

10

Projective, Observational, Ethnography and Grounded Theory Techniques

Learning Objectives

- 1 Explain the types and uses of projective research techniques
- 2 Describe the uses of observational research
- 3 Discuss the advantages of using ethnography as part of marketing research
- 4 Explore the use of grounded theory when researching consumer interaction

RESEARCHING THE WORLD OF AUSTRALIAN HIP HOP

Hip Hop culture may have been born in the Bronx in New York City, but it is now global. However, not all Hip Hop cultures are the same and Australian Hip Hop has unique characteristics. How do we know? Marketing research, including observation and ethnography, was used to explore the world of Australian hip hop culture. These techniques were necessary to get close to a group of individuals who weren't interested in helping market researchers learn more about their culture. Using these qualitative techniques the researchers learnt that Australian Hip Hoppers viewed themselves as different from the American-style Hip Hop culture. While not wanting to be involved in 'commercial' research, interestingly, the Hip Hoppers expressed their unique Australian identity through the consumption of particular products.

Questions: What local cultures or groups would be resistant to traditional marketing research techniques? Why do you believe this is so?

Source: Arthur, 2006

10.1 Projective Techniques

Projective techniques are used to encourage communication using nonverbal methods of response. They include completion tasks and other techniques such as component sorts and thematic appreciation tests. These techniques elicit information through writing, drawing and a variety of ways other than answering verbally. These techniques, borrowed from psychology, are gaining increased use in marketing. The aim of such projective techniques is to gain insights from participants of which they may not be totally aware.

10.1.1 Advantages of using projective techniques

Projective techniques are usually combined with other research methods. An advantage of combining the use of projective techniques with other methods, such as focus groups or interviews, is that they provide an additional means of gathering information. Projective techniques have the advantage of obtaining information of which participants may not be fully aware. They also allow shy or quiet participants to take part without speaking. In addition, they can be used to make other research techniques more interesting and participative.

One reason for using projective techniques is to gain information on topics that a participant may be unwilling to discuss. This unwillingness may be due to embarrassment regarding the subject. It also may result simply from shyness. For example, if the research question asks for opinions on adult-themed entertainment, participants may be reluctant to express either too negative or too positive an opinion. Having these opinions expressed anonymously by having them written allows participants to express views they might not state out loud (Ramsey et al., 2006).

The use of projective techniques makes research sessions more interactive and interesting. In today's technology-driven world, where people have immediate information and entertainment at the press of a button, sitting still while a topic is under discussion can be difficult. Unless the research participants are very interested in the topic, they may find an hour-long focus group a bit boring. Projective techniques can be used not just to gather data that cannot be obtained in any other way, but also to keep the research session more interesting. If participants are bored they will not provide the necessary information, while an interactive environment will result in richer data.

10.1.2 Disadvantages of using projective techniques

Projective techniques do not work well with research subjects who are unable to express themselves nonverbally. The idea of drawing a picture or completing a cartoon may be beyond their ability. Others may feel that they will be judged on their creative talents and will therefore not feel comfortable taking the risk. Another disadvantage to projective techniques is that they are not useful as a stand-alone research technique. They must be used to compare and contrast with other verbal information provided by participants.

10.1.3 Types of projective techniques

There are many different projective techniques that researchers can use individually or in combination with other research methods. These are creative tools that are especially appealing to researchers working in nonprofit organizations and creative industries. The most common

projective techniques are completion tasks, such as word associations, sentence and story completion, and cartoons. More advanced projective techniques include thematic appreciation and component sorts. Creative researchers may even develop their own techniques.

Many projective techniques involve the completion of a task that a researcher has begun. Such techniques allow participants to describe an experience in their own words but without speaking. These tasks include sentence or story completion. If a researcher feels that participants will not find the tasks too challenging, they can also include advertisement completion and product design. Even more creative would be for a researcher to ask participants to prepare the copy for an ad about a specific product that would motivate them to make that purchase. If the product under research is an experience, the participants might be asked to construct what they consider to be an ideal event or performance.

Other projective techniques include the thematic appreciation test, which uses photos to elicit responses, and component sorts where words and ideas are placed on cards which participants are then asked to associate with products and segments. All of these tasks allow participants to provide information about products without using themselves as subjects, which in turn allows them to reveal information in a non-threatening manner.

