A Presentation from the NewMR Ethnography & Market Research Event - May 25, 2011

Digging Deep: Ethnography Driven Innovation

Kelley Styring, InsightFarm Inc.

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I’m Kelley Styring, Principal, InsightFarm Inc. and I’m pleased to be with you at the New MR Webinar on Ethnography.
One of the fundamentals of my practice is helping my clients understand how consumer dynamics contribute to business growth. Consumers try a new product or brand and enter the franchise. If they are delighted with performance versus expectations then they will develop a certain degree of loyalty to the brand. Some leak out in any case, but generally the stronger the innovation, the stronger the brand.
There are two ways to go about the business of research. The first, is theoretical. I have a theory, an idea, and I want to prove or disprove it. OR I am mucking around in the data looking for something cool, something that conflicts with what I currently know, the “bit that doesn’t fit.” We spend 80% of our time and budget on theoretical research when mucking around leads to nearly all profound change and business growth.
Both of my studies are on the “mucking” side of the research equation. Both studies were syndicated, observational in nature and impactful in the marketplace.
The first study, In Your Purse, Archaeology of the American Handbag commenced in 2008.
This study revealed that the purse is the only physical object that connects the home, where needs occur, to the store, where needs are fulfilled by women who do 80%+ of all shopping in the U.S.
And, 88MM women carry a purse every single day. They own 10 but use 2.4 on a regular basis, moving just a few items between them. That’s 212 million little homes away from home in which to place products. Or 2.4 Billion of unit sales potential for any single product with regular purchase frequency.
The purse truly is a home away from home. It's the key organizational tool in the daily life of women. And each purse contains more than 30 common household categories of goods, fifteen of which occur in more than half of all handbags.
And innovation opportunity abounds. That’s because purses fail women and the products that go in purses fail women every single day.
How do they fail? Because purses are the key organizational tool in a woman’s life and yet it’s a disorganized pit of disaster. It’s difficult to find what you need when you need it and because the objects tumble around inside, they’re often damaged when you find them. Purses are never really cleaned, and so they are disgustingly filthy inside.
To collect the learnings I personally interviewed 100 women in shopping malls in the U.S. – the natural habitat of the purse. The women were recruited without advance warning and paid to dump their purses out for examination. They also participated in a qualitative interview. Each item was catalogued down to the last snotty tissue and a database of more than 7000 objects was built. Ethnography does not have to be purely a small sample, qualitative endeavor. This study was qualitative on a massive scale and quantitative in a representative way.
From the qualitative we know that the purse is something she carries with her to feel prepared for what may happen in any given day. It makes her feel efficient and capable when she is prepared and can solve problems as they arise. She feels she is at her best when capable in this way.
This need to be prepared begins with the self. It extends to family and friends. But women are also prepared to help complete strangers in need. It is this external display of preparedness that is most fulfilling.
So, what is the innovation space inspired by purses? 1) products that are purse appropriate; and 2) products that prepare us for successful daily living.
The other way we discover innovations is to observe with opportunity in mind. First, we look for compensatory behaviors – ways that consumers compensate for the failure of a product. I live in Oregon where we love to recycle. At our local park, there is a trash bin, but no recycling bins. The people of Portland place cans and bottles on the ground next to the trash bin rather than throwing them in. That’s a signal to the park managers that people want a recycling bin. That is a compensatory behavior. The other way we observe for innovation opportunity is by noting contradictions. This is when people say one thing and do another. This gap is not a lie. It represents their intentions and an opportunity for a savvy innovator.
First, I’ll share an example of a compensatory behavior. About a third of women are carrying small sandwich bags in their purses. And they are holding everything but sandwiches. They are using the bags to keep things clean and safe in an inhospitable environment.
Come conflicts observed include the carrying of objects that are used for hygiene purposes and eating and yet the purse is disgustingly filthy inside.
What if there was a sanitizer tablet, air activated, that you could drop in to the purse, close it up and vaporize it clean?
Another important thing to observe is what you cannot see. What items are not in the purse that could or should be, like beverages? And why are they NOT there? Beverages are bulky and if cold, they sweat inside a purse. This suggests that a tool for carrying the bottle on the side of a bag could be a desirable innovation for women.
Of course, that study has much more depth and many more opportunities revealed. As a result of the success of In Your Purse, I launched In Your Car: Road Trip through the American Automobile two years later. The theory being that women have to get to the store somehow, so…? Why not study cars?
The business proposition is vast... there are more than 250MM cars on the road in the U.S.
And people are not using the car just to get from point A to point B. The car is actually a habitat for living. And yet, it’s never been designed for this purpose. In fact, the basic architecture of the car hasn’t changed much since it was invented nearly a century ago.
This investigation was three-fold: 1) a 5800 mile family road trip where my husband and two kids and I circumnavigated the U.S. in a Honda Pilot courtesy of American Honda Motors which I’m required to say every time I give this speech: 2) We stopped in 7 American cities where I tore cars apart, much like the purse study, cataloguing the items inside and interviewing drivers; and 3) a quantitative inventory was completed via diary online with more than 200 drivers.
What we learned about drivers is that the car does get them from place to place but it is also a highly personal expression of individuality. We select a car based on what we want to say to others and adorn the inside with items we need to make it through the day as well as keepsakes that remind us of those we love. Driving makes a person feel free and independent. They can meet the world on their own terms and achieve a sense of control.
We spend about two hours a day in the car and yet only drive about 30 miles. And, no one in the U.S. is going 15 miles per hour. So... What’s happening? We’re reading, writing, working, waiting and eating in the car, among other things.
We carry objects with us to be prepared. Sound familiar? It’s precisely the same as the purse. The more time we spend in the car per day, the more objects the car contains. Again, we want to be prepared for not only our own needs but those of family, friends and even other drivers.
Again, we’re looking for compensatory behaviors and conflicts that reveal innovation opportunity. Keeping this in the front of your mind will help you spot clues during the investigation.
Here’s a good example. There is no place to put the things we bring into the car with us. Nearly all women bring a purse into the car and nearly all people bring a cell phone and yet there is no convenient place to put it once in the car. Most women put it on the passenger floorboard or passenger seat if it’s empty. One touch of the brakes and it goes flying. What a mess.
Another observation is the profound amount of trash in American automobiles. Because we are living in them – eating, working, etc – we generate trash. And, yet, there is no place for this trash to go. It generally ends up on the floorboards and migrates under the seats. Drivers were mortified by the amount of trash we pulled from vehicles. In fact, the same thing happened with purses but they tended to be receipts from shopping, which could be managed differently and opened entirely different innovation spaces.
So, if trash migrates under the seat, why not develop and under-the-seat trash management system?
Or something more temporary and kid-friendly, as my client Honda did for the 2011 Honda Odyssey.
If we’re eating in the car, why not provide a place for food to reside? And, can we safely accommodate children’s needs by creating inflatable table tops?
So, how do you best use this type of research? By understanding the environment. In this case it’s this concept of “home away from home” in an on-the-go culture. Understanding how this can contribute to business growth is key. Then, studying the gaps in product performance and solving for them. Finally, monitoring emerging needs, trends and technologies that can converge with your learning and suggest specific product ideas. These studies are both available on a syndicated basis and InsightFarm constructs these types of innovation space investigations every day.
Findings are just a springboard for thinking. Sometimes it takes an event to get the creative people in the right place and ideas flowing. InsightFarm Inc. facilitates innovation workshops to help clients find business growth. And, make it happen.
IN YOUR PURSE — Archaeology of the American Handbag

Q & A

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