

THINKING

Retail

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WHAT HAS MARGARET MEAD GOT TO DO WITH SHOPPING?

by Maureen Atkinson, Senior Partner, J.C. Williams Group

“Anthropology is the science which tells us that people are the same the whole world over – except when they are different.”

Nancy Banks-Smith

The magazine headline trumpets a revolutionary new trend: anthropology is helping to sell beer! Inside, the article describes how a group of anthropologists are using scientific techniques to understand how men interact in bars. The goal? To find the best way to get men to talk about beer.

Journalistic hype aside, just how “revolutionary” is the merging of social science and marketing? And why are we reading about anthropology in a leading marketing magazine now?

The answers reveal as much about anthropology as they do about market research trends. Market researchers for years have trolled social sciences for

new ways of understanding consumers. Psychology and sociology have been indispensable for even the most rudimentary understanding of why people shop for what. But until fairly recently, anthropology has been seen as a musty old science with little relevance for those outside some far flung “exotic” village. Think Margaret Mead and her groundbreaking study on Samoans. Fascinating, but what’s its relevance here?

Yet anthropology has evolved and struggled to show its pertinence globally. In doing so, it sought to deliver an all-encompassing theory of cultural development. This was not without problems; anthropologists tended to bring their own cultural

biases into the study and were criticised for affirming Western superiority rather than producing neutral observations. Not surprisingly, the most vociferous critics came from cultures that had been subjected to analysis.

In part as a reaction to this criticism (and because it was increasingly tough to find groups that had not been heavily influenced by Western culture), anthropologists started to study societies and culture closer to home. They moved from trying to describe the grand principles of society and culture to focusing on the deeper analysis of smaller segments within Western culture.

One of the most challenging aspects of studying human behaviour is the gap between how people describe how they act and how they really do. Every society has its set of ideal or accepted behaviours – norms that give a sense of orderliness to our lives that otherwise would be chaotic. Respondents in studies often answer according to these ideals. That accounts for market research's inability to predict the high failure rate for new products. People respond how they think they should, or describe their behaviour to conform to societal ideals. The result? Many new products that test well in the research phase fail to sell.

Here's where anthropology comes in. These different anthropological methods are helping market researchers eliminate that gap.

◆ **Observation** – The pillar of anthropological research involves simply watching and documenting behaviour. However, it comes with some major drawbacks. The

observer does not know why a subject responds in a certain way. Also, observing behaviour is not always easy – especially when the behaviour is considered non-ideal. Merely being observed changes people's real behaviour.

◆ **Deep Structure Analysis** – This analysis is based on the assumptions that there are underlying principles and systems of thinking that drive surface behaviour. These unconscious attitudes and belief systems can explain behaviour that appears to be in conflict with the surface attitudes. Researchers look for clues in their analysis that will explain the discrepancies.

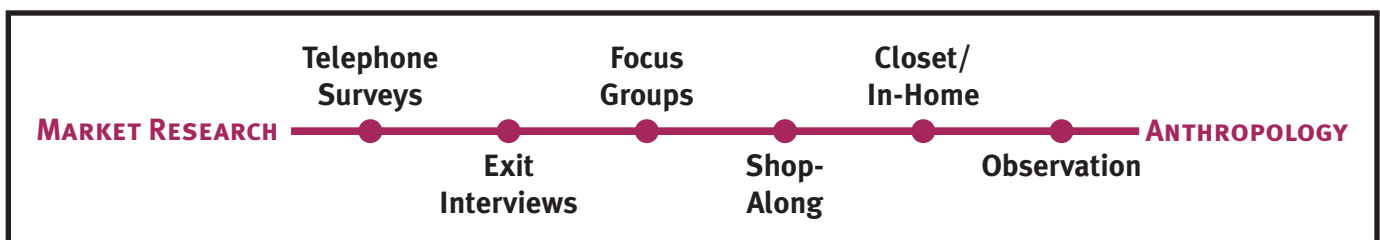
◆ **Linguistics** – The study of the language of subgroups can decode underlying attitudes because language is a way of expressing those meanings symbolically. Subgroups can use words in different ways that allows them to clearly identify with each other. These multiple meanings become a kind of code for the group.

◆ **Allowing the subject to speak** – By clearly differentiating the subjects' interpretation of their lives from the researcher's take on things, anthropologists have sought to allow the subject to have a stronger voice in the study. This is not just being polite; it lends greater depth to the analysis.

RETAIL RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

We as retail market researchers do not have the luxury of implementing a full-fledged anthropological study; these studies can take six months to years to complete and produce reams of documentation. Still, anthropological tools are proving to be very valuable in grasping retail dynamics.

One approach is studying people's behaviour in a store. No one approach can uncover the full range of shopper motivation, but by using the techniques offered by anthropology, the range of market research techniques is widened, and therefore, improved.



Also, while pure anthropological work is rarely if ever done in retail, anthropological tools are valuable in reaching a deeper understanding of retail dynamics. Here are some examples that we have found to be particularly effective:

- ◆ **Observation** – researchers like Paco Underhill (*Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping*) have used this method of capturing the dynamics of shopping. Again, the drawback is that observation will tell you what a shopper does, but not why. We therefore recommend teaming observation with other forms of research that include the voice of the customer.
- ◆ **Closet or In-Home Research** – The researcher visits the subject's home and interviews him or her there. This not only allows researchers to see for themselves the products selected by the subject, but to see how the subject uses the

products. This is ideal for understanding real attitudes towards clothes rather than those that might be voiced in an interview conducted in a research facility.

- ◆ **In-store Shop-along Interviews** – These are in-depth, one-on-one interviews that take place at the store. Shoppers are asked to recreate their shopping experience and describe it to the interviewer. The benefits are that researchers learn what the shopper actually did, saw reactions to the store and its design, heard suggestions for improvements, and better understood the relationship of the store to the shopper.
- ◆ **Other Techniques** – Any techniques that allow for a deeper understanding of the issues could be considered anthropological. While focus groups have been criticized because subjects often talk about their ideal of them-

selves rather than reality, various indirect techniques can help deepen the observations. In addition, “verbatim” – directly quoting people – also help give subjects a direct, unedited voice that is “heard” by researchers.

Studying human behaviour is an approximate science at best – the influencing factors are simply too vast and mysterious. Yet the more we draw upon techniques from other spheres of research, the richer our own understanding of shopping behaviour will be. Anthropology, we're discovering, can bring a lot to market research. Perhaps its time to put our pens down and raise a mug of beer to Margaret Mead. Without her, we'd know a lot less.

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