Types of completion tasks

- Word association
- Sentence completion
- Story completion
- Cartoon completion
- Ad and event creation
- Thematic appreciation tests
- Component sorts

Word association

Word association is simply asking for a participant's first response to a name, photo or event. The idea is to get emotional, rather than intellectual, responses. Word association can be used with individuals or in focus groups or interviews. One example of its use would be if a business was planning a redesign of their store. A researcher, rather than just describe the store, may show a photo to a focus group and ask the participants to write the first three words that come to mind. Using this technique a researcher could also show participants a product or photo of a place.

The participants must then record their answers on small cards which are gathered up by the researcher. Alternatively, participants may be asked to record their answers on large sheets of paper so that they can be immediately shared with others. Words that might be listed when participants are asked about a new store design are 'exciting', 'confusing', 'boring', 'crowded', 'lovely', 'feminine', or 'manly'.

EXAMPLE OF A WORD ASSOCIATION TASK

Three words that come to mind when I see the new store design are:

Sentence completion

An example of a sentence completion task would be to have the participants complete a sentence on their motivation for choosing a new product. If the research is being conducted regarding a service, participants might be asked to complete a sentence about a happy or unhappy customer that uses this service.

EXAMPLE OF A SENTENCE COMPLETION TASK

The Corner Billiards Parlor is _____
The people who visit the Corner Billiards Parlor are _____
The Corner Billiards Parlor should _____

Sentence completion allows for comparison between participant responses. Some responses to the sentences might express the fact that the Corner Billiards Parlor is a fun place where people can socialize. Other participants might answer that the Corner Billiards Parlor is a place where people drink too much and make trouble. These negative views might not be expressed using other methods. Researchers can then compare the demographic profiles of those participants who expressed negative views.

Story completion

Story completion is a bit more challenging for participants. They will be asked to finish a story that a researcher has prepared. For example, story completion could be used when researching how young people view a university. The participants in this research would be current students who might have difficulty when questioned about why they decided to attend that university. A more creative and interesting technique would present them with the following story. To see if opinions about the university would vary because of gender, the name Tom could be substituted. If researchers wanted to see if the story would change by ethnicity or religion, the names Anu, Pierre, Jacob, or Mohammed could be substituted.

EXAMPLE OF A STORY COMPLETION TASK

Amy has just returned home for the Christmas holidays after her first semester away at Small Town University. That evening she decides to have pizza with two friends who decided to attend Big City University. After they have talked about their own experiences, they ask Amy what she would say to someone who was thinking of attending Small Town University. Amy's response was _____

Cartoon completion

Cartoons can also be used as a means for participants to communicate ideas nonverbally. Cartoons can be used to enable participants to, almost literally, put their words into someone else's mouth. This can save a participant from the potential embarrassment of stating opinions in front of strangers who may disagree. Another advantage of this technique is that it can make responding to a question more fun.

The cartoon usually consists of two characters with speech bubbles over their heads similar to those in comic books. One character's speech bubble will ask a question, the other character will have an empty speech bubble in which the participant will put a response. One character might be saying 'Hi Alan, I was thinking of visiting the new billiard parlor. Want to go?' The survey participants will then put their own answers into the other speech bubble. This allows them to communicate their own ideas through someone else. It also assists participants in responding by helping them to picture the circumstances.

When using cartoon completion, the characters shown in the cartoon can be varied by age, gender or ethnicity. This can be used to see if the responses vary based on the consumer characteristics shown in the cartoon. In addition, the same characters can be used but the product being shown can be varied. This allows researchers to compare and contrast responses based on demographic or psychographic characteristics.

Thematic appreciation test

Thematic appreciation tests are used to give information to participants by using nonverbal means. Even a very skilled researcher may have difficulty describing people, places, or products with which participants are unfamiliar. Using thematic appreciation tests, a researcher will show participants a picture or photo and then ask for a written response. For example, a researcher may show a picture of a specific psychographic group and then ask which products the participants believe the group would buy. Participants might also be shown a picture of a place, such as a tourist attraction, and asked if this would be a place they would visit. Alternatively, they may be shown a picture of a product and asked how it could be improved.

