01-Mariampolski-4671.qxd 5/2/2005 3:39 PM Page 3

1

Introducing Ethnography to Marketers

Drawn from nearly a century of anthropological and sociological studies, ethnographic research brings marketers, designers, and planners as close to the consumer as possible in order to solve important business problems. Site visits and observational encounters with consumers in their accustomed habitats are the core component of marketing ethnography. They help corporate research managers and their internal colleagues acquire insights into consumers' needs and wishes by decoding behaviors observed and opinions expressed during direct contact with consumers in their natural environments. Both formal and spontaneous interactions with consumers form the underlying data of marketing ethnography.

Ethnography is effectively used in marketing when little is known about a targeted market or when fresh insights are desired about a segment or consumer-related behavior. Received facts about the marketplace have a very short effective life. Change is ubiquitous in contemporary societies, and, worldwide, citizens are continuously adapting to the advances in technologies, economic structures, and political institutions. Life courses on, and people adjust to new realities about their health, family composition, community roles, and relationship to work and leisure.

This dynamic model of the marketplace suggests that we frequently need to be reintroduced to our customers. Much may have changed since we last settled into truths about them—a new baby has turned night owls into diaper changers; having started a new business, a former employee now prowls through office-supplies superstores.

Multinational and cross-cultural studies are well-suited to ethnographic approaches. Populations are in motion throughout the world, following opportunities for employment and freedom; and the globalization of

01-Mariampolski-4671.qxd 5/2/2005 3:39 PM Page 4

production and consumption proceeds unabated. Consumers everywhere are seizing new opportunities for productivity and lifestyle enhancements. As we attempt to discover new marketplace realities, ethnography becomes a helpful tool for documenting consumer practices, whether these relate to products that they are accustomed to using or first learning to apply.

The categories that call for ethnography tend to be very process intensive, such as home cleaning, personal care, purchase decisions, and food preparation. Alternatively, the category may be interaction focused, such as infant care, sales negotiation, patient–physician relationships, and game playing. This focus on interactivity may involve not only people but also machines, whether they are simple or highly technical; some typical areas are computer navigation, financial transactions, and use of medical devices. Because ethnography concentrates on the natural locations where behavior takes place, these studies are well-suited to environmental and behavioral assessments in retail environments, homes and businesses, and public accommodations such as airports, hospitals, and schools.

Origins

Ethnography was developed at the turn of the 20th century, as scholars began to study social life and institutions on a scientific basis. Indeed, by going to the source and becoming immersed in the life worlds of traditional societies in the Pacific Northwest or the South Seas, such luminaries as Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, Margaret Mead, and Ruth Benedict[1] were influential in promoting an approach that, by now, has investigated every corner of the Earth. The intent of these pioneers was to turn discovery tools used in the natural sciences—direct observation, careful measurement, classification, and critical inquiry—to the study of diverse human societies. Their purpose was not social or (heaven forbid!) commercial intervention. On the contrary, they were seeking fundamental truths about human nature, social affiliation, and the conduct of daily life.

As the ethnographic approach succeeded in gaining adherents, applications of this approach gradually shifted from the study of so-called exotic and primitive people to the analysis of everyday life in distinctly contemporary urban settings. The perspective shifted from a static to a dynamic model of social life. In other words, social groups were looked on not as isolated and unchanging curiosities but as entities caught up in constant cultural shifts through adaptation, diffusion, and conflict. In the work of sociologists and anthropologists such as Herbert Gans (1967), Oscar Lewis

01-Mariampolski-4671.qxd 5/2/2005 3:39 PM Page 5

(1965), and Elliot Liebow (1967) during the 1960s and 1970s, ethnography began to shed light on cultural issues relevant to regional planning and poverty policies. The application of ethnography to contemporary urban studies began with the work of the Chicago School in the 1920s (Wirth, 1928/1956; Zorbaugh, 1929/1976).

The new urban ethnography also recognized that contemporary societies comprise a multiplicity of diverse, sometimes contentious, cultural groups. These collectivities may be linked not only by ties of family and nationhood but also by such characteristics as social class, age, sexual orientation, and consumption patterns.

By the 1980s, ethnographic techniques and related cultural perspectives were increasingly applied to consumer and marketing research. Within the marketing sciences, ethnography evolved as one of a family of tools for gaining insights into consumer roles and for learning about how consciousness and identity are bound into product and brand usage.

