

### A Time for Understanding: Adapt, Embrace or Die

featured on ethnosnacker (April 2010)

These days, there's a fixation on returning to surface-level research in marketing. Cheap. Fast. Tactical. What defines current research demands will not work in a market still defined by mass extinction. Change is needed and change doesn't come from shallow understanding. If a company is going to be truly successful, if a company is not just looking to survive but prosper into brand iconography, it has to do more than quantify and type its constituents. Above all, it must really understand the consumer. Truly understand *its* consumer on a gut level. Of course, the people in most companies would argue that they do just that; they have reams of data to prove it. They've spent countless hours and countless cups of coffee in focus groups asking people for their opinions. They've stopped shoppers in the mall, watched them at the check out and run survey after survey. The problem is that meaningful understanding doesn't come through focus groups, surveys or mall intercepts. It doesn't come from one-on-one interviews, hidden cameras or diaries. The things, like participant observation, are all part of the tool kits used by a range of researchers to talk to consumers but talking is not understanding. So what *does* it mean to understand our customers?

Admittedly, it's difficult to define "understanding." It's convenient to use an operation or behavioral definition where we begin with the maxim that somebody who reacts appropriately to X understands X. For example, one could be said to "understand" Japanese if one correctly obeys basic commands given in Japanese. But in context, this is a terrible inadequate definition. A person can execute the command, but may miss the fact that it was given in sarcasm. If a native English speaker tells another native speaker to jump off a cliff, they understand they subtext of the phrase, but a non-native speaker may not pick up on that. This is why idioms and metaphorical language are usually the last linguistic concepts to ingest when learning a new language. Understanding implies a much deeper ability to interpret and create, especially in a foreign or unknown context. And it's this interpretive element that defines "understanding" and what real consumer understanding means to a business.

"Understanding" is an ability to reason from an inductive perspective and pull together seemingly disparate bits of information into something cohesive. An inductive researcher approaches the analysis of data and examination of practice problems within their own context rather than from a predetermined theoretical basis. The approach moves from the specific to the general, which means that the research team looks at things in a completely fresh and unbiased way. Anthropology is built on this fundamental principle and goes beyond providing a company with the raw understanding of human behavior, innate responses and bio-social needs. It provides a richer method for understanding how these pieces fit together and, more importantly, how people craft these pieces in a given context. Because anthropologists take an inductive approach, it means they learn as they react and are taught about what is important by the people with whom they work.



## TWO WEST DISCOVERY

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Human beings are complex, absurdly complex. These complexities are amplified by a postmodern condition where speed, mutability and fusillade of advertising bombardments are the hallmarks of existence. It simply isn't enough anymore to know that family X prefers crunchy or smooth. Companies need to understand "why." They need to understand how people shop for food in general. They need to understand how people cook with it peanut butter. They need to understand the changing conceptualization of food. They need to understand the changing landscape of the family meal. The point is that opportunities do not lie in the obvious, they lie on the outskirts and it is up to us to knit together the relevant pieces. Armed with this depth of understanding - *real* understanding - of a culture, businesses can develop products that do more than produce small incremental profits. They can develop brand loyalty and brand advocates. They can transform their businesses. They must, because as we know, the basic rule of evolution is simple: "understand" and adapt or wait to slowly die.



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