Besides saving researchers the difficulty of trying to describe people, places or products, another advantage this technique provides is consistency. When a researcher describes people, places, or products verbally, there is always the possibility that participants will have actually created different mental images based on this description. If this is true then their responses will not be comparable.

Component sorts

With this technique, participants are provided with cards that show or state the different features of a product. They then sort these cards into categories provided by a researcher. Another technique allows the participants to create their own categories.

For example, participants may be given different descriptions of consumer market segments along with a list of a company's products. The participants would then be asked to sort the cards by the type of consumer that might choose each product. For example, a soft drink company may create categories such as 'young urban youth interested in music', 'suburban youth interested in sports', 'retired people interested in travel', and 'middle-aged consumers involved with family life'. The participants are then given cards with the company's different products by brand name and description. The participants then sort out which of these brands each group uses.

The purpose here is not to learn about actual consumption patterns, as each participant will only have a knowledge of their personal consumption and those with whom they closely associate. Rather, the purpose in this case is to learn about brand image amongst the participants. Using this technique companies can learn that a certain brand has a family image while another has a youthful image. They can then use this information to either reinforce or reposition a brand image.

10.1.4 The process of conducting projective research

Using projective techniques requires preparation just as any other form of research does. First of all an idea must be created that will help to answer a research question. Projective techniques should not be used simply to engage the attention of participants. Instead, each technique should obtain the information that will help to answer a research question. Once an idea has been created materials must be prepared. These might include cartoons, drawings, half-completed ads, cards, or any other suitable material. A little creativity and a computer will allow a researcher to create interesting and useful materials.

When projective techniques are used, a researcher must explain the reasons for using the technique without leading participants as to what to create. This can be difficult, as participants may look to a researcher to provide the ‘right’ answer. While people understand how to answer questions verbally, answering them nonverbally may be a new experience. If a researcher finds a group unwilling to cooperate, they must be ready with a different technique for obtaining the required information.

Once the research is completed, a researcher must gather and label all the information. The names of participants aren’t important, but their characteristics and the date of the research should be noted as this will help in the analysis of the data. The data will be examined for the range of responses provided, with the researcher noting common themes and unusual insights. The completed projective material can be very useful when preparing a final report. Drawings can be reproduced and used in the body of the report or else included in the appendix, while quotes provided through sentence completion may be used verbatim. These examples of projective techniques provide a unique insight into the research subject’s thinking.

The projective technique research process

- Create ideas
- Prepare materials
- Have alternatives available
- Record and maintain information
- Analyze data
- Insert examples of completed materials into report

10.2 Observational Research

Another research method that can be used by organizations is observation. Observational research is based on analyzing what people do rather than what they say. The research is conducted without communicating with people, but rather by noting their behavior. Observational research is being conducted in new ways as technology is now making it possible to ‘observe’ using the internet, scanner-tracking, video and neuroimaging (Lee and Broderick, 2007).

10.2.1 Advantages of observational research

Observational research allows researchers to study behavior without involving research subjects. Using this technique can confirm what people actually do rather than what they say they do. Observational research can also expand perspectives without spending money on more expensive research. In addition, the research subjects do not need to answer questions about behavior that they might find difficult to recall.

Observational research should be considered when a research question calls for confirming the actions of consumers. For example, a retail organization might want to know if customers have difficulty following the signage to the fitting room facilities in its stores. Rather than ask, they can station someone near the signs to see if customers appear confused.

Another rationale for using observational research is if there is a research question that would be too difficult or expensive to address with another research technique. A downtown association might wish to know if their store's Christmas window displays effectively engage the attention of shoppers. While an interesting research question, it might be too expensive for them to conduct a survey to ask people if they visited downtown and, if they did so, how effective the window display was in catching their attention. It would be much cheaper to conduct an observational study in order to see who stopped by to look in the window and how long they stayed.

An important advantage of conducting observational research is that it will determine what people actually do versus what they say they do. Research subjects may give inaccurate information when surveyed about their behavior because they might recall incorrectly what they did either because of inattention or because of a poor memory. They may also wish to give an answer they perceive as correct or appropriate. If visitors to a museum are asked how they spent their visit, they might respond that they spent the majority of their time contemplating the art. Observational research may find that they actually spent the majority of their time in the gift shop and café.

