Julie by email at jasp@hansagcr.com.

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We pride ourselves on our ability to truly understand the voice of the customer and translate that voice into winning strategies for brand development, marketing communications, customer relationship enhancement, and product/service innovation.