

An Old Research Tool Made New Again Can Drive New Product Success By Barry Curewitz and Alan Sharavsky, Whole-Brain Brand Expansion

For decades, companies have involved consumers in the product development process. Until recently, the preferred strategies for doing this consisted of qualitative and quantitative research like focus groups and central location testing. Nowadays, companies are moving their research to inside the consumers' homes attempting to better understand how existing products fail to deliver the best experience possible. This type of research is called ethnography and it is back with a vengeance.

While ethnography has been receiving a tremendous amount of press lately, it isn't new. How do you think the most fundamental products were developed? Someone has a need based on personal experience, applies creative thinking with determination and a problem is solved. How was the very first steak knife developed, or the very first pair of shoes? We can assume with confidence this is how many of today's product categories were started.

And, as consumer product companies evolved along with their brands and product offerings, to grow their businesses they would develop "new and improved" products as a means of creating differentiated products. These formulations would be developed with consumer input through qualitative research like focus groups or one-on-one interviews and later through quantitative testing like home use tests or central location tests. These approaches work when you're trying to add enhancements or refinements to existing product categories.

But when you're trying to make a bigger "leap", desiring something more than a marginal gain, a different approach is necessary. That's where ethnography brings the most value. Ethnography can do a lot more than identifying the right number of horsepower needed to drive a mix master. Ethnography can add tremendous value in identifying a higher level need or problem to be solved.

This methodology can identify "work-arounds", those compensating behaviors consumers unconsciously incorporate into their daily lives. For example, when the original kitchen mixers were developed, they were introduced without lids. After consumers used the products, someone noticed how often bakers were wiping the kitchen counter when they used an electric mixer. The baker didn't think much of it. If they wanted a clean kitchen, they had to wipe the counter. At some point, a consumer-oriented business person recognized this compensating behavior and solved the equation by developing removable, washable lids. Instead of introducing a mixer in a new color or a slightly different size, actions which may have generated marginal revenue gain, someone changed the market by enhancing the overall user experience.

When conducting ethnography, there are four elements to keep in mind:

1. You're there to observe the consumer's behavior. How is your product being used? What other factors contribute to your product's success? What is it that your consumer is doing that's making the activity more cumbersome or laborious than necessary?
2. Next, ask "why?". When you identify a potential "work-around", ask "why are you doing that?". The goal is to understand both the pragmatic issues at hand as well as the emotional. Perhaps, the baker mentioned above wanted a clean surface in order to keep their clothes clean, or maybe they're a neat freak and get stressed-out when the kitchen is messy.
3. Assuming this is a consumer you'll want to "own" in the marketing sense for years to come, confirm your findings with them directly. This is easily done by saying, "so, you wipe the counter when use the mix master because....." And follow-up with "tell me more about that".
4. Once you've confirmed your findings, the fun begins. Start to play "what if" with the participant. "What if the mix master had....., or did..... or could.....".

In our experience, this process generates much richer results than "traditional" qualitative research. Not only has a new product opportunity been confirmed or refined (assuming of course you went into the research with an idea or two in mind), but you're likely to come away with second and third generation ideas which can fuel future initiatives.

Some people wonder "will Sally consumer really let us in their homes to talk about use of our product?" Yes! Considering how poor customer service has become in our society, consumers seem to jump at the chance to have their opinions heard. So, if you want to make your next new product introduction more than a line extension, invite yourself into your consumers' home and watch what's going on.