

In Your Face, In Your Space

INDIAN COMPANIES ARE STRADDLING UP-CLOSE TO CONSUMERS IN THEIR NATURAL HABITAT—AT WORK, PLAY AND HOME—IN THEIR BID TO TAILOR-MAKE PRODUCTS AND SERVICES FOR THEM. THEIR COOL NEW TOOL: **ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH.**

BY VIDYA VISWANATHAN



Tapping creativity: Aditya Sood of Centre for

S. NARENDRAN, VICE PRESIDENT (Business Development) of the Rs 200-crore TVS e-Services, a computer hardware manufacturer, is posing for a picture for this article with K.M. Mariappan, owner of Murugan Store, a grocery shop in Nungambakkam, an upscale Chennai borough. In the foreground is the recently-launched black-coloured TVS Sprint, a point-of-sale solution, which is essentially a computer with software to manage a store, a built-in printer, a display unit and a built-in battery back-up. Three summers ago,



DEEPAK G. PAWAR

Knowledge Studies combines market research with design expertise

when the machine was being conceived, Narendran had decided he wanted to “think like a grocer” and had sweated it out 14 hours a day for two weeks in this very same store. He had followed up that exercise with yet another two weeks at another grocery outlet in Chennai, Gajalakshmi stores in T-Nagar, a bustling shopping district. He got there before the store opened and stayed on till the shutter went down, recording every little detail. The idea: To build a machine that would fit into the lifestyle of a storeowner.

Sangeeta Gupta of market research agency ACNielsen spent the autumn of 2001 in a rather unusual fashion: She accompanied couples on their shopping sprees. She also hung out at the payment counters of departmental stores and spoke to shoppers after they had paid for

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Ethnographic researchers use a variety of techniques to gain insights.

- **Photographic diaries:** Give respondents a camera to capture moments in their lives and ask them to describe what each picture means to them



- **Food-for-thought diaries:** Ask people to capture their life and thoughts in their own words supported by pictures from magazines wherever a verbal response is inadequate



- **Slice-of-life observations:**



A researcher accompanies a person on some activity like shopping or to a pub. It could be a familiar or an alien place

- **Day-in-the-life observations:** Spend time observing people in their homes or at work and also record all the artifacts in the place

- **Habitat interviewing:** Interview people where the activity happens: in a canteen, pub or a disco

- **Walk and talk:** If a person like a farmer spends more time outside his home, go along with the person wherever he goes



MORE THAN JUST TALK

Focus groups pale in comparison to ethnographic approaches.

● Pepsi

The Issue: Wanted to develop an advertising concept for "Daring" for the age group 19 to 22

What It Did: Gave video cameras to youngsters and asked them to shoot pictures of what they thought was daring. The clips allowed Pepsi to look at how they talked, what they wore, and where they hung out

● HLL

The Issue: Wanted to understand ageing in women

What It Did: Asked women to put together the story of their lives in pictures, giving it a better idea of how they age over the years

● Quantum

The Issue: It wanted to research habits of alcohol drinkers

What It Did: Hosted a party in a pub, where it observed how people interacted with each other, their lingo and how they mixed their drinks. What happened in the pub itself influenced behaviour. For example, a whisky drinker shifted to Bacardi because there was a promotion on

● TNS

The Issue: Wanted to test its hypothesis that working women were modern and would be bold in their choice of brands

What It Did: Did day-in-life observations of some women, found they preferred to make their own masalas and use fresh flour from a mill. Yet, they used Kelloggs and cling wraps and aluminium foils



G. KRISHNASWAMI

Staying ahead: TVS' S. Narendran (right) with Mariappan of Murugan store

their purchases. It isn't as if Gupta was idling in vicarious, voyeuristic pursuits: Rather, by hiring Gupta and her team ABN AMRO Bank, a late entrant in the highly-competitive retail banking space, was studying consumer behavior up-close. By observing how, and how many, shoppers flashed their plastic, ABN AMRO was building ample insight that would come to its aid when launching its own credit card.

Two years ago, Latika Khosla, a designer who graduated out of the National Institute of Design (NID) and has studied colour trends for the last 15 years, got together the marketers, engineers and model makers from the Ranipet plant of the Chennai-based Parryware. She then escorted this rather unlikely team to pubs, malls, kitchen shops and furniture stores in the metro cities. The fruits of that excursion will be visible in all hues, colours and designs when Parryware launches its new range sometime in June or July.

If you've read carefully so far, you'd have noticed that the companies mentioned thus far have resorted to a rather novel way of gathering consumer insight. Rather than just relying on information collected from consumers revealing how they behave in given situations—which is what conventional market research is all about—in these three cases you have marketers capturing the precise behaviour of consumers in those particular conditions. Such non-traditional and innovative techniques—which anthropologists would term ethnographic—are not just being used by manufacturers tucked away in Chennai, but by mainline marketing majors, right from Hindustan Lever to ITC, Nestle, Coke, Hutch, Philips, Hewlett-Packard, Nokia and Honda. As Rinita Singh, CEO of the Mumbai-based Quantum Research, points out: "You can't convene a set of consumers and say to them: 'Now give me your insights!' You have to watch them

WATCHING EMPLOYEES TOO

ETHNOGRAPHY COULD BE USED TO study employee behavior too. Anuroop 'Tony' Singh, CEO of insurance major Max New York Life, suspected the sales processes the Indian subsidiary inherited from its overseas parent were not quite effective. The sales team in an insurance company is in the business of recruiting insurance agents and is measured by the number of agents it recruits and the success of those agents. So Rajit Mehta, VP (Human Resources), and Rajeev Narang of Erehwon, a Bangalore-based innovation consultant, spent weeks

criss-crossing the country talking to a large sample of successful agents and sales managers. They looked at the files that these agents had made or how they answered difficult questions. The whole exercise was documented on video so that it could be shown to the sales team or seen over and over again. "Our assumptions about who could make a successful agent had to be changed. It turns out that people with a good social network don't make good agents. People don't take it seriously when one's friends or relatives approach

them. They buy a nominal policy out of obligation," says Mehta.

