

W5 on Ethnographic Marketing Research

The dynamic between consumers and the marketplace is constantly changing. In order to remain abreast of consumer desires, wants, and needs, in-context ethnographic marketing research is an ideal methodology for supplying insight that can be directly translated into efficient and effective new product development, packaging, and marketing communications initiatives.

This overview is designed to illuminate the benefits of ethnographic research with regard to a variety of marketing needs.

What is Ethnography?

Developed within the academic discipline of cultural anthropology, ethnography is research conducted within the intimate context of real-world consumer experience. It facilitates an understanding of consumers' complex environments through direct observation and exploration of their own social, cultural, and economic vantage points.

Ethnography creates an interpretive framework through which to better comprehend the consumer by determining what internal (emotional, motivational) and external (contextual) influences affect behavior. Ethnography is particularly suited to assessing categories that are process intensive or interaction focused.

When and Where is Ethnography Conducted?

Ethnography can be conducted at any time of day necessary to reach consumers in stores, malls, bars, restaurants, homes, workplaces, concerts, in the street, or on college campuses.

Wherever consumers experience and relate to brands, products, and environments, ethnography can be employed to expand the scope of qualitative research beyond the sometimes sterile, lab-like setting of focus groups. In focus groups participants are asked to adapt to an artificial group dynamic, where memory, self-reporting, and the interviewer's frame of reference can guide and potentially bias individual recall and insights.

Individuals in a focus group setting sometimes provide details of their behavior that are closer to what they want to believe than what they actually do, often providing cognitive answers to emotional issues. Ethnography reveals consumers while they are experiencing their own emotional reactions to products and therefore is able to capture authentic responses as they happen, rather than the cognitive recall of an emotional response.



Knowledge gained during observation can then be applied by the ethnographer, if appropriate for the study, to engage consumers in relaxed, intimate dialogue. Such casual conversations can quickly address precise aspects of the respondent's specific experiences, clarifying the effect of environmental factors such as atmosphere, packaging, signage, and service on their response. Consumer interviews can be recorded in several ways (audio, video, photographs, etc., or a combination of these), allowing a series of personal, documented consumer dialogues to advance insights gathered during research. These dialogues provide opportunity to deeply probe all aspects of a study, using subject-centered, context-sensitive, flexible techniques.

Why Use Ethnography?

Consumers' relationships with their environments are multi-dimensional, and individual consumers are not necessarily fully self-reflective or conscious of unspoken cultural forces that shape their behavior.

Ethnographic observation is able to delve beneath cognitively apparent motivations to uncover veiled psychographic and attitudinal aspects affecting subliminal purchase drivers and subsequent action. Once gleaned, these insights can be translated into actionable recommendations for marketing and product design.

Ethnography evaluates consumer behavior in detail, identifying meaningful patterns and themes that emerge through sustained, structured observation of people engaging in activities such as browsing, buying and trying products, or using services. By recognizing such patterns and themes and finding their underlying meaning, the skilled ethnographer can highlight the points of inflection at which consumers are most susceptible to influence, as well as develop a holistic picture of the market environment. Through conversing with consumers as they shop, ethnographers are able to address with rich detail and subtlety, issues regarding consumer thought processes and shopping rituals.

For example, consumers' behavior is often highly influenced by mood states, so effective manipulation of a retail environment via point-of-purchase stimuli, marketing communications, service encounters, and the context in which all of these converge (ambience, color scheme, temperature, display, lighting, assortment, prices, etc.) can sway negative mood states and encourage positive purchase and traffic patterns. This will increase individual purchases as well as affect what lasting impressions are recalled by the consumer in the future.

Ethnography provides comprehensive information regarding the entire product usage, consumption or purchase cycle. This nuanced approach gathers details encompassing the larger sphere in which consumers reside, taking into account the cultural dimension present in psychological decisions.

Who Conducts Ethnographic Marketing Research?

W5 ethnographers are adept at inconspicuous immersion in diverse environments, cultures, and groups. Researchers in the field have an objective eye for pattern and detail, coupled with the ability to instigate mutual rapport with individuals for impromptu on-site interviewing and discussion. With creative improvisational skills, W5 ethnographers can thoroughly engage in a person-centered interview, addressing new insights spontaneously as they arise, while remaining unbiased as the "naïve outsider" in order to minimize influence over consumer responses and behavior.

We become the link between insider and outsider perspectives by unearthing and illuminating insider motivations in order to allow our clients to better understand and reach consumers.

Methodology

W5 develops a custom methodology tailored to optimally meet the specific research objectives of each client.

