

# ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

## LEARN WAYS OF SEEING ETHNOGRAPHICALLY



**Including:**  
Understanding the consumer through ethnography



Ethnography is considered to be the oldest of the qualitative research methodologies. Ethnography is a research methodology that can enable researchers make sense of peoples actions by observing them in the context of their environment. This then allows for an understanding of their behaviour within their cultural arena.

#### Q: What is Ethnography?

**A:** Ethnography is the study of people in their natural or "native" environments—where they live, work, shop, and play. It is a set of complementary techniques developed within the discipline of anthropology. The ethnographic method requires a well-trained researcher skillful in immersing him or herself in diverse environments, cultures, and populations; in establishing rapport with people in these social contexts; and in interacting with them through participation, observation and dialogue to uncover their attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, and values, as well as the unspoken cultural patterns that shape behaviour.

#### *Ethnography aims for their categories.....*



#### Q: When is Ethnography appropriate?

**A:** In a business or marketing research context, ethnography is used to uncover, interpret, and understand the consumer point-of-view and the hidden rules of environments. Ethnography can provide unparalleled insight into any given experience from your customers' point of view. It is learning from people, finding out what makes them tick, expressing interest in what is important to them, and letting them teach you to see the world from their point of view.

Although ethnography encompasses a whole range of techniques, they all share two common principles:

1. They are always 'in context'. The ethnographer doesn't bring the research subjects or participants into an artificial environment, such as interviewing facilities. They carry out the research in the participant's own home, office, regular shopping places – the day-to-day places in which the participant would naturally carry out the activity under survey. This eliminates any unusual influence on the participant due to unnatural surroundings, leading to a more natural, unforced and therefore accurate research experience.
2. The participants are seen as the experts. Ethnographic data gathering is often determinedly open-ended, using both theoretical and practical tools to let what anthropologists call the 'native point of view' emerge. Ethnography is rooted in the disciplined treatment of data. By far the most important part of 'doing ethnography' is the rigorous analysis of all the data gathered and interpretation of key data patterns. The participants are experts on their own experiences and the ethnographers are experts at translating those experiences into a descriptive and analytical account that clarifies business issues and reveals the cultural basis for consumer experiences. The goal is to produce a consistent body of data that can have utility beyond the study's original scope.

## COMMERCIAL BENEFITS OF USING ETHNOGRAPHY

Ethnography provides a clear understanding of any given experience from your customers point of view.

The unique value is that it reveals not just what people say or how they think, but also provides a clear understanding of how experiences work so that businesses can see what actions they need to take to support, improve and change those experiences.

It can explain behaviour in ways that more traditional research cannot. It is based on the assumption that people have reasons for what they do, even if those reasons seem inexplicable to the casual observer.

Moreover, ethnographic tools are capable of producing far deeper description of behaviour, looking at multiple levels of resolution,

- ◇ Conversation analysis, for example, looks at individual conversations at the level of tone of voice, inflection, gesture, body language and sub-cultural references; not just at what is said.
- ◇ A 'cultural inventory' focuses on the material culture surrounding an interaction, such as the cues we process almost pre-consciously when we recognise a room as a doctor's office.



***Ethnographic research, gets below the surface and challenges assumptions made regarding a variety of topics. In challenging basic assumptions, doing ethnographic research is like peeling an onion. As you peel back the layers of an onion, you discover there is yet more to be seen***

## Ethnographic study of gender influences on social behaviour of members at a private golf club

The objective of this study was to utilise ethnographic research techniques to gain an understanding of the ways in which gender issues are in evidence in the day-to-day activities of a private golf club. In particular, this study aimed to investigate whether and how gender issues were a part of the experience of being a member at the golf club.

Using an ethnographic research technique, within an interpretive framework, this study sought to understand gender relations in a private golf club from the perspective of the members themselves. Using interviews and observation, the research was carried out continuously over a period of five full days at a private golf club. The structure of each day was determined by the schedule of the club. During general observations in the club, any actions, behaviours or incidents that were deemed to be linked to gender were noted. Wherever possible, the researcher's interpretation of the issue was discussed with the respondents at the time or soon after the observation. Of the 550 full members, 400 are male and 150 are female. Apart from the senior section, there are also veteran and junior divisions for the men. The women have a separate section. Five themes were identified from the mass of raw data:

- Attitudes towards participation
- Social interaction and communication
- Organisation and compliance with rules and regulations
- Age,
- Inferiority

These themes are discussed in turn and supported using extracts from field notes and comments made during the interviews

**Illustration:** Once again members are gathered in the bar having played in a mixed competition (teams consisted of two men and two women). The atmosphere is jovial and most of the members seem relaxed and contented, irrespective of how they had performed on the course. However, two women seem less than cheerful and their solemn behaviour merits further examination. One of the women proceeds to apologise to her respective male partner for her poor performance and dismal score. He laughs and dismisses her apologies, remarking that everyone has bad games and she need not worry. The women agreed to be interviewed and the following exchange took place;

**Interviewer:** What are you feeling at the moment?

**Respondent:** I feel a bit disappointed because of the way I played and I feel a bit embarrassed. Both men in our team scored well and hit the ball well. I couldn't compete with them and at times I felt silly. At several holes, I picked my ball up because I was so far behind and had no chance of making a score.

Some of the members suggested that, at times, female players exhibit signs of nervous tension on the course, especially when playing in mixed events with the men. According to one male player, women often feel inferior when playing with men because of their lack of power and length off the tee.

The club professional also noted that some women get tense during mixed events, and he felt that it was because they feel inferior to most male players. He explained that there is a stigma attached to women's golf that defines it as, 'Slow, Short and Shabby', and that the women are fully conscious of this stigma. It would appear that many club members recognised differences between the ways in which male and female members approached both the playing of golf, and the social side of the club.

