

Worth A Thousand Words—Online Ethnography

By Jerry W. Thomas

It has been said and repeated millions of times that “a picture is worth a thousand words.” The truth of this old proverb is part of the underpinnings of ethnography (or observational research), and suggests that “seeing” reveals what words alone cannot describe.

Traditional ethnography, as applied to marketing research, involves the analyst spending time observing the consumer in her natural lair, so to speak, as she goes about buying and using a product or service. But ethnography doesn’t stop there. The observation of target consumers is almost always accompanied by depth interviews, during or after the observation phase. So, ethnography is actually a combination of a traditional qualitative technique (depth interviews) with a new twist (some type of observation).

In traditional ethnography, the observation might be done in person (that is, a real live human being spends hours or days with the respondent observing and studying his behavior) or via some type of installed video camera. A camera crew, for example, might install a video camera in a subject’s kitchen or laundry room so every action in that room is recorded. As the analyst observes the respondent’s behavior, he notes and records unexpected (as well as expected) behavior, then reviews this behavior with the respondents in a depth interview. So again, it is the merging of actual behavior with the participant’s explanation of that behavior that forms the “raw data” that serves as the foundation of analysis.

The advantages of traditional ethnography are well known. It is a powerful way to study and explain human behavior. However, it also has serious disadvantages: It is slow and



labor-intensive. Projects often can take months to complete. The observer’s physical presence might cause the subject to behave in atypical or abnormal ways. It is very expensive to personally visit people in their homes or workplaces, especially if the observational period is more than a few hours or the distance from respondent to respondent is great. Because of the intrusiveness of personal observation, many people are reluctant to participate, and this makes it difficult to recruit a representative sample of consumers. The cost of personal visits also tends to restrict the geographic areas sampled to no more than two or three major urban areas (with good airport service).

A new approach that overcomes some of the disadvantages of traditional ethnography is “online ethnography.” First, a sample that is representative of the target market is pulled, typically from an online panel. One of the advantages here is that panel members are accustomed to surveys and therefore are more likely to participate than the average man or woman on the street. Also, since no one is visiting their home or office, a higher share of potential subjects will agree to participate, which creates a more representative sample.

Beyond the sampling advantages, another benefit of this approach is that the online environment promotes a sense of anonymity and safety, which encourages a high level of self-disclosure. In the online environment, participants feel comfortable expressing their feelings. With guidance from experienced moderators, respondents can explore and describe all the behaviors, routines, thoughts, feelings, and experiences they believe are most relevant to their purchasing decisions.

The respondents' normal routines are not disrupted. They can provide their detailed responses at a time of their convenience and over a span of several days (or sometimes weeks). This expanse of time also gives the respondents an opportunity to reflect on the questions posed and give detailed descriptions of their thoughts, feelings and experiences.

So, how does "online ethnography" work? How is it conducted? The exact design of the project and its execution depends upon the product or service category and the objectives of the research. As a general rule, some or all of the following steps are involved:

- **Respondents might be asked to keep diaries** (either online or offline) to record their behaviors, routines, thoughts, and observations related to the purposes of the study.
- **Participants might be asked to take digital pictures** related to the focus of the study (it could be photos of their refrigerators, pantries, backyards, or bedrooms). And with the inclusion digital cameras in smart phones and tablets, photos are relatively easy for most people to take and send (with the moderator subsequently uploading the pictures for discussion).
- **One member of the household could be asked to take photos or videos** of other members of the household at certain times or to record specific behaviors, events, etc.
- **Participants' stories or explanations typically accompany the photos**, telling us what is in the picture, who is in the picture, what is happening, and perhaps even what it means to the respondent.
- **Projective techniques can be employed** as well (for example, respondents might search and select online photos

or be instructed to take photos that represent the personality of a brand, or bring to mind memories of the brand).

Typically, the digital photos or videos are sent via email to the moderator for review and uploading to the online depth interview. The diaries and photos are studied and then used as stimulus in conducting the follow-up online "depth" interviews. These are typically described as "time-extended" depth interviews since the project unfolds over a period of several days (five to 10 days, but longer time periods are possible). In fact, the term "time-extended" should be used to describe the whole online ethnography process. Indeed, this is one of the major advantages of the method: The respondent's concentration on a topic for a period of several days sensitizes her to the subject and her own feelings and motives related to the topic.

Example Online Ethnography Project

An online ethnographic project was conducted by Decision Analyst on health and beauty products among women and men from the U.S., U.K. and France. All participants were medium to heavy users of skin-care products.

Study Methodology

- Respondents were asked to take **digital pictures of their skin care** and other health and beauty products at their normal storage place. They were asked to accompany the pictures with stories of "what's in the pictures."
- Participants were instructed to record **daily diary entries** of their morning/evening routines when using health and beauty products.
- They were asked **to provide detailed descriptions** of their experiences from a regular shopping occasion for health and beauty products.
- Respondents also kept a **log of advertising** they noticed related to health and beauty.
- Follow-up **depth interviews** focused on the following types of questions: How do you define beauty? What motivates your interest in skin beauty? How would you feel if your favorite skin-care lotion should vanish from the

market place? How much time do you spend daily caring for your skin? What are your favorite brands, and why?

