

LEARNING HOW TO SEE: OBSERVATION RESEARCH EXERCISES FOR CONSUMER BEHAVIOR AND MARKETING

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Abstract

As the practical application of qualitative market research methodologies by corporations continues to grow, the relative void of such methodologies in related marketing textbooks and pedagogy is perplexing. For example, Freeman and Spanjaard (2012) note that not only do the leading marketing research textbooks strongly emphasize quantitative research methodologies at the expense of qualitative ones, but they also tend to emphasize primarily focus groups and depth interviews as representative qualitative methods under those limited circumstances. While focus groups and depth interviews certainly fall under the rubric of qualitative research, the results these commonly used methods produce are genuinely constrained by the fact that they only provide a decontextualized understanding of the consumers they involve.

In contrast to focus groups and depth interviews, ethnography and its related observational research methods offer the opportunity to observe consumers in their natural setting and, over an extended period of time, gain a contextualized understanding of their needs, wants, and behaviors (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994; Boddy, 2011; Boote and Mathews, 1999; Freeman and Spanjaard, 2012). Major corporations including Intel, IBM, Apple, Harley-Davidson, Whirlpool, Xerox, Microsoft, Nokia, Wal-Mart, and Procter and Gamble, to name just a few, have been jumping on the ethnographic bandwagon since the 1960s (Freeman and Spanjaard, 2012; Spencer, 2006; Tischler, 2004; Wellner, 2003; Wood, 2013). Nonetheless, it should be noted that the typical background of ethnographers that are hired by such corporations is anthropology--not marketing. While this hiring preference presents a rather frustrating portrait for newly minted marketing students who might be interested in pursuing market research careers with such notable corporations, the mere fact that undergraduate and even M.B.A. students in marketing rarely if ever get the opportunity to learn ethnographic market research methods (but anthropology students do) no doubt contributes to this dilemma.

For several years, the authors of this session have attempted to address this very issue by introducing experiential learning exercises into consumer behavior and marketing courses to help students learn “how to see” through the eyes of the consumer. Through the study and application of observational research methods in various retail settings, in both community and commercial spaces, marketing students have been challenged with the opportunity to observe consumer behavior through structured class assignments designed to teach them “how to see.” In this session, the authors will discuss strategies that worked and didn’t work, as well as offer solutions to implement observational exercises in the classroom and in the field—in spite of the constraints of time, resources, bureaucracy and skeptical colleagues.

References Available upon Request