

## Using ethnographic research to gain deeper customer insights

In an increasingly competitive market place where customers are becoming more sophisticated and fickle, new methods of understanding are required.

### When to use surveys and focus groups

Quantitative surveys are important for business planning and help companies quantify the size and prevalence of certain occurrences *how many* people agree that a second holiday is desirable, *how much* they might consider spending on one. Surveys are important business tools as long as their limitations are understood. Intentions and opinions do not always translate accurately into behaviours. Surveys are good for quantifying, they're not so good for understanding the reasons why.

Focus groups are good for canvassing and exploring opinions, especially about things like politics where discussion and debate are so much part of the domain. They're also a good way of exploring what concepts and ideas excite people and what they might be interested in purchasing. What they're not so good for is understanding people's needs and providing data that will lead you to develop products and services that people will want to buy. They're good for figuring out how to sell things, not so good for figuring out how to design things.

Why are focus groups limited in this way? It's not that people lie in focus groups — although sometimes they become self-conscious in front of other people and perhaps attenuate their views. It's that much of what people do they are either not aware they do or they don't consider significant enough to report. When you ask people about the reasons for their behaviours they tend — with the best possible intentions — to resort to folk theories to explain their behaviours. Unfortunately many companies rely too heavily on using focus groups to identify needs and miss key insights available from observation or recording of activities.

### When to use ethnographic research

The big difference between focus groups and ethnographic research is that ethnographic research takes place in the context of use while focus groups take place in an artificial and contrived setting. The case for ethnographic research is based on the simple premise that what people say they do is not always the same as what they actually do. It's not subject to the artefact of the group dynamic and by exploring real experiences it gives us the opportunity to notice and investigate significant behaviours rather than rely on what customers deem to be important.

In the strict anthropological sense ethnographic research involves spending days or weeks with target users to observe and understand behaviours and see whole events and stories unfold. In a commercial environment this is impossible and we have to limit our time. Although we cannot always be there at the time that important activities take place we have developed a range of methods to let us capture and explore them. Typically we combine self-reporting using a camera, audio diary or log book with observation and shadowing, and in-context interviews.

There is a perception that ethnographic research takes longer and is more expensive than focus groups. It is generally true that it takes longer, sometimes several weeks. But when looking to develop products and services that are essential to your business and competitive position most companies are able to plan these timescales into their development process. Ethnographic research looks more expensive when you compare doing in-depth research with eight people to doing focus groups with 48 people. This misses the point as a client is paying for the value of insights not for how many people were involved in the research.