At this point, the manner in which ethnographic approaches were applied became markedly different. In the applied research realm, ethnography does not necessarily require becoming a long-term resident in a community, adopting a role, personally interviewing or interacting with numerous residents, and so on. Laurence Wylie's *Village in the Vaucluse* (1976) is an excellent exemplar of the classical approach that brought this sociologist and his family to a southern French town for long periods. Over many years, he was able to chart the transformation of village life as a consequence of industrialization. Kornblum (1974) similarly spent nearly 3 years in a South Chicago community making observations about political sentiments among his working class neighbors.

Classical ethnography requires analytic induction based on the subjective experience of the individual researcher. The applied approach, in contrast, began to rely on teams of researchers making focused observations over relatively short periods of time—often no longer than a few hours for each respondent. The process of analytic induction was transformed to account for relatively discrete spheres of experience, such as shopping in department stores or doing the laundry. Sponsors of ethnographic studies for marketing demanded quick turnaround and rapid assessment of consumer environments.

The reasons for this adaptation were clear. Ethnographic techniques had started to provide the basis for intervention strategies: the groundwork for new product development and strategic marketing. Learning about consumer behavior, emotions, consciousness, and language in relation to brands and product categories offered a point of departure for the marketing adventure. (Hirschmann, 1989; Mariampolski, 1988).

01-Mariampolski-4671.qxd 5/2/2005 3:39 PM Page 6

Moreover, analyzing such issues as the sources of product satisfaction, ease-of-use, points of entry, and the dynamics of influence and susceptibility was not a grand cynical strategy for public manipulation. On the contrary, these insights were intrinsic to new consumer-centered approaches to marketing and product development. Theodore Levitt (1983) insisted that "the purpose of a business is to create and keep a customer." Don Norman (1990) demanded that we concern ourselves with "user needs" and "user friendliness" in designing useful things. The result has been a marketplace in which business tries to anticipate consumer needs, strive for total satisfaction, communicate clear benefits, and, above all, make the buyer a partner in the enterprise. Ethnography became another approach for guaranteeing that the customer's voice is represented when business investments are made.

Contemporary Definition

Ethnography generally has one of two complementary meanings when discussed in a marketing context. The definitions are based on the distinction between ethnography as an intellectual approach or analytical framework and ethnographic methods as a model of applied practice.

THEORY

Ethnography can be taken as a theoretical perspective that focuses on the concept of culture and its relation to observed behavior as the principal analytic tool for classifying and explaining consumer dynamics. In this context, culture is not some reified entity; rather, it is the foundation of a worldview and value system, with both stable and dynamic components, which gives meaning to people's concept of self and their roles in daily life. Culture is a major constituent of the material and intellectual environment that frames personal consciousness, ideals, and aspirations.

The sociocultural perspective on behavioral causation is generally contrasted to psychodynamic perspectives, which emphasize the motives, drives, needs, and impulses that shape behavior in the marketplace. In practice, a comprehensive paradigm for explaining consumer choices should not rest on purely psychological grounds while excluding sociocultural and situational perspectives. Shoppers' impulses may arise in some need state for personal gratification, but these dynamics are mediated by social structures and cultural norms that influence, support, modify, or thwart satisfaction of those drives. Motivations and drives may bring

01-Mariampolski-4671.qxd 5/2/2005 3:39 PM Page 7

customers into the store, but satisfaction will be thwarted if brand image, signage, and merchandising are inconsistent with expectations. This encompassing concept of culture reinforces the holistic insights that qualitative researchers strive to achieve.

METHOD

Ethnography is also understood as a methodological orientation that emphasizes direct contact and observation of the consumer in the natural context of product acquisition and usage. This standard of direct engagement with the "real world" is commonly contrasted with other laboratory-based, probabilistic, and statistical approaches to market analysis, which rely on such techniques as telephone surveys or shopping mall intercepts. Ethnography may also be contrasted to other qualitative techniques such as focus group studies, with which it shares a spirit of consumer engagement without their reliance on synthetically created groups of respondents.

Ethnographic methodology, however, is not entirely hostile toward quantification and is sympathetic toward alternative ways of gaining knowledge. Studies may sometimes include statistical measurement or group interviewing as triangulation and validation techniques.