Another occasion for conducting an observational research study is when the research subjects may not remember their actions. For example, a museum can observe the behavior of specific groups of visitors, such as families, to help their organization determine which exhibits attract the most attention. This method will often give more accurate information than surveying, as most families on their way out will have tired children to get home and might not remember their visit in detail as a result.

10.2.2 Disadvantages of observational research

The disadvantages of observational research include an inability to accurately profile who is being observed. When conducting observational research it is not possible to ask potential participants questions about demographic characteristics such as their age, education level or income. Therefore, the sample selection depends on the ability of a researcher to estimate these characteristics. This researcher is also dependent on who happens to be at the location at the time and date when the research is conducted. For example, they might have planned to observe consumer behavior at the shopping mall. However, if the weather outside is beautiful many young people might be outdoors playing sports. Thus the sample observed might be older than anticipated and the research effort may not be as effective as originally planned.

10.2.3 Types of observations

There are three distinct types of observational research. When using the complete observer approach, research subjects will not be aware they are under observation. Using another type of

observational research, researchers will participate in the behavior at the same time as they are observing. A third approach is for researchers to completely immerse themselves in a behavior.

Complete observer

When using the complete observer approach, a researcher will have no interaction with participants. Using this method the marketing researcher should attempt to be invisible to the participants. This can be accomplished through actually being hidden from view. In this case, the researcher may be watching from a location outside the sightline of customers. If this is not possible, the marketing researcher will try to be almost invisible by not being noticed by the research subjects. The researcher can stand behind a counter where they will be thought to be just another clerk. This type of observation is conducted when the presence of the researcher may change the behavior of those being observed (for example, if a marketing researcher wants to observe children at play, as the presence of an unfamiliar researcher would affect how the children interact).

The complete observer approach does not require a researcher to record the data. The behavior being researched can be videoed and then analyzed. For example, security camera tapes from a store could be examined not for evidence of shoplifting, but to watch how customers interacted with the displays. Below is an interesting example of the type of information that is collected on a routine basis.

CARDS CAN TELL A LOT ABOUT A BRITISH SHOPPER

Everyone knows that when a loyalty card is used to purchase products at a grocery or drug store, that store is recording purchase information. Few people will have thought about what can be learned from an analysis of the recorded data.

Researchers used the purchases of an anonymous female British shopper at a chain drug store to compile a composite of her demographics and lifestyle. They called her 'Brenda' and using information from her purchases alone they described her as a 'large woman whose desire to lose weight is thwarted by her appetite. She has long hair, bad skin and is shortsighted. Her parents are still alive; she lives for holidays; and has a long-term boyfriend'. How did they know so much about someone they had never met? Here are some of her purchases:

- Large size tights
- Healthy foods, but in large quantities
- A set of scales
- Hair accessories for long hair
- Contact lens products
- Regular purchases of tanning products
- Christmas cards for parents and boyfriend

Stores collect this information to better target consumers with the right products and promotions. The data compiled are used in product line and promotion decisions. Researchers do not analyze such data on an individual basis. So don't worry about your secret purchases becoming public!

Source: Farrar, 2004

Participating observer

Another type of observation has researchers participating in the behavior that is being observed. This type of observation is used when it is impossible to conceal an observer. In some social settings the use of a silent person observing a behavior would draw others' notice. For example, the manufacturer of sports equipment installed in public parks may want to know how the equipment is being used. Using a video camera in public would be an invasion of privacy and would certainly raise concerns among people using the park. Even a silent observer taking notes might result in calls to the local police.

In this type of situation, an observer might visit the park and bring a book or magazine to read while sitting comfortably on a bench. While they will seem to be just enjoying the park, they will at the same time be observing the behavior of park users. Of course the problem is that this participation can interfere with observation. This problem can be handled by having some hidden means of recording data, such as concealing the observation form in the book or magazine. Another way of handling this issue is for the researcher to observe for only a short time and then record the notes elsewhere. Of course, if a researcher is noticed and asked about their note taking, they should explain what they are doing and the purpose of the research. It might be wise for the research firm concerned to supply them with an official letter explaining the purpose of the research and who can be contacted for more information.

Complete participant

A third way of conducting observation is for the researcher to be a complete participant. With this method, a researcher engages in the same consumer behavior as the research subjects. If an airline wants to learn more about the experience of being a passenger on a shuttle flight, a researcher can travel on that flight as just another commuting passenger. They will not only be able to observe behavior, they will also be able to overhear comments. Because researchers can blend into the action, they don't have to worry that their presence is distorting the behavior of the research subjects around them.