This is not an isolated trend. IBM Research, which has just announced that it is going to get into services sciences, has just hired an anthropologist at its Almaden research centre in Silicon Valley to study how services can be rolled out efficiently. Companies like General Motors and Nynex have used anthropologists before to study people and processes in a company to figure out why some groups are successful and why some other groups fail.

in their natural surroundings."

Clearly traditional quantitative research techniques as well as qualitative methods like focus groups have their limitations in today's highly-competitive markets. "If there are five manufacturers of motorbikes, they will hire the same few agencies, which will frame almost similar questionnaires and tackle the same issues," explains out Pradeep B.V., Vice President of consumer and market insights at Lever. "You ask consumers in a focus group what is important and the answer will inevitably be power, which is measured by companies in terms of either engine size or horsepower." But when Pradeep actually asked bike riders what power meant for them—during his posting prior to Lever, which was with a two-wheeler company—they weren't too bothered about cc, bhp and all that jazz. As far as they were concerned, power was all about the buzz they felt when opening the throttle.

Consider another example: That of a focus group to evaluate brands. Since consumers tend to primarily play back what marketers themselves have conveyed to them, conventional research often throws up little that's refreshing. Research on cold drinks, for instance, will inevitably highlight the attributes of 'modernity, youthfulness, trendiness and refreshment'. "Yet drinking Pepsi on the road in the sweltering heat is a totally different experience from sitting at McDonald's and having one. Sipping it at somebody's place when

served as a guest is yet another experience. Each such moment can throw up a different insight," says Singh of Quantum. Ethnographic research would be able to capture each of these moments.

Doubtless one of the biggest advantages of ethnography is the extraordinary intimacy it allows for. Research firm TNS, for instance, chose to conduct what it terms "day-in-life" observations of a panel of working women. Researchers spent time at each of the women's homes in the mornings (before she left for work) and evenings (after she returned) as well as on entire weekends. The findings were manifold, and certainly wouldn't have been thrown up in a conventional focus group: For instance, the TNS researchers discovered a working woman's time was so structured that she did not like experimenting, which of course meant that her brand choices were safe. She also had a sense of 'guilt' about leaving her children and so tended to compensate by refusing to abandon some of the traditional roles, which a housewife in contrast would be more easily tempted to do. Radhecka Roy, Head of qualitative research at TNS, does admit this kind of research is expensive, but then the benefits are certainly many, and it makes immense sense for large consumer companies.

Aditya Dev Sood, an architect, anthropologist and also CEO of the Bangalore-based Center for Knowledge Studies, asserts that ethnography is far more relevant



UMESH GOSWAMI

Reading minds: Asian Paints' K.B.S. Anand is just one of a throng of converts

for technology products, which typically tend to be launched rapidly. "The product here is infinitely mutable according to consumer preference. The problem here is to tap user creativity to define a product." In case you're trying to decipher what all that means, keep in mind that Sood's firm claims to combine market research with design expertise and is currently studying mobile phone users for a trendsetting global handset manufacturer. Sood won't name any of his customers, but promises his handset client will announce a product launch in a couple of months.

If consumer behavior is indeed getting more multifaceted and less predictable, it's because of changing lifestyles triggered by rising income levels coupled with increased exposure to good life—or at least what's considered good life. K.B.S. Anand, Vice President (Sales & Marketing), Asian Paints, says close to 32 per cent of his paints sales come from consumers influenced by such trends. "Movies like *Dil Chahta Hai* and soaps

like *Kyunki Saas...* have influenced people. They are now willing to experiment with colours and texture on their walls," he adds. Asian Paints, which earlier boasted about its ability to create 10,000 colours, has now decided that it is in the fashion business and has come up with a colour palette for 2004. To arrive at that collection, the company spent nine months in intense research, meeting sociologists from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, designers from the NID, as well as household accessories outfits like Yamini and Good Earth to look at what colours they were using. Commercial places—new malls, popular pubs and restaurants—were also audited. "We wanted to study regional diversity, global influences, technological changes and demographic changes and their impact on colours," explains Anand.

Ethnography clearly can prove very effective—but only as long as it is followed up by more hard-nosed research. Going back to the TVS Sprint example, remember that Narendran wasn't alone: He was ably backed up by a 14-member team

that included a product designer, a few software and hardware engineers and a few more tool designers, all of whom made numerous rounds of 14 stores across six cities. Back in office, hours of video footage and reams of notes were scanned and re-scanned, and eventually synthesised into a framework. A few thermocol models of the machine were then taken on the road, and after showing grocers pictures of various consumer durables, the team thoughtfully arrived at the conclusion that the product should look like a baby elephant—grey, solid, with a huge forehead (which is apparently very Indian) and very inviting. It didn't end there. IMRB was roped in to survey 15,000 stores, to find out what features owners would want, and how much would they be willing to pay for the baby elephant. By the time the product was ready, three years had passed. The verdict on the TVS Sprint isn't yet out, but a thumbs up would prove a huge shot in the arm for ethnographic research too. **bt**