



Evolving ethnography

As you begin to read this article, I ask that you put yourself in the following situation: you have taken two hours off of work and are sitting on your couch in your living room wondering what will transpire over the next 120 minutes. There is a knock at the door. You open it to find three people, strangers really, asking to be let in. One of them is holding a video camera so large you worry what the neighbors will think. It is raining lightly outside and you pray that your guests have the common sense to take their shoes off so as not to ruin your beige carpeting.

After taking 15 minutes or so to set up the cameras, adjust the lighting and do a quick A/V check, they are ready to interview you. Your interviewer is sitting to your left and directly across from you is the video camera whose operator is also staring right at you with headphones so large you feel he is stuck in the '80s. The third person is a tad quiet, off to the right, and holding a

notepad to write down his thoughts on what you have to say. From time to time you wonder why he writes down some things over others - are those things more important?

Every now and then the phone rings and taping has to be paused and the note taker is visibly upset likely because it is hot in the house and the air conditioner had to be turned off because it interferes too much with the microphone. Then you notice it: the interviewer squirming as if he has to use the bathroom and you just cannot bear the thought of a stranger using your bathroom.

How do you feel? Relaxed? Ready to talk? Ready to open up about your feelings? I didn't think so. You are more likely worried about how you are going to straighten up the house before you have to get back to work.

Ethnography is a topic that has gained a fair amount of attention over the past five years as marketers continue to drink the "tra-

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ditional focus groups are dead" Kool-Aid. It is important to note that the term ethnography, in many people's minds, is a sexy way of saying in-home interview. Real ethnography is much more observational in nature and deals with communities of people and not individuals. That said, ethnography has come in vogue as marketers believe that people will be more open in their own homes than in a traditional focus group facility. In addition, by being in someone's home you can learn things that you cannot learn anywhere else, such as how they use certain products, how they interact with packaging, where products are stored, etc.

Ethnography as we know it has downsides (just like other forms of

marketing research). Budget constraints often limit researchers to one or two geographies. Ethnography projects tend to take longer to field as a team typically cannot conduct more than three in a day as they have to drive from house to house to get to their next interview. Additionally, clients cannot participate as much as they would like as the ratio of interviewer to interviewee should not exceed 3:1.

Then there is the million-dollar question: you are in someone's home expecting to learn all those things that you cannot learn in a traditional group setting - but how much can you really learn about a person's behavior in the scope of two hours during a non-typical day (i.e., the kids are not home, a spouse is not present, you actually have two hours to devote to something)? Is this real behavior?

Ethnography, or some variation of it, has its place in the qualitative world. Certainly there are research issues that require being in locations where behavior happens. However, what we call ethnography must be evolved in order for researchers and marketers to obtain more value out of it. What researchers need is an approach that accomplishes the following:

- captures behavior on film that happens over a longer period of time during the course of days which are more typical for participants;
- captures behavior that occurs outside of the home (for example, a snack-food company only studying how snacks are consumed inside of the home is missing out on a large number of usage occasions);
- overlays behavior with attitudes (i.e., allows for probing into why certain behaviors occur); and
- is flexible to include participants from multiple geographies.

I would like to discuss two approaches I have used recently that account for the above while still staying true to the reasons for doing ethnographic work. Both involve

video diaries and follow-up interviews but differ in terms of how the footage is sent back to the researcher and how the follow-up interview is conducted (offline vs. online).

Video diary/in-person interview

Video diaries are a technique whereby qualified participants in select markets are sent compact video cameras along with a guide or checklist of what we want footage of (i.e., please film a typical meal in your household, please film some of the things you do with your friends to have fun, please film all of your snacking occasions during a typical day). Cameras and tapes are sent back to the researcher for viewing.

The research team views each tape and takes notes on points to follow up on during an in-person interview. Participants are invited to a facility for their follow-up interview where the researcher asks probing questions to uncover reasons behind why certain behavior was observed (clients can participate by observing in the back room). An edit of the participant's footage is used as stimuli for discussion. The final deliverable is a professionally-edited short film in which the participant's self-generated footage is overlaid with the depth interview footage so that marketers can "see" behavior and at the same time "hear" why it is important.

Video diary/online interview

This technique is similar to the previous one in that participants are sent cameras and directed to record specific behaviors. However, the ways they interact with the researcher are significantly different. Instead of sending back a tape, participants are asked to upload their footage to a secure Web site (think of it like YouTube meets market research). The researcher (and clients) then log into the site and can view footage as soon as it is uploaded. An online interview

can be conducted with participants either through threaded discussion or online chat sessions.

Overlaying attitudes and behavior
Both techniques allow for researchers to record behavior beyond what is typically captured during a two-hour in-home depth interview. Additionally, both techniques allow for overlaying attitudes and behavior (albeit using different mechanisms). That said, there are some instances where you should consider using one over the other.

Consider using the video diary/in-person interview when production value is important. As professional videographers are used to film the in-person interview follow-up, the quality of video is high. Additionally, while the online interview allows you to overlay attitudes with footage, it is done via typed interaction between the participant and the researcher - therefore, you cannot create a video edit linking both aspects of the technique.

The video diary/online interview should be used in cases where timing is very tight. Since footage is reviewed online and the researcher posts follow-up questions immediately, these projects take significantly less time to field than those including an in-person follow up. In addition, these projects are preferred when there is a need for a more nationally-representative group of participants as interviewers don't have to fly to multiple geographies to conduct follow-up interviews. Finally, this technique is preferred when budgets are small as the technique eliminates travel expenses.

Found a market

Ethnography is a tool that has found a market in the realm of consumer insights. However, it is not without its share of limitations. We live in a world where average consumers are very comfortable in generating their own footage, and we as researchers should be tapping into this in ways that serve to evolve ethnography. 