The women showed greater respect for rules and regulations, paid greater attention to etiquette, were distinctly more organised during committee meetings and formal events than the men, and appeared to value the social benefits of golf more than skill acquisition or victory.

The men, according to many of the club members, were more overtly competitive and placed greater value on winning and improving skill level than the women. Within the clubhouse, there was evidence of friendly and relaxed social interaction and communication between genders.

However, there were very few female members compared to male members, and more of the female players were older - the club didn't even have a junior section for girls. So, although few members identified gender-based issues as problematic, and the club secretary felt that his strategies would ensure that 'everyone is happy', it is clear that the weight of discrimination against women in sport, and in golf in particular, was an ever-present - albeit not overt - feature of life at the club.

## Bringing ethnography into the home

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 theatre product, to be used for occasional viewing (movies, sporting events, etc.). At this early stage of development, the firm needed to understand how and why this product might appeal to home users, including what barriers they would have to overcome, technical performance expectations and price targets. A consulting company took this prototype into homes, conducting two-hour sessions exploring current home entertainment behaviour. The prototype was then demonstrated, not only for evaluation but also to look at future usage. The prototype was cobbled together using whatever engineering components were available, offering no brand, aesthetic or user-interface experience, and bearing no resemblance to the actual product. However, this low level of refinement encouraged participants to project their own interests and desires, unconstrained by the actual prototype itself. Many insights were gained, included the segmentation of viewing habits into key types. Based on this feedback, the company was able to refine the prototype, also taking into consideration feedback on positioning and price.

## UNDERSTANDING THE CONSUMER THROUGH ETHNOGRAPHY.

If companies understand a group's social context, they can better understand and even predict their product needs and attitudes towards products in the future. Ethnographers are giving corporations an inside look at the cultural trends, attitudes, and lifestyle factors that influence consumer decisions about everything from bathtubs and toothpaste to insurance and batteries.

Such research can give companies an advantage in learning not just what customers want, but what they will want. A way to get up close and personal with consumers. Whereas focus groups often work in artificial settings for short periods, ethnography situates consumers within the larger social and cultural context. Ethnography looks not for opinions but for a 360-degree understanding of how a product might resonate with the consumer's daily

Ethnography provides a holistic view of consumers in the context of their daily lives. There really is no substitute for the opportunity to experience what consumers experience. For example, consumers do not interact with your products and services in isolation; they are affected by changing family patterns, unseen cultural factors, and other products and objects in the proximate environment.

Ethnographic research is the best means for getting at these unspoken cultural and social patterns that shape consumer behaviour. Ethnography can be used as a stand-alone technique or can be used in conjunction with other qualitative and quantitative marketing research techniques. We'll examine how consumers actually use and experience your products and services to determine their patterns of usage, current level of satisfaction, unmet wants and needs, and suggestions for improvement.

Business people put a lot of emphasis on market research when it comes to new products or services, the common questions they ask are:

- What is the potential market value?
- How many consumers for the product or service exist?
- What are the market trends?
- Who are the competitors

All this is valuable information, but none of it really answers the question whether people will actually buy the product or service.

Ethnographic research helps marketers identify the clues consumers leave behind as part of their consumption habits and hints at new opportunities. Marketers can use this by exploiting and by developing new products or services.

There is a common misunderstanding that consumers are eager to tell marketers all about their dissatisfactions with current offerings and needs for new products.

Consumers do not spend a great deal of time consciously thinking about how to improve on products or what new products might help them. It is hard for them to think beyond what is already available at store.

Most shoppers lack the insight and ingenuity to imagine practical new product opportunities, and the innovations they imagine, when solicited, often have a hackneyed or unachievable quality. For example, their expressed needs may not proceed beyond lower prices and less disposable packaging.

## Examples of normative consumer behaviours

These are consumer behaviours that suggest new product opportunities:

- Combining products and home remedies - If nothing satisfactory exists or if a current product fails to meet all of the needs consumers bring to a task, they may combine products from different categories; or they may concoct home remedies. In an ethnographic study of home cleaning, for example, the observing this will help the manufacturer or company to improve on its existing lines of cleaning agents.
- Work-arounds - If consumers are frustrated in achieving a goal, they often improvise and work around a barrier. If they are not aware of or do not understand all of the operations required to complete a task in a database program, for example, they may patch together unique ways of solving problems or, alternatively, perform some task based on their own limited knowledge of the program's functionality.
- Indifference: Putting up with merely adequate results - When products perform poorly, many consumers just accept mediocre results
- Avoidance - If the right product is not available, consumers may just avoid certain tasks or relegate them to the end of the agenda.
- Imaging perfection - When products do not perform as expected, consumers simply assume that the capabilities to meet those needs do not exist

## WISDOM & WIT

"Business opportunities are like buses, there's always another coming"  
*Richard Branson*

"Capital isn't that important in business. Experience isn't that important. You can get both of these things. What is important is ideas"  
*Harvey Firestone*

"Find your passion..... Then its no longer work"  
*L.A. Reid*

"A man should look for what is , and not what he thinks should be"  
*Albert Einstein*

### Part and not the whole.

If manufacturers understand how the consumer thinks then they can get a number of alternative product development directions on how to improve on their current products.

*James Peacock illustrates the dangers of only looking at parts of a situation and not the whole. He gives the example of a factory worker who at the end of each day leaves the factory with an empty wheelbarrow. Each day a security guard checks to make sure that there is nothing in the wheelbarrow and then allows the worker to leave. Several months later it was discovered that the worker was stealing wheelbarrows the whole time! No one noticed that the worker never began the day with a wheelbarrow!*