

Perceptions and realities

There are few things more frustrating to the ethnographic market researcher than watching reports from ethnographic fieldwork sit on the shelf while development teams and executives work from assumptions without the benefit of understanding users. This is, in many respects, a product of how we learn to conduct and present research. Conducting ethnographic investigation for business means adapting to the expectations and styles of corporate culture.

Video has been used for many years to analyze and report data but has frequently taken a backseat to the lengthy, written report. If we are to see our research implemented and more extensive research employed, then video should take center stage. Video transforms how our findings are viewed and implemented. While video cannot and should not eliminate the written report, it should have a greater role in the tool kit of the researcher working in the corporate environment.

Whether we conduct fieldwork for clients as a consultant or as professionals inside an organization, we use a range of different strategies in an effort to effectively communicate our findings, or to persuade developers, executives and others to take into account the perceptions, motivations and needs of consumers when making decisions about products or business directions. Many of these strategies develop out of trial-and-error encounters as we learn how to make ourselves heard and understood.

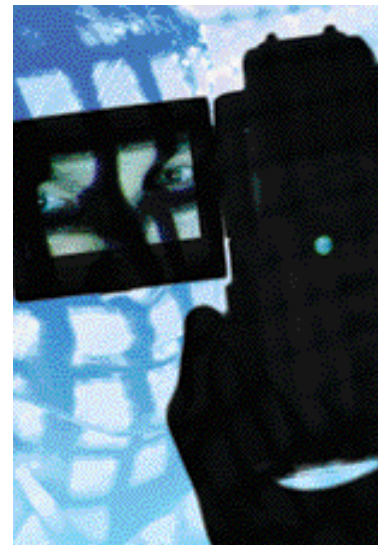
Sadly, our work is often ignored as key stakeholders remain

ensconced in their offices, never to change their perceptions or convictions. Equally common, the people we most need to persuade with consumer insights are those who are the most skeptical of our methods and findings. As such, the question becomes: How do we persuade them of the necessity of understanding the consumer?

We can start by taking our own advice and recognizing that lengthy

reports produce indifference, rejection and sometimes outright hostility from our employers. In our media-rich culture, the convention most people are used to for persuasion about contested issues and the reporting of human experience is not print. Our clients don't read anthropology journals, they often don't even read the editorial page – they watch TV. When they do read, they scan. And the executive summary on your latest field study report is never going to give people the

Thoughts on the role of video and ethnography in marketing research



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richness of detail or direct experience with users that you need them to have to change the direction of their project or their business.

Of course, video ethnography has some obvious advantages and disadvantages. While unethical editing can easily skew data and partially control the transferred “reality” of events, primary experience with research participants on video can be far more persuasive than summarized bullet points. Unlike a paper transcript, video conveys emotions such as anger, disappointment, uncertainty and enthusiasm clearly. It often presents user pain points more objectively in the eyes of the clients. Users are given a human face. And our client’s decisions are shown to impact real people in tangible ways. The effort required to sit and watch a 10-minute video on the corporate intranet is less than that required to read and understand a large ethnographic report. Captivate in the beginning and they will be considerably more likely to turn their attention to the final text.

If video manages to carry the “objective observer” narrative voice of a documentary, our own objectivity and credibility as researchers will be preserved. Stakeholders can walk out of a video presentation and use fact and example to argue with their co-workers about user needs and behavioral processes. Video presentations inject specific people and their experiences into sometimes hopelessly generalized discussions about “what users want,” and “how users work.”

In past work conducted for Fortune 500 companies, video presentations drove people to delve into the larger written reports. Without video, the reports were typically neglected. Simply, most corporate employees will not print out and read anything of length, regardless of the quality, levels of insight or significance.

Obviously, we never want our video summary of findings to turn into entertainment, or our attempts to create a compelling presentation of findings to overshadow the find-

ings themselves. But if the screening of our mini documentaries helps push a development group or a strategy in a more user-informed direction, that’s a good thing.

Risks: art vs. science

The use of video and film in user business-related ethnographic data collection should lead the way in understanding and developing more complete pictures of user-centered design, customer-focused products and services, and customer behavioral patterns. Unfortunately, the methodology has sometimes been disregarded as too expensive, too subjective, or not reflecting “real science.”

It is not uncommon for a researcher using film in data collection to run into people concerned with the validity of the method. Sometimes the concerns revolve around whether film and video are art or science. Because of its interpretive, creative, impressionistic and emotional attributes, art is sometimes assumed to be in direct conflict with an objective, value-free “science” – apparently creating an unavoidable conflict between the goals of film as art and user research as science. Consequently, people – academics and professionals alike – assume limited possibilities for film. Film as a serious analytical resource has remained fairly marginal.

Film is sometimes seen as a humanistic pastime, not significant scientific work. It is meant to appeal to the audience’s emotional pliability. Ultimately, the producer of the final visual document is seen as selectively building subjectively constituted data and constructing a piece that reflects his/her interpretation rather than “the facts.” However, the same can be said for any written document, particularly when behavioral research methods are applied to data collection for a specific task or client need. A logo-centric culture prevents researchers from benefiting from the full breadth of insight and information available, treating video as if it has less validity than the written word. However, written reports often

have pictures, films often use written narratives, subtitles or intertitles.

