

Foreword: Ethnography, Design, and Customer Experience: An Anthropologist's Sense of It All

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Management pundits (Pine and Gilmore 1999; Schmitt 1999; Underhill 1999; Wolf 1999) have finally awakened to a notion that anthropologists have always held as foundational: we are living in an experience economy. This awakening is akin to M. Jourdain's discovery that he had been speaking prose his entire life. Marketers in general, and advertisers in particular (Levy 1978; Randazzo 1993; Williamson 1978) have long realized that their principal mission is to shape the experience of others. What is especially intriguing about our own era—whether you construe the period as hyperindustrial or postmodern—is the apparent supermediation (Real 1989) of experience. From the French philosophers (Baudrillard 1994; Debord 1983) to the American cultural critics (Berman 2000; Frank 1997; Postman 1986), from the lit-crit ad analysts (Twitchell 1996) to the ethnographers of consumption (Appadurai 1986; Gottdiener 1996; McCracken 1988; Sherry 1995), we hear a common warning. The technologies of influence that undergird consumer culture have grown so pervasive and so transparent that they come to resemble a total institution. Soon marketers will not merely shape our experience, they will determine it, providing it to us prepackaged and, effectively, preconsumed.

Although well intentioned (one hopes), this warning is usually declaimed *ex cathedra*, ostensibly by cultural guardians concerned with the erosion of plebian integrity encouraged by those "hucksters of the sym-

bol" (Sahlins 1976) that our culture so outrageously rewards. Ironically, anthropologists have paid surprisingly little attention to the empirics of consumer behavior until (with a few notable exceptions) relatively recently, favoring superstructural critique to infrastructural investigation. Because of a confluence of historical factors—intellectual, ethical, financial—this reflexively uncritical criticism is being balanced by a wave of ethnographic research into the behaviors consumers actually evince, and into some of the motivations underlying those behaviors.

What ethnographers are discovering is that consumption is an active process, literally produced by consumers-cum-*bricoleurs*, in as nonmonolithic a fashion as one might care to imagine. Or, to qualify more precisely this process, consumption is cocreated by marketers and consumers. Marketers provide the tesserae from which consumers compose the mosaics of lifestyles, although in a postmodern climate of multiphrenic selves (Gergen 1991) and marketing cyberscapes (Sherry 1998) the colored stone metaphor—even recognizing consumers' penchant for recutting and altering the hues of these very stones—grows increasingly anachronistic. As rapidly as selves morph, so does the stuff of marketplace behavior. Marketers introduce artifacts and meanings into the environment, which consumers appropriate, transmute, and nativize to suit local desires. Marketers in turn reappropriate and countertransmute these local adaptations and resistances, sending the wheel spinning once again. For better and for worse, marketing and consumption are among the most potent forces of cultural change and cultural stability at work in the world today.

If consumption drives culture, who better than anthropologists to study the driving? If marketing profoundly affects the quality of the drive, who better than anthropologists to advise marketers? Some of us have been making this argument for decades, from inside business schools, advertising agencies, consulting firms, and sundry corporations. Practitioners have been much quicker to recognize the contribution that anthropology stands to make than have our academic colleagues. If applied anthropology has always been the bastard stepchild of the four fields, then certainly "business" anthropology has been the Rosemary's baby of this aspiring fifth subdiscipline. If we demonize ethnographers for consorting with practitioners, then perhaps this book is a useful tool with which to begin an exorcism. The inevitability of "development" has proven a compelling moral mandate for anthropological intervention. So also must the inexorable commingling of desire and stuff demand enlightened anthropological guidance.

A successful marketer purports to give consumers not what they say they want, but what they really want (Levitt 1984). The determination of this deep underlying motivation is generally left to methodologists who have never encountered a consumer in a naturalistic setting, nor

practiced systematic subjective personal introspection (Holbrook 1995; Sherry 1995). Further, concern for unanticipated or unintended consequences of marketing decisions does not seem to fall within the purview of these researchers. Even among forward-thinking firms that seat consumer advocates on their boards of directors, it is rare to find a consumerist attitude in the research function. It seems to me that an anthropological habit of mind is a ready remedy for these particular grievances. An ethically engaged ethnographer can penetrate the heart of consumer experience, and render it accessible to intervention in a way that not only minimizes potential harm, but also optimizes the potential benefit consumers are likely to derive. This is a prosocial use of proprietary inquiry.

Before the anthropologist may speak to marketers effectively, the power base of engineering must be breached. Most firms have an engineering ethos, and a product orientation shapes their view of marketing. This is true of as many industries as you care to examine. Engineering (or product development) and marketing are distinct and hostile subcultures speaking mutually unintelligible languages, despite their ostensible devotion to a common cause (Workman 1993). Engineers pursue features and benefits; they seek solutions to problems. They have a concrete, particularistic view of product development. Although marketers are more attuned to consumer experience and grasp the wisdom of seeking emic understanding, their intuitions have been honed in an engineering environment. Marketers are too quick to sacrifice qualitative understanding to exigent rollout, to reduce meanings to metrics—but not quick enough to suit most engineers. Since consumers don't know what they want (maintain the engineers), how can marketers presume to know? Enter the anthropologist.

The history of our discipline suggests that engineers can become exemplary anthropologists. I believe marketers hold similar promise. The key to conversion lies in construing consumer behavior in terms of contexts and systems, and demonstrating the insights of cultural phenomenology as they emerge in focused field immersion. In an era of interdisciplinary teams and cross-functional task forces, it is easier to get marketers, designers, and developers into a field setting. Getting inquirers grounded in the methods of ethnography and the analytics of ethnology is a more difficult proposition, but certainly not insurmountable, especially when an anthropologist becomes part of the task force. When an ethnographer helps the marketers and the engineers see the "familiar" as "strange," new product development leaps to an entirely different plane. The chapters of this volume couldn't illustrate this principle more clearly.

The contribution of ethnography does not end with an interpretation of the ecology of consumer behavior, although frequently this is the case.

Nor does it end when the product produced has all the functional and ergonomic properties to compete favorably in the category. We live in a world of functional parity, where optimal features and benefits are the ante to get into the game. If ethnography contributes merely to the addition of bells and whistles, it falls far short of its promise. A well-designed product is increasingly evaluated on its esthetic dimension, for the experience it helps the consumer enjoy. Ethnography lays bare the cultural erotics that consumers employ to animate the world of goods, and renders those principles accessible to creatives (designers, advertisers, and other visionaries) whose job it is to translate them into artifacts and relationships.

Ecology, ergonomics, esthetics, and erotics—these are the building blocks of what we are calling “design ethnography.” End-user studies are the tip of this disciplinary iceberg, and this is where media and corporate interest are currently fastened. Knowing *what* consumers do is simply the prelude to knowing what consumers *are*. And consumer behavior is far more complex than any of our disciplines, applied or not, have even begun to imagine. Practical, creative, humane interveners into our lives require the kind of nuanced insight and sensitive counsel that only anthropologists can provide, if only as a projective field, as grist for their vocational mills. The contributors to this volume demonstrate that the unpacking of customer experience is a challenging enterprise, but one not best left to untrained professionals or to lone researchers, for that matter.

I invite the reader to complement these chapters with a tacking between observation of and introspection into the role of design in his or her own everyday life. Put the reading to work in the service of apprehending your built environment. See how the legibility of the world of goods improves with an ethnographic lens. I commend the authors for placing such powerful tools at our disposal, and challenge the designers of products, services, brands, and markets to use the fruits of improved understanding of customer experience to exalt consumers everywhere.

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