10.2.4 Designing the observational research process

Observational research involves more than just watching people. If research findings are to be useful it is important that the research methodology is carefully designed and that trained observational researchers are used. Once a research question has been written, the first step in the process is to determine exactly what behavior should be observed. This question is just as important as asking what questions should be included on a survey form or writing a script for a focus group. If the wrong behavior is observed, the findings will be useless.

For example, a company that designs clothing might want to know more about the relationship between the clothing they produce and teen consumers. The research questions they might want answered could include why teens chose that company's clothes, what items they chose and how they decided exactly what to buy. Each question will require a different behavior to be observed. If the company wants to know why teens chose their brand of clothing, observational research will not be appropriate, as observation can reveal what people do, but not why they do it. If the research question is what items teens chose, an observer can watch young people at the checkouts at a store where that product line is sold. (While a store might have total sales figures in a computer database, this information will not be broken down by age.) In fact, the salespeople themselves can be trained to gather this information. If the company wants to know how young people chose the company line, they can be observed while they shop.

How a behavior will be observed also needs to be specified. The research descriptions should describe the sample to be observed using demographic terms. The description should also use

psychographic terms if attitudes, values and lifestyles can be determined by observing behavior. For example, if a company produces skateboards, they may decide upon observational research to discover what types of tricks skateboarders do. The research directions might provide a demographic description of young males, aged 16 to 20, who live the skateboard lifestyle. It will be up to researchers to use visual clues to both estimate age and to determine lifestyle, which could be based on the way skateboarders are dressed.

Observer training

Observation is difficult. It requires patience, attention to detail and the ability to be unobtrusive. When selecting observers it is important to consider whether they have the patience to sit or stand quietly while watching others. If someone does not have the necessary patience, no amount of training will correct this. However, training can help observers to pay attention to detail and learn to be unobtrusive.

A well designed observation form will help to keep an observer watching what needs to be observed rather than any other more interesting behavior they may notice. An observation form that uses the systematic recording of specific types of behavior during specific time periods will help a researcher stay focused on the important details that are needed to answer a research question (see the box below).

SAMPLE OBSERVATION FORM

Store: _____ Shopper number: _____

Date: _____ Start time: _____

Demographic description of shopper: _____

Observations:

Period	Location	Purchase behavior
Start	_____	_____
15 min	_____	_____
30 min	_____	_____
45 min	_____	_____

Take a 15-minute break and repeat

Additional Notes: *In the area below make any additional notes regarding constraints/problems or unexpected activities you observe.*

Shopping Project Observation Form Directions

Once at the store, note your location on the form. If people are already shopping, choose three 'subjects' to observe. If possible please try to choose a variety of individuals, groups, couples or families. Record the start of the observation for each subject. Describe the individual subjects and note their behavior every 15 minutes.

Before the observations occur, a researcher should carefully choose a location for the observer to be stationed. This should be a site where the observer can see the relevant behavior without being unduly noticed. This could be sitting on a chair in a seating area of a department store set aside for customers. It could be leaning against the bar at a nightclub or pushing a grocery cart in a warehouse store. The location should be as comfortable as possible without being too noticeable.

The researcher should first try out various observation time periods and locations to ensure that they will allow the observer to be successful. They should also accompany the observer for the first observation period to ensure that the instructions have been understood.

Observational research process

- 1 Select the type of behavior to be observed
- 2 Select the sample to be observed
- 3 Select a location based on where the sample and behavior can be found
- 4 Select the time for an observation
- 5 Write out an observation form
- 6 Train the observers
- 7 Analyze any notes and forms
- 8 Write up the report

10.3 Ethnography Research

Ethnography is a research technique originally used by anthropologists and sociologists to gather information on how groups of people interact on a daily basis. Rather than ask questions or simply observe behavior, a researcher becomes one of the members of that specific group for a period of time. This allows researchers to more clearly understand the values and attitudes that underlie a group's behavior.

Ethnographic marketing research studies consumption behavior and can take place in a research subject's home or at their place of employment, although gaining access to conduct research in these settings may be difficult (Canniford, 2006). While a researcher is involved with a group, they will be keeping track of behaviors by preparing notes and, if possible, gathering photographic or video evidence.