Ethnography as Qualitative Research

Sometimes also called *field research, observational research,* or *participant observation,* ethnography is the original form of the research tradition that today is categorized as qualitative research.[2] In the constellation of marketing research techniques, its qualitative extremity embraces the more humanistic, naturalistic, creative, and intuitive ways of acquiring knowledge and making sense of the world. In this context, ethnography shares many features with—but can also be strikingly contrasted to—such research approaches as intensive interviewing, focus groups, life history analysis, semiotics, and text analysis. It remains an insurgent tool in marketing research, where qualitative research has been most strongly identified with focus groups since the 1960s. In contrast, academic researchers in sociology, anthropology, and many applied disciplines have taken ethnographic studies to be the exemplar of the qualitative orientation.

The principal features of ethnography as a qualitative approach include some combination of the following orientations to knowledge and practical steps in conducting research—all of which are oriented toward revealing reality from the subject's perspective through the process of induction.

01-Mariampolski-4671.qxd 5/2/2005 3:39 PM Page 8

Engagement. Applied practice is based on intensive face-to-face involvement with the research subjects. Ethnographers tend to disparage the presumption that people can be thoroughly understood by having junior researchers speak to a sampling of consumers over the phone for a half hour, the conversation structured by a strict survey questionnaire and the results compiled by statistical analysis. Each of these steps, they argue, incrementally removes the researcher from the respondent's reality. In contrast, doing as much as possible to engage people in their own terms and their own space is the basis of the ethnographic approach.

Context. Ethnographers place high significance on encountering research subjects in their own environment: the home, neighborhood, workplace, store, and so on. In this respect, this discipline differs from related laboratory-based interviewing and observation approaches. The assumption operative here is that this authentic context represents the highest level of grounded reality as experienced by subjects in their day-to-day lives.

Subject-centered. Ethnographers attempt to understand subjects on their own terms while radically suspending their own assumptions and analytic categories. They strive to apply Malinowski's (1922) injunction "to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world" (p. 25) or as Powdermaker (1966) has written:

> To understand a society, the anthropologist has traditionally immersed himself in it, learning, as far as possible, to think, see, feel, and sometimes act as a member of the culture and at the same time as a trained anthropologist from another culture. (p. 9)

This dynamic tension between the insider and outsider perspectives produces a level of understanding that extends the researcher's ability to see patterns, types, and models. Instead of using subjects to confirm preexisting hypotheses and validate established theories, the ethnographer uses the absorption into respondents' life worlds to generate what Glaser and Strauss (1967) called "grounded theory."

Ethnographic approaches used by rapid assessment teams are not as effective in entering the participants' worlds as the classical stands exemplified by Malinowski; nevertheless, it is an ideal and a goal to which they aspire.

Improvisational and flexible. Ethnography is based on a combination of both formal and improvisational interviewing and observation procedures. Ethnographers enter the field with a plan but allow emerging discovered

01-Mariampolski-4671.qxd 5/2/2005 3:39 PM Page 9

realities to modify the issues, questions, and approaches being used. This flexibility allows the researcher to adapt when emerging discoveries and surprises challenge expectations in the field. This ability is in contrast to rigid questionnaire approaches, which require complete faithfulness to the plan but may miss essential truths when emerging findings challenge starting assumptions.

Triangulation. Ethnographers take a critical approach to their emerging knowledge. They obtain support and validation by double- and triple-checking, or what is known as triangulation: using multiple subjects, observers, and methodological tools (e.g., intensive interviewing, nonobtrusive observation, etc.) to confirm and establish facts.

Holistic. Ethnography tries to be comprehensive and inclusive. It aims for a thorough, contextual understanding of the typical respondent's worldview rather than a statistical accounting of attitudinal statements.[3] Basing themselves in the sociological and anthropological concept of culture, ethnographers strive to piece together elements of the inner and outer worlds that shape respondents' behaviors in everyday life.

Comparisons and Benefits

Ethnographic or observational approaches, when compared with related qualitative methods such as focus groups or individual in-depth interviewing, present unique opportunities for generating strategic insights. Ethnographic methods are similar to other qualitative approaches in that they focus on holistic understanding as a research objective and open-ended, respondent-driven interviewing tactics (e.g., Merton et al., 1990). However, several differences add value to ethnography as an information-gathering strategy.

