

Eye on the Shelf

Point-of-Purchase Research

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Market Research should be an anthropological eye perched on the store shelf. When a consumer reaches for a product, that eye should be wide open, for this is the only time and place that consumer's purchase interest and motivations are well defined and readily expressed.

At this moment, the consumer is thinking in the internal language of desire. This world and language of desire contains the cultural information sought by market researchers. But, before the shopper buys, this world is easily warped by typical market research.

In true anthropological style, interviewers and field agents who blend into the consumer culture should conduct market research. In fact, the analytic world of numbers, charts, and smooth presentations should be veiled in the distance, and kept far from the shifting world of desire that is the mind set and native environment of the research subject.

Market research, in other words, should occur in the market, at the point-of-purchase, not in the office.

Consumer culture is based on personal convenience, time, and place. These elements converge in the marketplace at the point-of-purchase. Away from the marketplace, these elements decay and the shopper ceases to think like a consumer. So when market researchers insist on an environment that serves *their* own needs, subsequent communication becomes unreliable.

For interviews at a phone center, consumer desires are not top-of-mind. The interviewer does not tap into the buying experience but rather requests a memory of the purchase motivations while far removed from the buying context. This is a problem, especially when you consider that purchase motivations are not clearly defined in the consumer's mind in the first place. Furthermore, the researcher does not gain an understanding of consumer culture by working from a research environment that is alien to consumer culture.

Similarly, mail panels involve people in offices designing research and preparing little packets to be delivered. Consider that the act of opening mail is defined by worry over bills and personal finances, not by a desire for products. With a mail survey, the respondent may try to answer the questions honestly, but he can hardly be considered a consumer, when he is so far from the time and place of purchase, and the mental state of purchase motivations.

Likewise, mall intercepts are conducted in leased spaces or mall offices. A mall offers a buying experience defined by browsing for clothing, sunglasses, books, perfume, etc. Mall shoppers are often shopping for pleasure with no serious buying agenda or motivation and this has little relation to the purchase of packaged goods.

Mall surveys evolved out of the need to conveniently gather large numbers of respondents — a need was not dictated by purchase information. These surveys ignore the essential difference between a point-of-purchase experience and a mall browsing experience, and mall respondents do not answer from the context of the buying experience that market researchers want to study.



And in focus groups and central location tests, consumers, actually, are paid to leave their native environment and come to a central office location where they are exposed to concepts or products and interviewed. In these circumstances, convenience is violated and consumer time and place is abandoned.



In each of the examples mentioned previously, the research occurs in an environment that is dictated by the needs of market researchers and their non-anthropological methodology. Consumers are forced to conform to the needs of the research environment and become more concerned with pleasing that culture than with expressing what pleases them as shoppers. In the typical market research environment, the shoppers/respondents cease to be consumers. As a result, their answers are highly suspect as an indication of the market.

In defense of industry practices, there are understandable circumstances that have drawn the science of consumer study out of the consumer environment and into the office laboratory. However, true communication with consumers culture demands that we do leave. Further complicating the matter are the many clients, research experts, and others who expect market research to be a clean, well organized process efficiently communicated through hard numbers, quick e-mails, and colorful charts.

This is reasonable, excepting the initial work that should be done in the consumer's messy world of desire. The desire to control consumer reality is reinforced by the difficulties inherent in conducting organized research in context, at the point-of-purchase.

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With a lot of persistence, human understanding and verbal skill, a market researcher can work in an office environment and gather a body of data that, though warped, represents some version of reality. What value to business planning or product development does this warped view have? The current 90% failure rate for new products ought to have brought such methodology into question long ago.

Should the market researcher embrace the method akin to a scientist watching films in the Harvard library about a foreign culture and then generating data based on the paradigm of his or her own professional world? Or should the market researcher embrace real anthropological methodology where the scientist leaves the office to live and learn the language, cultural ways, and the messy personal habits of the people being studied, before returning with real experience, to be wisely translated into effective data?

The answer is clear. Market researchers must develop field anthropological agents aggressively — agents who go directly to the point-of-purchase and become the research eye on the shelf.