For example, a company that designs office furniture might wish to market a new type of office desk. Rather than use a survey or focus group to ask what features employees might like, the researcher concerned could conduct ethnographic research to learn how employees use office furniture. To conduct the study, this researcher would remain in the worksite taking notes, talking to key individuals and gathering visual data. The research might reveal that office workers do not have a convenient place to set their cups of coffee and lack a desk area where they can work jointly.

Ethnography is used to study the behavior of groups that would not, or could not, participate in traditional research studies. These groups might be based on lifestyle or demographic factors such as religion or ethnicity. Another rationale for using ethnography is to gather details of behavior that are so engrained into the fabric of everyday life that they are difficult for people to describe. For example, if researchers want to know how families do their laundry so that a better container for laundry detergent can be designed, they can stay with a family on laundry day. The

company can then use this information to make strategic decisions and also to build a stronger relationship with consumers (Agafonoff, 2006).

10.3.1 Advantages and disadvantages of conducting ethnographic research

The advantage of conducting ethnographic research is that researchers not only observe a behavior, they also share the experience with research subjects. Ethnography therefore provides insights that cannot be gained from merely observing or discussing behavior. In addition, ethnography research is a valuable tool to use when researching consumers in other cultures where stating your opinions directly to a stranger is not considered appropriate behavior. In countries such as Indonesia and Thailand, ethnography has been helpful in overcoming cultural barriers to providing information (Fielding, 2006b).

One disadvantage of conducting ethnographic research is that it takes time to develop the necessary trust to gain access to a group or family in order to conduct the research. In order to allow for a behavior to unfold naturally, the research time will need to be longer than for other types of research. In addition, this process must use researchers skilled in this technique so that useful marketing information can be obtained.

10.3.2 The process of conducting ethnographic research

The first step in designing an ethnographic study is to determine the group and the behavior that are to be researched. The most important decision will be to decide upon the location where this research will take place. The location might be in a store, at home, in the workplace, or at a place where the research subjects socialize. In addition, researchers must establish trust with the members of the group that is to be observed. Because the researchers may be entering the private space of the research subjects, taking the time to establish trust is imperative. To establish trust both the purpose of the research and the research process should be carefully and fully explained.

Using ethnographic research, a researcher both watches and listens while the subjects go about the behavior under study. If the observation reveals that there are key individuals in a group that are determining the behavior, informal interviews may take place to clarify issues. Besides watching and listening, a visual record of photos or videotapes may also be taken. All of the data are then analyzed for common behavioral patterns and why these patterns exist.

Ethnographic research process

- 1 Decide on the research subjects and behavior to be studied
- 2 Gain their permission and build up trust
- 3 Observe the behavior of individuals and the group
- 4 Informally interview key individuals
- 5 If needed, photograph or video the behavior
- 6 Analyze the written and visual data

10.3.3 Participant involvement in ethnographic research

A unique aspect of ethnographic research is participant involvement (Durante and Feehan, 2006). This can be accomplished by having the participants complete logs or diaries, or using photography. Research subjects can be asked to keep a log of their behavior that can then be analyzed. For

example, a fast food restaurant chain may wish to know more about the lunchtime habits of office workers. The restaurant's management may believe that business is falling because more people are taking shorter lunch periods while working at their desks. One method to gain insights is to ask workers to participate in a study where they log in how long they take for lunch each day. Diaries will ask for more detailed recorded information. For example, teenage girls may be asked to keep a diary of their clothing purchases that also records how they feel about the items bought.

An advantage of combining logs or diaries with ethnographic research is that it can track a research subject's behavior over time. The disadvantage is that it is difficult to have people maintain their interest in recording the data in a timely fashion. If they do not, they are likely to go back and fill in entries for previous days with estimated information. However, this method can easily be adapted to online use which makes the entire process much easier. A research subject can either log onto a website where they will record the information each day, or they can email the researcher with the information. If they forget, the researcher can email them a reminder.

Another method to have research subjects become involved as researchers is to provide them with either digital or video cameras. They can then record objects or interactions that they feel are important. For example, children might be asked to photograph their favorite toys at home. This material is then provided to the researchers for analysis.