Reality-based. Focus groups and depth interviewing tend to be laboratory-based, whereas ethnography takes place within the context of respondents' lives as they are engaged in product usage, purchase, and other everyday activities. Moreover, because the research is grounded in the respondents' own homes, workplaces, or familiar public places, there is no need for respondents to accommodate themselves to an artificial situation and unknown fellow respondents. Focus groups are collectivities of convenience; respondents have no intrinsic relationships with or feelings about each other. In contrast, ethnographers can gain insights by observing consumers surrounded by their own family members and friends. Focus group respondents

01-Mariampolski-4671.qxd 5/2/2005 3:39 PM Page 10

may talk about what they feed their children in the morning, but ethnographers present at the breakfast table get to see exactly what happens.

Use of observation. Ethnography not only applies traditional discussion and question-and-answer tactics but also uses *looking* as a data collection device. Thus, it does not rely only on consumer reports and recollection but supplements that with direct observation of behavior. Because consumer self-disclosure can be idealized, obscured, corrupted by interpersonal influence, or poorly recalled, one can argue that observation provides a necessary way to discover and validate behavioral patterns.

Improvisational. Ethnographic site visits tend to be less structured and directed by the researcher than other interviewing styles. The consumer typically has more latitude in shaping the sequence of events during an ethnographic encounter, and the observer relies on inductive strategies to gain insights rather than seeking confirmation of preconceived hypotheses. Respondent-stimulated observations allow researchers to make unanticipated discoveries, which may be obscured by the closed categories and expectation sets that shape conventional research.

Comprehensive. Ethnographies try to explore "a day in the life" or an entire product usage, consumption, or purchase cycle. Thus, they are able to capture details and nuances that are largely overlooked or unanticipated in other research approaches.

Contextual. Ethnography tries to account for the entire context and environment associated with product usage. In practical terms, this means that the *site* is the focus of analysis as well as individual consumers. Product usage or purchase decision making commonly involves interaction among household members or reflects interaction with a particular context and situation. Ethnographic analysis attempts to account for these *in situ* variables.

Engagement. All qualitative strategies attempt to engage the respondent, but ethnography is the closest that the market researcher can get to the consumer. As few barriers as possible mediate the relationship between ethnographer and respondent.

Spontaneity. Ethnography is the least directive of research methods, thereby permitting a highly unfiltered view of the consumer.

01-Mariampolski-4671.qxd 5/2/2005 3:39 PM Page 11

Culturally grounded. This method takes account of the cultural dimension in product purchase and usage. It does not depend only on psychological categories—for example, whether the respondent is striving or repressed—that may be valid for one but not other cultural groups.

Behavioral. Ethnography provides behavioral as well as attitudinal data. It pays attention to what consumers actually do as opposed to what they say or wish to have done. In focus groups or other interview-based studies, consumer reports may represent an idealized or socially approved set of behaviors. For example, a study by the American Society for Microbiology reported in *The New York Times* compared the results of reports of hand washing following a trip to the bathroom—95% in a telephone survey—to actual observations of people's behavior in well-trafficked bathrooms in five American cities. In actuality, 67% of the women and 58% of the men were actually observed washing their hands, which tends to undermine the validity of what respondents told researchers (Dewan, 2000).

Context sensitive. Ethnography yields information on product usage in its natural context—the home, store, office, and so on—so that the influence of other people or the physical setting can be assessed.

Creative. Observational research offers novel insights into consumer behavior. Changing the lens used to view consumers creates opportunities for surprises and valuable unanticipated findings.

Notes

1. A full accounting of the discipline's history is beyond the scope of this discussion. A classic of the field, which summarizes its early approach and protocols, is Ruth Benedict's (1934) *Patterns of Culture.*

2. The history of ethnographic methods is rooted by Bogdan and Taylor (1975), in the mid-19th-century investigations of European families and communities by Frederick LePlay. These approaches were melded with the *Wissensoziologie* of Max Weber in the famous Chicago School studies of the 1920s and 1930s and were further developed from the 1940s through the 1970s by researchers working from a variety of perspectives, such as symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology.

3. Robert Merton's practice of focused interviewing was developed for both laboratory and real world based research. See Merton, Fiske, and Kendall, 1990.