The methodology is typically based on a three- or four-tiered model that outlines how the research proceeds from a general review of societal and cultural trends relevant to the research topic to specific documentation and analysis of consumer behavior and attitudes.

Figure 1, below, is an example of a four-tiered model W5 has used as a framework in designing custom methodologies for ethnographic engagements.

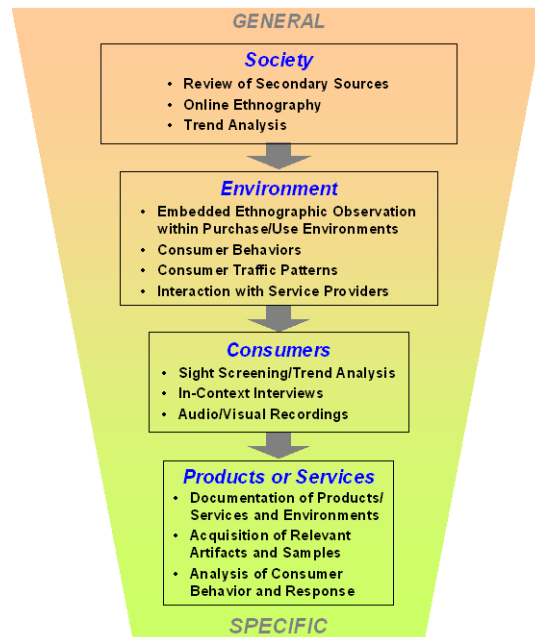


Figure 1: A Four-Tiered Model for Ethnographic Research

By examining markets at increasingly specific levels, W5 identifies and defines patterns and trends in how consumers relate to environments, products, and services. As each level of analysis progresses, a layered, in-depth framework for understanding both the market and the consumer develops. The four tiers in the aforementioned model are summarized as follows:

Society:

How the collective of individuals both perceives and presents information and products found in the market

Environment:

How smaller sub-groups of the collective society address and perceive the momentum of societal forces and messages

Consumers:

How individuals perceive and act upon what is presented to them

Products/Services:

How individuals perceive and feel about specific elements of certain brands, products/services, and group associations

Ethnography deals with increasing degrees of specificity during different phases of research, but the ethnographic process is not purely linear. Rather, at certain stages it involves a cyclical flow that gleans deeper insight through dynamic application of findings to continued research. Thus, different elements of the research are often referential to and bolstered by other elements.

As ethnographers learn more through research and observation, they return to earlier ideas and concepts armed with their new knowledge and greater insight to comprehensively examine available data. Above all, it is a flexible, improvisational and creative process enabling research techniques to conform to situations, rather than requiring situations to conform unnaturally to fixed research plans.

Figure 2 illustrates the dynamic application of findings in some stages of the ethnographic process.

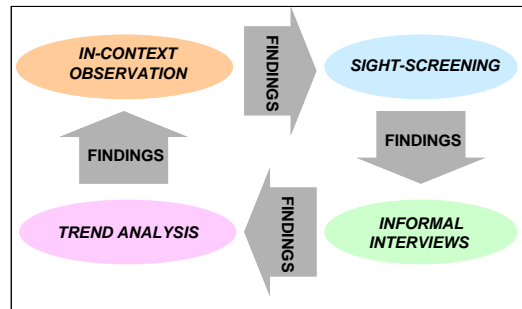


Figure 2: Dynamic Application of Findings

Society

- Review of Secondary Sources

There are a variety of sources available for secondary ethnographic research. During past projects conducted by W5, some of the most valuable sources included online chat rooms, weblogs and forums. The wealth of dialogue available on the Internet provides a direct window into consumers' unaided perspectives on a wide variety of topics. Other secondary sources include magazines, radio, television, journals, newsletters, and newspapers.

- Current Category Trends

Category trends are discerned in various ways. Depending on the category, this could require analysis such as cross-categorical, international (when applicable) trends assessment and in-store observation, in-depth analysis of category publications and relevant resources uncovered during secondary source review, interviews with product distributors or service providers, as well as apparent patterns witnessed through analytic observation.

Environment

- Embedded Ethnographic Observation within Purchase/Use Environments

By observing and contrasting different environments and their respective consumer bases, W5 consultants identify cross-categorical trends and differences existing in products, brands, layouts, consumers and the actual purchase/use environments.

- Consumer Behaviors

Analysis of consumer behaviors in relation to products and retail spaces identifies patterns in how individuals react to different store layouts and stimuli as well as determines specific types of shoppers with regards to their apparent motivations for entry into product purchase/use environments. This element of analysis focuses on how individuals and groups relate to their surroundings.

