



Gerry Katz

## Viewpoint

## The truth about ethnography

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*Ethnography is a popular research technique. In fact, in New Product Development it has almost taken on a life of its own—as the panacea for all research challenges. But is it the right technique to use in all situations? Are there situations in which another research technique would be preferable? In the following article, senior contributing editor Gerry Katz looks at this question.*

“Ethnography is hot!” So says the June 19, 2006, special issue of *Business Week* on innovation. And with good reason. Ethnography has proven to be one of the most useful techniques available in the product developer’s toolkit for gaining new and useful consumer insights.

Ethnography goes by a lot of different names: *the deep dive*, *customer site visits*, *contextual inquiry* and *contextual observation*, and *going to the gemba*, (the Japanese term for the place where the product and the user come together). Whatever you call it, the idea is that much can be learned simply by watching customers in their natural “habitat,” as they use particular products or services, or try to complete certain tasks or achieve certain outcomes.

The term “ethnography” actually emerged from the field of anthropology, the study of human culture and social behavior. In the 1920s, Margaret Mead popularized an approach in which anthropologists literally camped out with their research subjects for months or even years, never asking a single question, just observing, participating, and drinking it all in. Since Mead, ethnography has become standard operating procedure for cultural anthropologists everywhere.

In today’s version of ethnography, as adapted to New Product Development, ethnographic research helps developers and designers better understand customer needs. But while scientists may spend months or years in the field, product developers work in much shorter timeframes—anywhere from an hour to maybe a day or two—and usually combine observation with some form of active, verbal questioning.

Many view ethnography as an alternative to the traditional sit-down customer interview, used to gather needs during a Voice of the Customer initiative.

Over the past few years, I’ve been involved in nearly 30 cases that have used some form of ethnography. In some it proved to be enormously insightful, while in others it ranged from being somewhat useful, albeit inefficient, to being utterly impractical. As with buying socks, there’s really no such thing as “one-size-fits-all.” So before we fall all over ourselves running out to “live with the natives,” I think it’s time for a little objectivity about this not-so-new, but suddenly highly fashionable technique. What are the pros and cons of ethnography? When is it likely to yield great returns to a development project, and when will it add little or nothing?

## The pros and cons

Initial needs finding, i.e., gathering the Voice of the Customer, is a recognized Best Practice in New Product Development. There are several effective methods to gather customer needs and many factors to consider in determining the best approach for a given project, including:

- The *number* of customers you interact with simultaneously (groups vs. individuals)
- The *place* in which you typically interact with them (at the customer’s site or at some form of central location, such as a market research facility or a hotel conference room)
- The *medium* used to interact with them (face-to-face, telephone, or Web)
- The *method* used to interact with them (observation vs. direct questioning)

While there is now widespread agreement and good empirical data to support the argument that face-to-face individual interaction is preferable to remote and/or group techniques for gathering needs, there are a number of important trade-offs to consider for the other two decisions: the place and the method of interaction.

## Where to find customer needs

There is no question that much can be gained from observing a customer’s environment first-hand. And this might be even more true in those “blue sky” projects where no current product or service exists. We get a better understanding of the current situation, the problems that customers face, how they work around them, and any usability issues associated with existing products. All help us to better *visualize* things that customers may want to talk about in a follow-up discussion; to ask smarter questions about things we might otherwise not have considered; and finally, through photos or video (a standard practice in ethnographic research), to demonstrate important themes or issues to other members of the development team.

The downside, of course, is that onsite interviewing is far more expensive and time-consuming than central-location interviewing. In a conference room or market research facility, it is not uncommon for two investigators to complete 10-12 interviews in a single day. By contrast, it is nearly impossible to complete more than two to three customer visits in the same time frame. Add in travel time and expenses, a videographer—professional or amateur—and the cost of ethnographic research quickly becomes prohibitive. As a result, most ethnographic studies include only around 10-15 completed encounters over two to four weeks, whereas central-location

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studies can easily include 20-40 completed encounters in half the time.

