

Two West Brings Ethnography to Enterprise

Kansas City, MO (Two West, Inc.) In November, Two West's Chief Anthropologist, Gavin Johnston, spoke to a forum of marketing research professionals and strategists at the 2008 Marketing Research Association (MRA) Fall Conference in Las Vegas. The topic was about how cultural anthropology – and its hyper-analytical and interpretive branch, ethnography – can help a business further understand the practical reality behind consumer decision making.

The MRA Conference, held several times throughout the year in various locations around the country, provides practitioners and experts in marketing research with a venue for lecture programs, panel discussions and interactive workshops. Gavin, an anthropologist since 1999 and Chief Anthropologist of the Two West, Inc. consulting team, was invited by the MRA to be a principal guest speaker at the conference.

Gavin spoke about the basic skills and practices that define ethnography, and how the information generated from inductive research provides a level of depth and insight traditional methods of marketing analysis are unable to reveal.

For businesses targeting a specific audience, the information gathered through ethnographic studies can prove to be invaluable. Due to limits in statistical accuracy and the sometimes dubious results from focus groups and surveys, ethnographers actively position themselves within the world they are attempting to define and engage in what Johnston calls, "participant observation." Rather than asking people a series of questions and hoping their responses are bona-fide, ethnography takes place in a natural setting where relevant events and behaviors expose the hidden truth.

"Ethnography is an approach to understanding the world," says Gavin. "It's a way to understand what people do and what they say, because they're often different." To cite one example he provided, mothers and fathers shopping for cars may report that children have no impact on their decision to purchase a specific vehicle, but according to the ethnographic research, this is not actually the case. When parents finally enter a car dealership with the intent to buy a car, children's opinions ultimately influence the final decision.

As it applies to marketing, Gavin admits that ethnography opens up more questions than traditional academic anthropology, but the ultimate goal of an ethnographer is to follow these questions to their developmental roots and then use the answers to translate analysis into points for creative direction. "Knowing the deeper symbolic meanings and triggers for people helps you re-articulate problems in a way you haven't thought about," he contends.

This is the first year that Gavin and Two West Inc. were asked to speak at the conference, but after a successful first run, Mr. Johnston and the company hope to return in the future as possible keynote presenters.



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