- Interaction with Service Providers

Observing consumer interactions with sales representatives aids in the understanding of consumer expectations for their shopping experience and also identifies areas where display, layout and structure of the environment fall short in guiding the consumer to desired products. Discussion with sales representatives offers the opportunity for focused development and assessment of consumer patterns.

- Consumer Traffic Patterns

Observing how consumers relate to retail spaces and layouts presents an opportunity to identify the degree of influence displays, product placement, and ambiance exert on consumer movement and subsequent selection and purchasing behaviors.

By comparing different spaces and traffic patterns within those spaces, W5 will better understand the product purchase/use environment and its effectiveness in promoting an ideal environment for consumers in the category.

Consumers

- Sight Screening/Trend Analysis

Before performing interviews, the ethnographer must sight screen potential interviewees to determine the most appropriate individuals to approach.

- In-Context Interviews

All previous observation and research culminate naturally in impromptu interviewing of individuals regarding specific observed behaviors and reactions to the purchase/use environment, products, brands, and services.

Insight gained from these interviews further enriches the depth of information gathered during observation. Interviews can be conducted using varied methods to probe their shopping expectations and experiences. Thorough probing enables interviews to maximize and dimensionalize information gathered from respondents.

By occurring in the contextual space where purchase/use occurs, these interviews garner immediate and candid reactions to aspects involved in the shopping/use experience that may otherwise become sublimated by out-of-context inquiry.

- Audio/Visual Recordings of Interviews

Recording of interviews can be accomplished inconspicuously using a hand-held recorder or a small video camera. Less formal exchanges can be recalled later by the trained ethnographer and recorded along with that day's observations or noted on paper during or immediately after the encounter. Documentation of interviews is included in the *Final Report*.

Products

- Product/Consumer Photos

Photos of consumer behaviors indicative of larger product purchase patterns can be gathered discreetly during all phases of ethnography in order to depict representative themes. Capturing areas where consumers are particularly stimulated in photographic form facilitates a visual understanding of how product themes can be combined to create new product designs. Photographs are compiled as visual aids when presenting key findings in the *Final Report*.

Figure 3 contains examples of photos taken during an ethnographic study researching teenagers and their skin care product selection in stores:



Figure 3: Example Product/Consumer Photos

Each picture was taken discreetly in a different store and represents specific findings contained in the report.

- Documentation of Displays

Store displays and the effect they have on consumer behavior typically are documented with photographs and written notations on settings, activities, and dialogue. Ethnographers will decode the consequences of displays and their effect on sales and merchandise performance. Ethnography discerns strengths and weaknesses by assessing how the design of point-of-purchase promotions and displays influence what consumers put in their shopping carts.

- Analysis of Consumer Behavior

Documentation and analysis of consumer selection and purchasing behavior is conducted in order to further clarify the nature of consumer relationships to specific products and services. Through observation and engaged communication, ethnographers assess the myths, aspirations and language used by consumers when they relate to a contextual space or specific products and services. Often laboratory approaches to studying consumer behavior identifies the psychodynamic perspective of individuals without gaining the sociocultural influence responsible for structuring these mental forces. Behavioral causation is embedded with rich cultural, social and environmental influences, and in order to tap into that holistic center, ethnographers use several techniques:

Triangulation is the ethnographer's try and re-try approach to accuracy in data collection by double and triple checking data, using multiple sources, observers, and methodological tools.

Subject-centered: ethnographers suspend extensive amounts of their own experience and assumptions in order to evaluate consumers without forcing conclusions. Using improvisational techniques to address consumers' intentions, ethnographers are able to direct conversations to address the most pertinent aspects of each shopper's experience without a fixed agenda.

In-Depth Reporting

After completion of all stages of ethnography, an in-depth *Final Report* provides a detailed account of all findings derived from research.

This comprehensive report presents full exploration and analysis of observed patterns in order to best identify gaps where new products, services, or retail space designs would be encountered and received most advantageously by the consumer.

For example, W5 recently conducted an extensive ethnographic study for a Fortune 500 company that produces skin treatment products marketed to teenagers. The comprehensive *Final Report* provided well-supported conclusions and succinctly summarized key findings in the body of the report, backed up by an appendix containing detailed documentation of all aspects of the study.

Key findings were profusely illustrated with photographs of teens and the contexts within which their behaviors and attitudes were studied. The report included relevant verbatim quotes from online sources and in-store interviews, graphics illustrating research methodology and findings regarding product positioning, point-of-sale messaging, and related aspects of the client's product and competing product lines.

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Visit our web site at www.W5insight.com or contact us at inquiry@W5insight.com or (919) 932-1117 for more information.