Researchers still continue to find new ways to integrate technology into the practice of ethnography (Chen et al., 2006). Examples of how ethnographic research is used are discussed below.

ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH SUCCESS STORIES

Ethnographic marketing research has gained in popularity because of a growing dissatisfaction with the data that are provided by focus groups. Here are a few examples of success stories.

Frontier Airlines had discovered via focus groups that people liked the animals that were painted on the tailfins of their planes. However, it took ethnographic research to discover that parents and children enjoyed seeing which animal would be on their plane. The airline now has a marketing campaign where the public can vote for their favorite animal.

Whirlpool discovered that people did not want to wait until a dishwasher was full before running a cycle. As a result, Whirlpool designed a smaller machine.

Whole Foods groceries discovered that their customers shopped at their stores at a more leisurely pace than at traditional supermarkets. Shoppers also spent most time in the fresh food section where they made their menu decisions based on produce availability.

Eastman Kodak researched how 18 to 24 year olds used disposable cameras by studying their behavior in dorm rooms. What they discovered is that students shared cameras and enjoyed taking gag photos of their friends. This behavior became the basis of a promotional campaign.

Duracell studied people replacing their hearing aid batteries. They found that many users had a problem removing the old battery. As a result of this research, Duracell improved their batteries by simply attaching an extra long tab that could be pulled when it was time to be removed.

All of these behaviors would have been difficult to understand using more traditional research methods.

Source: Wasserman, 2003

10.4 Grounded Theory

Most research starts with a theory of why people behave the way that they do. A research methodology is then designed to test whether this theory is correct. Grounded theory starts with the opposite approach. Rather than the researchers first establishing a theory and then observing the behavior to determine if they are correct, the researchers observe the behavior to determine a theory.

Conducting grounded theory is useful when the consumer behavior to be studied involves social interaction. For example, a clothing manufacturer might want to know more about who makes the purchase decision when female ‘twens’ go shopping for clothing with their mothers. Unless the researchers happen to be mothers with daughters aged nine through twelve, they will probably have very little knowledge of the purchase process. Grounded theory would be the recommendation here, rather than hypothesizing with very little knowledge.

Grounded theory does not start with an extensive secondary research process about what is already known. Instead, the goal is to start field research as soon as possible. Rather than theorize, marketing researchers use the methodology to find patterns or ideas that will help explain this behavior. Rather than holding a traditional focus group or interviews, behavior is researched in its natural setting (Daengbuppha et al., 2006).

When conducting grounded theory, research data are collected and analyzed simultaneously. Grounded theory, like ethnography, involves research that takes place in the ‘field’ or where a specific consumer behavior is taking place. What is unique about grounded theory is that the analysis does not wait until after the research has been conducted. Instead, the analysis of the data takes place on an ongoing basis. As a result of this analysis, the next subject observation or interview question will be adjusted. Thus, theory is built from the ground up rather than imposed from above.

10.4.1 Advantages and disadvantages of conducting grounded theory

An advantage of conducting grounded theory research is that researchers do not need any preliminary knowledge to begin research. In addition, researchers observe a behavior as it occurs in its natural setting rather than in the unnatural setting of a research focus group or interview. Such a formal research setting may skew the results on sensitive or decisive topics. In addition, as some groups of consumers become more resistant to being involved in traditional research methods, grounded theory can offer a means to research consumer behavior.

A disadvantage of conducting ethnographic research is that researchers skilled in building theory must be used. In addition, management commissioning the research may have difficulty understanding the rationale behind grounded theory.

10.4.2 The process of conducting grounded theory

The first step in the grounded theory research process is to determine the research group behavior to be studied. After this decision has been made, the next step is close observation of the group while they are engaged in the behavior. After observing the behavior, the research subjects are immediately asked questions to clarify the behavior being observed. The information obtained is then used to choose the next research subject or group and what behavior will be observed. The process is repeated until a theory can be determined that causes the behavior.

Using the previous example of mothers and daughters shopping, if the first observation notes conflict during the purchase process, this is what will be addressed in the questioning. The daughter may state that the sales assistant recommends the clothing and that the mother is being unreasonable in her objections. On the basis of the analysis of these data, the next research observation will include interaction with the sales assistant. The observation, interview, and analysis process continue. However, the subject and interview questions will be adjusted each time based on the analysis. At the end of the process, the researcher should have developed a theory of how the purchase decision was made.