Some comments and pictures from one participant, Sally, in Chicago:

"Obviously my medicine cabinet is filled with a variety of products at various price points. I admit that I like to try the high-end brands but I'm on a budget and also take advantage of the less pricey products one finds at drugstores and stores like Body Shop. So that's why Creme de la Mer is elbowing for room with Olay, and Kinerase is cheek-and-jowl with Ponds."



Medicine Cabinet Filled with Health & Beauty Products

"Once a day first thing in the morning, I feel it is necessary to remove excess oil from my face with either water or soap and water. If I use only water, I usually do not use moisturiser. If I use soap, my cheeks and the area around my mouth feel very dry, so I need to use a little moisturiser in the morning only. During the day I have to dab my face with a napkin (I find the Starbucks brown napkins work best) usually because it soaks up the excess oils better than a tissue. If I don't dab my face several times a day starting at about 11 a.m., by the end of the day I feel like I have enough oil on my face to fry an egg!"



Drawer of Products Used Less Often

After the Data Collection

Once all of the photos, diaries, stories and interview transcripts are finished, the next step is the analysis, which is the most time-consuming and brain-intensive part of the process. There are no shortcuts. The moderator must comb and re-comb through all of the raw data (photos, videos, diaries, transcripts) and try to understand what it all means. Certainly, some understanding of cultural anthropology is helpful to the analyst, as is some knowledge of psychology, sociology, economics, history, etc. The most important background, however, is knowledge of the target industry, the product category and previous experience with marketing and marketing research related to the product or service. If all of these knowledge sets can be integrated, the analysis is apt to be much better than an analysis based on a single academic discipline.

How does the analyst analyze the raw data, reach sound conclusions and make insightful marketing recommendations? First, she has to pretend she just arrived on Earth from a distant galaxy so she can see everything through the fresh, unbiased eyes of a total stranger. She must search for the obvious, and very often this is the most difficult to perceive. Our culture is the ocean we live in, and just as fish are not aware of the ocean, we are often blind to the most obvious aspects of our own culture. The analyst, then, must see the obvious, document it and incorporate it into the final analysis. Second, the analyst must search for the invisible. What is missing? What was not shown? What was not talked about? What was avoided or dodged? Why was the "missing" overlooked or avoided? Answers to these questions can be very revealing.

In addition, what choice of words was used to describe the product or experience of using the product? Words are revealing if you see them with fresh eyes and think about them deeply. Why does our culture say "fall in love" instead of "get in love?" The words "fall in love" tell us something about our culture's beliefs about love (that it is sudden, that it is unplanned, that it is accidental, that one is likely to lose control).

What do the digital photos tell us? Are the pictures consistent with the stated behavior and reasons? If pictures and words tell a different story, why is this and what does it reveal? Are the results consistent with other research? If not, why? What could possibly explain the differences?

What metaphors, associations and images are linked to the category and to brands within the category? For example, our culture often uses “chick” or “chicken” or “hen” as a metaphor for women. Why is this? What does the chicken metaphor tell us about women? Or, perhaps, what does it reveal about men?

Cultural anthropology is traditionally associated with the analysis of symbolism and ritual, and these concepts are important analytical tools for the qualitative researcher.

What are the symbolic values associated with your product or service?

For example, a dress has functional values (i.e., it protects from the cold and it prevents sunburn), but a dress also has symbolic value. A dress says something about our culture's beliefs related to nakedness. A dress says something to the world about who we are, how much money we have, what groups we belong to (tribal affiliation), where we rank in the pecking order, what impressions we want to project, whether we are looking for a mate, and so on. It's always important to understand the symbolic values of a product or service. Symbolism is not new to the human race. Look at flint spear points or flint axes dating back several hundred thousand years. These were not merely functional objects; they were often magnificent works of art. Our ancestors who created them were attempting to say things beyond mere function.

Another dimension of symbolism is ritual, and it's likely that rites and rituals have been with us for hundreds of thousands of years. Rituals are woven into the fabric of our

life, and many times we are not even aware of them. We are all aware of religious rituals, and wedding rituals, but what about the rituals that govern how we eat, how we greet, and how we consume? Rituals have meaning and purpose. What rituals are linked to your product, and what are the symbolic meanings of those rituals? Symbolism is absolutely essential to good qualitative analysis. If you don't understand the symbolic values, your analysis is only skimming the surface.

The most important part of the analysis, however, is incorporating the business, marketing and competitive issues into the investigation. This is why the marketing and research background is so important for the analyst. How are the different brands perceived, and what imagery is associated with each brand? What motives drive the product category, and what underlying motivations drive each brand in the category? How do the products in the category compare, and what role does pricing play? Given all of this, what are the positioning options for the brand, the key advertising themes, and the critical marketing variables to achieve success?

Online ethnography offers an economical and practical way to dig deeply into the “DNA” of a brand and identify potential marketing strategies. The words tell us much, but it is the pictures that speak to us at a deeper level and help prove that the old saying about a picture's worth is still true. A picture is worth more than a thousand words: It is the basis of insight into the consumer's mind.

About the Author

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Decision Analyst is a global marketing research and analytical consulting firm. The company specializes in advertising testing, strategy research, new products research, and advanced modeling for marketing-decision optimization.