

Marketing Executives International Group
Knowledge Alert
November 15, 2010

Bringing an Anthropological Perspective to Focus Groups

Robert J. Morais, Ph.D.

Linkedin url: <http://www.linkedin.com/pub/bob-morais/6/69/5a6>

Summary: This article suggests several ways that anthropological perspectives can be applied in a focus room setting, in groups and in one-on-one interviews.

For most anthropologists, focus groups are antithetical to their naturalistic mode of inquiry. A focus group room, even one warmed by homey art and comfortable seating, is not the ideal environment for accessing a consumer's life in the fullest sense. Unless they are engaged in an individual interview, respondents sit among a group of strangers in a focus group room. The artificial environment usually causes respondents to pay greater attention to advertising than they would to ads shown on their television, or read in print or online. The formal atmosphere and direct questioning can compel consumers to become hyper-logical. They may object to a non-linear narrative or reject an advertising execution that is highly innovative. New product ideas that are outside consumers' comfort zones may be summarily dismissed in a focus group; the products might receive more consideration in a store. As ethnographers know, respondents are often more relaxed and expressive in natural settings than in a focus group room. In addition, homes, offices, and similar locations provide stimuli, in the form of rooms, objects, and people, which reveal behavior, attitudes, and sentiments, and their cultural correlates. These issues help explain why ethnography took root and blossomed in marketing research, and why it is often selected as an alternative methodology to focus groups.

Despite the recognized value of ethnography among many business executives, time and research budgets mitigate against more frequent adoption. For these reasons, and because some executives still do not know precisely what ethnography is or comprehend

what heuristic purpose it serves, the methodology of choice for qualitative research is typically focus groups. Although focus groups impose limitations on what can be learned from consumers, many anthropological methods and ideas can be incorporated into this venue, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of consumers. In my new book, *Refocusing Focus Groups* (Paramount Market Publishing, 2010), I suggest several ways that anthropological perspectives can be applied in a focus room setting, in groups and in one-on-one interviews. Here are a few of them:

The Value of Being Naïve

Anthropologists are experts at assuming a naïve stance because their job is to take nothing as a given. During qualitative research on a breakfast cereal, we wanted to understand our respondents' most basic definitions of what breakfast is and how they experienced it. In a focus room setting, we conducted ninety minute in-depth one-on-one interviews. Prior to the sessions, consumers created collages with images that illustrated how they feel when eating the client's brand and how they feel when eating other kinds of breakfast foods (non-cereal). Respondents also kept two-week diaries concerning their breakfast experience and took photographs of home eating and breakfast food storage places. During the interview sessions, consumers were exposed to a model of a supermarket shelf-set with a wide range of brands, tasted the client's brand and competitive brands, and were asked about their feelings, beliefs, and rituals surrounding breakfast. Respondents were asked to describe childhood breakfast eating experiences and to imagine their current life without their preferred brand, a deprivation exercise with questions centering on their degree of loss and food substitutions. By stepping back from our assumptions, we learned that breakfast is an in-between, ritual-like time when certain personal transformations occur. Early morning is a transitional period; consumers move over a threshold from sleep to waking, from their private to public self. The specific breakfast cereal brand they consume during this transition is an essential component of their transformational experience. In this research, we discovered that our brand's sensate attributes of sweetness and crunch made respondents feel happy, optimistic, and even joyful, promising a positive beginning to their day. This is the stuff of effective advertising.

A Cultural Perspective

In *Chief Culture Officer* (Basic Books, 2009), anthropologist Grant McCracken argues that when corporations ignore culture, which he defines as "the body of ideas, emotions, and activities that make up the life of the consumer," they place their organizations at risk in the marketplace. The kind of cultural analysis advocated by McCracken, Denny and Sunderland, and others is applicable to focus groups, where connections between consumer buying behavior and culture can be made in much the same way that they can be discovered in ethnographic interviews. While the focus room setting precludes naturalistic observation, respondents can engage with stimuli such as supermarket style shelf sets, apparel, laptops, or any kind of material culture, and be questioned about how culturally driven behavior and beliefs relate to their consumption of goods and services. The cultural connections between advertising and consumers' everyday lives can also be explored. For example, during times of economic pressures, aspirational advertising can over-shoot. Consumers might not have an affinity with a 25-year old woman cleaning a \$200,000 kitchen. Similarly, advertising that celebrates a culture of consumption could be an affront to shoppers who view themselves as financially challenged.

Focus groups are a site to explore what I call "culturalgraphics," a portrait of the symbolic meaning of consumer customs, rules for behavior, and beliefs. For example, "Thanksgiving" denotes a holiday on the calendar. Its cultural connotations are vast: an idyllic Norman Rockwell-like gathering of family and friends, a day to appreciate all that we have, permission to overindulge in food, a special occasion for cooks to showcase their abilities, a time to reflect on our national history, long, traffic-clogged trips on the highway, college football games, and so on. Each of these meanings has potential applications for marketing brands during the Thanksgiving holiday.

Focus Group Interactions

One way to understand how consumers make purchase decisions is to watch them interact with those who influence these decisions. Ethnography is often fielded for these kinds of observations, but interactional research can be also conducted in focus group rooms. In these settings, by instructing respondents to role-play, it is possible to see

and hear children ask their parents for their favorite brands and notice how their parents respond, observe the ways couples negotiate the purchase of big ticket items like cars, or watch the decision-making process used by groups of friends as they discuss where to go for dinner.

My company conducted interactional research among pairs of doctors and patients when a client was marketing an innovative prescription contraceptive. Through their role-playing, we discovered that physicians assumed their patients were happier with their current contraceptive than they were in reality, so the doctors did not encourage change or offer information about new methods unless asked. Only when the patients in the research mentioned reservations about their current method to the physician or asked, "What's new in contraception?" did the doctor discuss the new option. Based on this study, the client developed direct-to-consumer communications that sparked patients to inquire about new contraception solutions, as well as doctor-targeted messages to convince physicians that patients would react positively to the new method the corporation was marketing.

Life Histories

Anthropologists have long used individual life histories to learn about the cultures they study. A modified life history approach in focus groups can yield new product ideas. A manufacturer was exploring line extension possibilities for its carpet freshener. We asked respondents to reflect back on their lives and tell stories about their experiences with things or places that seemed "fresh." Among their comments were:

- *Raking leaves at my grandparents' house on an autumn day, the air clean and pure. I felt so alive. It was exhilarating.*
- *The smell of flowers at my communion. My grandmother gave us all flowers – carnations and daisies. I was overwhelmed by the fragrance of the flowers. I felt happy, proud, excited.*
- *My mom's cooking: homemade pizza, making tomatoes into sauce. I felt content, relaxed.*
- *Sleeping on sheets my mom dried on the line. A smell, but not a smell...just clean.*

Respondents were then asked to invent new products for the brand. Among their suggestions (paraphrased to protect confidentiality) were:

- Fresh Lift, a "rake" that lifts embedded dirt before vacuuming
- Old Carpet Freshener, which restores body and color vibrancy to aging carpets
- Fresh and Soft, which makes carpets smell great and feel softer

Not all of the new products flowed directly from the consumers' reflections, but by taking respondents back to the sensation of "fresh," we inspired them to create fresh ideas.

Conclusion

Ethnographic techniques, especially when informed by anthropological theory, will continue to provide value to manufacturers, advertising agencies, design firms, and other commercial enterprises. At the same time, methods and concepts borrowed from anthropology can improve the quality and increase the benefits of research in focus group settings.

[Robert J. Morais, Ph.D.](#)

Linkedin url: <http://www.linkedin.com/pub/bob-morais/6/69/5a6>