Grounded theory research process

- 1 Observe the group behavior to be studied
- 2 Ask interview questions based on observation
- 3 Analyze the data
- 4 Choose a second subject to observe, based on analysis of the first data set
- 5 Observe the research subject
- 6 Ask interview questions based on the observation
- 7 Analyze the data
- 8 Continue the process until a theory is developed

Summary

- 1 Projective techniques are methods that allow research subjects to respond to questions in ways other than giving verbal answers. These creative techniques allow for interactive participation in the research process, making the experience more enjoyable for subjects and providing researchers with unique insights. Techniques include completion tasks, thematic appreciation tests and component sorts. Projective techniques can stand alone or be used as part of the focus group or interview process.
- 2 Observational research is based on analyzing what people do rather than what they say they do. This method allows for subjects to be the focus of research without directly involving them in the research process. This method is useful when research subjects may not remember past behavior as it is simply a routine part of their daily life. Observation can be conducted without the knowledge of subjects or researchers can participate in the behavior while conducting research. The observational research process requires a skilled observer who will follow a process of watching and noting subjects' behavior.
- 3 Ethnography is a research technique borrowed from other social sciences. It is used to research group behavior that may be difficult for participants to describe. Therefore it is conducted in the environment of the consumer. Ethnography observes reality rather than relying on a description of reality. To conduct this type of research requires the permission and trust of research subjects and a researcher skilled in the process. First of all the behavior is observed and then any key individuals are informally interviewed.

- 4 Traditional research starts with secondary research to develop a theory and then observes or questions to test its reality. Grounded theory starts in the field in order to construct a theory of behavior. This method is particularly helpful when the consumer behavior under study involves social interaction. Grounded theory is also distinguished by the fact that the research process evolves as research is conducted. Any data collected are analyzed in the field and the subjects chosen and questions asked will be adjusted based on the information that has been received. This method also requires a skilled researcher.

Key Terms



component sorts research subjects are provided with cards that show or state features of a product and are then asked to sort them by category

ethnography researchers become involved, through observation and interviews, in the daily lives of research subjects in order that they can learn more about consumer behavior

grounded theory researchers observe consumer behavior in order to develop a theory

observational research researchers watch what research subjects do, rather than rely on what they say

projective techniques methodology that allows research subjects to provide information in nonverbal ways

thematic appreciation tests researcher shows a photo of a product, place or person and asks for a response

Discussion Questions

- 1 Why are projective techniques sometimes used in focus groups? Why would some researchers argue they should not be used?
- 2 What type of projective technique would you recommend if you wanted to find out students' attitude toward this class? Why would you recommend this technique?
- 3 What type of observation would you recommend for a study of how students use the library at your university?
- 4 Why is ethnographic research growing in popularity?
- 5 What are the issues that result in it taking longer to gain permission to conduct ethnographic research?

- 6 How can logs and cameras be used to allow the research subjects to participate in the research?
- 7 For what type of studies would you recommend the use of grounded theory?
- 8 Describe the grounded theory research process and why it needs to be adapted in the field.

Recommended Reading



Abrams, Bill (2000) *The Observational Research Handbook: Understanding How Consumers Live With Your Product*. Lincolnwood, IL: American Marketing Association. A basic primer that introduces the reader to observational techniques and the various steps in this process.

Goulding, Christina (2002) *Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide for Management, Business and Market Researchers*. London: SAGE. The book first explains how grounded theory fits in with other qualitative techniques. It then covers the data collection and analysis process and also includes a case study.

Mariampolski, Hy (2005) *Ethnography for Marketers: A Guide to Consumer Immersion*. London: SAGE. While the book covers the theory of ethnography, it also explains how to plan and implement an ethnographic research project.

Pink, Sarah (2006) *Doing Visual Ethnography*. London: SAGE. While covering the subject of ethnographic research in general, the book focuses on the use of video, hypermedia and photography.

Seale, Clive, Gobo, Giampietro, Gubrium, Jaber F. and Silverman, David (eds) (2006) *Qualitative Research Practice*. London: SAGE. An extensive collection of articles on all aspects of qualitative research designed for both beginning and advanced researchers.