They always have accompanying written material. The reality is that while the film-focused researcher does indeed run the risk of compromising the complex realities of a particular behavior or series of behaviors, the risk is no greater than that of the researcher relying primarily on the written word.

Typically, film is accepted most openly is when it is considered to fit the documentary archetype. This stems from the widely held belief that film is a mirror for the world. The argument is that the camera is a device for scientifically recording data about human behavior that is more objective than other types of information because of the mechanical nature of the collection device. While this may be true, it probably is not. However, given the context of the work (time limitations and constraints imposed by the nature of contractual research), the footage supplied by the camera may be as close as we can get to a check of objectivity. The reality of research purchased by a company is such that it assumes, even demands, a final product that is easily used, applies to a wide range of internal needs, and can be readily disseminated.

For some, manipulation of the footage (editing it into a film, altering, etc.) destroys its “scientific value.” The model is that teams go into the field to film material, the scientist studies the footage, and the filmmaker transforms it into art. In actuality, this fantasy is never realized. The footage is indeed dissected and analyzed by the researcher, typically transformed into a product the client will readily consume, but by its very nature qualitative research always has a degree of subjectivity. In fact, any and all research, be it in the field and interpretive or in the laboratory and highly controlled, involves degrees of subjectivity and personal biasing. This hardly invalidates the work or the means by which data are captured and displayed. Validity and reliability are not necessarily one and the same.

If researchers are supposed to make films intelligible to client audiences, they must learn what common sense, such as it is, dictates as constituting a good documentary film; that is, they should emulate the aesthetic conventions of documentary realism. Pieces of the puzzle are, of course, missing from any documentary film, but the most important themes and primary informational pieces remain for consumption by a wide range of viewers. The pieces selected for a final edit do indeed play to the emotions of the client, but without that emotional impact clients are likely to forgo the deeper issues entirely and be unwilling or unable to sift through the informational tome so often presented by researchers. By communicating customer needs, reactions, behaviors, etc., film spurs viewers to delve deeper into the research findings and examine the totality of the research in greater detail. Film can be used to access a level of emotional response and personal identification or conflict which is difficult within the lexical constraints of writing. By a series of movements in a sequence, films can communicate in concrete and specific terms what in written words would be abstract expressions.

Another argument against video documentation as a primary means of disseminating findings is that because prior consent is always sought, there is always some degree of engagement by the participant with the camera and therefore the findings are inaccurate. However, the very fact that participants are recruited for any study by definition means that there is some degree of awareness and engagement.

Consequently, whether the awareness and engagement take place with the researcher exclusively or with the researcher and camera together, the authenticity of an activity, context or behavior should not be in dispute. After all, typically, the camera is soon forgotten, but the person asking questions and

watching over the shoulder remains.

The case of cell phones, youth and Japan

A company had contracted with the consulting firm for whom I was working at the time in the hope of gaining a better understanding of how portable information devices (such as PDAs) and Internet-ready cellular phones were used in the context of daily life. It was interested in uncovering what characteristics other than image quality, sound quality and functionality were determinate in the decision to purchase a PDA or cellular phone in urban centers of Japan, and why those “peripheral” issues were important. The term “peripheral” is the term used by executives to describe how they viewed the work – they were skeptical of the notion that culture impacts perceptions and uses of technology. So, while the team was ensured work, there was little guarantee that the findings would be implemented. In addition, the researchers were given half the time to conduct the research that they had originally requested. Gaining the attention and interest of primary decision makers in order to conduct further, more in-depth research at a later date became almost as important as the findings. Without continued research, the researchers feared that the company would act without consideration to the needs and cultural patterns of the population.

The team was asked to identify some of the behavioral and cultural motivators in the purchasing decisions of young (16–30 years old) Japanese from middle-income homes. The research took place in several locations in Japan to provide a range of cultural practices. However, because the researchers (two ethnographers and one social psychologist) were out of touch most of the time but needed at the end of the project to build a single, cohesive series of conclusions, they needed to capture the participant observation sessions on video for later shared analysis and review. Added to this was the fact that only two of the researchers spoke Japanese well

enough to effectively communicate. The other had to rely on interpreters or the language skills of the informant. The researchers decided it was imperative to capture on video exactly what was said for later analysis and translation.

Because of time constraints and the limited language skills of the researchers, the goal of the research centered greatly on material culture, display and overt patterns of interaction. Consequently, activities, objects, spaces and moments of interaction needed to be captured on video so that the researchers could return to the tapes later to catalogue patterns. Without the video footage, much of the information would have been overlooked or misinterpreted – video allowed the team to accurately assess their assumptions, catalogue use patterns and artifacts, and check for validity.

By returning to the video over a two-week period, the researchers were able to determine with some accuracy what designs were preferred and why, what levels of functionality were important, what was most significant in terms of brand and image, and what patterns of interaction were taking place. It also allowed them to demonstrate what they did not know and thus get buy-in to conduct more extensive research. The final video presented to the company ensured that business planners and designers would be sensitive to cultural aspects of products to be used in Japan.

Clear understanding

Video documentation both for client presentations and for data analysis is a vital tool for conducting ethnographic research in the business environment. There are obviously significant issues that must be dealt with openly and honestly, but those challenges can be met and dealt with if we have a clear understanding of the benefits and risks along with the processes involved in capturing and analyzing the footage we shoot. If not, ethnographers in the business environment run the risk of being ignored and ultimately forgotten. | Q