

Uses of Anthropology

What are Some Important Uses of Cultural Anthropology for Advertisers and other Business Types? Let's take the example of soap.

Ethnography, Advertising and The Interpretation of Culture

Ethnography is now a standard term in the consumer researcher's vocabulary. Advertisers especially have been alerted to the research technique's superiority over the focus group. The focus group setting is an artificial setting. For instance, it is often said that the focus group does not allow us to see consumers in their natural settings where they can be observed as well as questioned about their relationship to a particular product. Increasingly then market researchers have been doing ethnography--- visiting consumers in their homes, in their kitchens, and in somewhat more extreme instances, in their bathtubs (researching the satisfactions of frilly soaps). As you can imagine it is usually a fruitful source of new insights.

However, anthropology (and the practice of observing or ethnography) is more than a body of sexy techniques. It is also a discipline of ideas, about culture. For an anthropologist studies of suburban purchase patterns and product uses are simultaneously studies of key cultural ideas as these are represented and symbolized in the products that populate our homes. Let's go back to the example of researching frilly soaps. From our perspective a study of soap, and of cleansing/bathing rituals is a window into current notions of purity, cleanliness, pollution and dirt, domesticity, beauty, class and status among other things. Anthropologists see consumer behavior as culture in action. The key aspect of ethnography is therefore the *interpretation* of culture. Observational techniques are well and good but the interpretation of consumer behavior is the crux of the matter. Knowing how culture guides and informs behavior, sensibilities, emotions, aesthetic judgments and taste ultimately makes for more compelling advertising and business strategies.

Ethnography and Cultural Systems

It is not enough just to adopt the techniques of cultural anthropology. Real insights occur when consumer behavior is interpreted culturally. Anthropological methods are not simply tools, but themselves represent a particular take on culture. "Ethnography", for instance, is not simply an in-home focus group. It was originally developed to provide a particular type of description of practice and belief--- one that reflected a view of culture as a system of values, beliefs, symbol and behaviors. Ethnography aims to portray patterns of belief and behavior. The view of culture as a system and/or pattern of belief and practice provides us with a key to leveraging the particular ideas that a consumer has about a product or service. To leverage the particular satisfactions or benefits that a brand of soap provides to the consumer one should understand how these benefits are perceived as part of a system of understandings about, for instance, cleanliness, renewal---the connection between American ideas of productivity, as in work productivity, and personal rituals of self presentation such as bathing and showering. The product benefit, or advertising positioning can then be cast in terms of one or another of these ideas.

Knowing how a product takes meaning from different dimensions of culture makes it easier to advertise.

An example would be that of a soap manufacturer. From a study of American bathing rituals that our team carried out for this manufacturer we found that a system of beliefs lay behind, and influenced the way consumers used personal cleaning products. One part of that system was Americans shared understanding about the nature of the body. To put it in a nutshell American consumers conceptually segment the physical self, or the body, in ways that differ from the people of other cultures. The American understanding of the body as being composed of “segments” that have different essential characteristics means that hair, face, body (trunk, arms, legs) hands and mouth are washed “differently because they are believed to have different cleansing needs. It would be taboo, or at least not quite kosher for a woman to take a bar of soap to her hair when she shampooed. Bar soap is considered more appropriate for the hands, or the body, which, according to the American conception, can take rougher treatment than the hair. The face sometimes is spoken of as needing medicated soaps because of the American view that, when unwashed or unhealthy----it is a kind of pool of oils and dirt. These metaphors about different body parts, and their cleansing needs, are absent from the vocabularies of say, Papua New Guinea tribesmen. Indeed New Guinea women do not hesitate to take a bar of soap to their hair when they can get hold of such a commodity (I know because I have often seen them do a hair washing in this way). They don’t share our taboos. They have an involved system of their own cleansing taboos. Incisive knowledge of American views of the body was crucial to the advertiser and manufacturer as they sought to portray the particular benefits of each of their types of soaps and cleansers for the consumer. In making our recommendations we drew on anthropological literature that showed how the body was a metaphor for a host of cultural and moral issues.

Soap and other Dimension of Our Culture:

Washing and Transition.

Knowing how consumers used different soaps as part of a set of rituals of transition—transitioning from home to work for instance, and then back again from work to home--- or transitioning from work to play, or from play to work, or from sleeping to waking and alert states— was also crucial to creating advertising strategies. We used ideas drawn from the anthropology of ritual to outline the structure of these transitions and to show how emotionally powerful they were for the consumer. These benefits were then leveraged by advertisers in their ads.

The Gender of Things

We also listened to Americans speak about soap. In their estimations bar soap seemed trustworthy and basic. It was what “really got you clean”. Liquid soaps of various sorts seemed more luxurious, expensive, “feminine and silky”. Often, when using it, people felt they were pampering themselves. When listening to respondents articulate such thoughts we interpreted their ultimate meaning in terms of anthropological literature that

showed how commodities are often personified by being given gender characteristics. Thus, there was a tendency to classify bar soap as a basic “masculine commodity”-- hence the male aversion to liquid soaps of various types. Here we drew on anthropological theory to point out to the client the symbolic barriers that stood in the way of the adoption of various categories of soap by market segments.

Again, in our research we were interpreting as we observed, and our interpretations were guided by anthropological ideas. The ideas enabled us to portray the particular ideas and emotions that linked the consumer to the product, that guided the way the consumer used the product and, of course that made him/her buy it or not.

Our view of culture as a system means more insight into product benefits for the advertiser.

So, we come at the consumer ethnography from a number of different angles. Our aim is to portray the range of benefits, symbolic and utilitarian, that the product and brand can provide for the consumer. Our conception of culture as a system of symbols, beliefs and behaviors helps us achieve this aim.

How we would have gotten to any of our insights without a particular understanding of culture as a system of symbols and meanings is beyond me. For, we would not have been inclined to perceive how the consumer would *necessarily* define the benefits of soaps of various sorts by drawing on different aspects of the American cultural system-the American system of belief. Nor do I see how we could have gotten to any of our insights without our grounding in anthropological theory. You can look as closely as you like at consumer, or any other type of behavior. That doesn't mean that you'll always see what's going on. To be carried out properly, and most profitably, ethnography should be informed by anthropological theory.

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