Several other problems with the ethnographic approach often come into play but are rarely discussed. First—at risk of stating the obvious—there has to be something that is possible and practical to observe or ethnographic research simply does not make sense. Here are a few examples from recent projects during which an ethnographic approach would have been problematic:

- In a study of property and casualty insurance, we conducted interviews with corporate risk managers. Since this is strictly a desk job, few, if any, insights would be gleaned from watching these customers work because there is no physical product and nothing really to observe.
- In a study of automatic external defibrillators, like those you would see at the airport or supermarket, it would have been impractical for us to wait around until the devices are used since their use is hardly predictable!
- In a study of clinic-based dialysis equipment, there was a great deal to observe, but we found that many clinics, in keeping with privacy regulations, refused to allow outsiders in the presence of patients.
- In several studies involving medical devices used in the operating room, many hospitals do not allow observation at all, while those that do usually will not permit observation near the sterile field—where the device is actually used—because of infection risk. Likewise, in hospitals, videography is rarely allowed for fear of creating evidence that could later become available to malpractice attorneys. (Videography is also nearly impossible in defense-related industries like aerospace, given concerns about national security and terrorism.)
- In hotels, we could easily observe the public areas (check in and check out, the restaurants, the fitness facilities, etc.), but few guests would allow an observer into their rooms. And while some might be willing to show you how they like to work or watch TV in their room, I would venture to say that almost no one would allow you to observe their morning toilet, shower, shave, hair, or makeup routine! (Some companies work around this problem by creating usability laboratories in which volunteers agree to be observed shaving, for instance, as an alternative to ethnography.)

A second problem that is often considered is how observation can alter behavior—the so-called “Hawthorne effect.” For instance, on construction crews, workers sometimes bend rules regarding safety—eye and hearing protection, working on ladders, etc.—but under observation, they go exactly “by the book.” A

good ethnographer needs to be able to filter these things in order to truly understand how a particular product is being used, even though it’s not always easy to do so.

One other observation has been helpful in determining the potential value of ethnography for a particular project. Simply stated, the further the investigator is from being a customer, the more there is to be gained from ethnography. That is, since almost all of us go to movie theaters, banks, hotels, and doctor’s offices, we can easily visualize those environments; and, therefore, more instinctively know what questions to ask and more easily understand people’s verbal descriptions. But since I, myself, have never done any off-road dirt biking, I would probably gain a great deal from going out and “living with the natives” for this type of application.

## Observation vs. direct questioning

An oft-cited reason for using ethnography is the belief that many “unspoken” needs exist that, when discovered, can lead to enormous breakthrough innovations—real “game-changers” in industry parlance. Some say that the only way to “hear” these unspoken needs is through observation. For instance, it has always been alleged that the innovation of cup holders in automobiles resulted from observing people trying to balance their beverages on the central console, the floor, or even between their legs!

To create an affinity diagram and prioritize customer needs, however, these needs must, at some point, be expressed verbally. Product developers have recognized this since as far back as 1993 when Griffin and Hauser argued in their landmark article, “The Voice of the Customer,” that it is important to use the *customer’s* words to describe needs. When we try to describe the needs in our own words, we always face the danger of inadvertently twisting the customer’s real meaning.

In practice, therefore, most ethnographers also conduct some form of traditional verbal interview in addition to observation—sometimes simultaneously and sometimes immediately following the observation. And whether they do their research at the customer’s site or in a central location, it is now common practice to employ audio or video recording, and then capture the needs verbatim from a tape or a transcript.

This creates a few other difficulties with ethnography. First, many environments do not lend themselves to easy recording. Shop floors are notoriously noisy, and many environments are poorly lit for video. Moreover, many respondents don’t want to be questioned while they are concentrating on the task at hand. I’ve seen some surgeons who are real chatterboxes during a surgical procedure and others who become quite upset if interrupted. For all these reasons, it is often necessary to leave the immediate area where the product is being used and hold a more traditional sit-down interview—the only way to get the best of both techniques. This dual approach leads us to an obvious conclusion.

## A logical compromise

Rather than giving ethnography a universal thumbs up or thumbs down, why not consider a logical compromise: why not do both?

First, ask yourself whether your product or service lends itself to observation at all. Is it possible, practical, and affordable to do so? And what will it take to gain access to observe the product or service first-hand? If it does in fact make sense to move forward, then go ahead with your ethnographic research on a trial basis, and see what you learn. Then, if it seems productive and cost-effective, continue in that vein. But then, consider following up with some central location interviewing, too. And if you do, I would advise that you conduct your research *in that order*: ethnography first and central-location interviewing second. That way you can take advantage of both the visualization of the product and the environment in which it is being used, as well as the verbatim comments from customers. This approach lets you augment your questions and better understand your customers’ answers—and it usually yields the best overall results within a realistic time frame and budget.

So, that’s the truth about ethnography. Remember, we’re not just talking about socks here, but product categories that are complex, idiosyncratic, and variable. We shouldn’t even pretend that one-size-fits-all!

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## Endnote

Griffin, Abbie and Hauser, John, “The Voice of the Customer,” *Marketing Science*, 12 (i): 1-27 (Winter)

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