Publications: Emphatic Design: Innovation & Observation 2

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In my previous article, we saw how companies need to innovate to break through consumer overload and apathy. Products and services that meet newly emerging needs, and thus bring a freshness and have a jump on competitors, receive true welcome and support in the market. Customers think, "Why didn't someone think of that before!?" For everything else, value is increasingly driven by price. With deflation everywhere and China in the WTO, competing on price alone is a sure path to becoming a smaller company.

Consultants Harris and Zeisler urge innovators to look for weak signals, small changes that could portend major new trends. Similarly, Chicago-based Doblin group, a leading innovation consultancy, encourages companies seeking breakthrough innovations to look wider than just their own company and customers for new input that might telegraph unmet needs. One way to seek out such signals is through ethnographic-based research. Daishinsha recently did some work for a Japanese company that illustrates this.

The client manufactures housing materials and systems such as bathroom and washroom units. The company was seeking input to its product development process concerning what kinds of bathroom vanities will sell well over the next several years among Generation Y (age 28-35) buyers entering the home market for the first time.

The need was deeper than just knowing likely trends in popularity of different colors or other surface attributes of the product. Rather, is anything going on in the customer's relation to the category as a whole, or is there any opportunity to innovate across categories? Daishinsha designed a research program that aimed to get mostly qualitative input about customers' attitudes towards the space and objects in their home. The program was kept fairly simple to fit the client's budget requirements.

A key element of the research was a self-documentary study. New homeowners in the target age range were given a disposable camera and asked to take pictures of spaces and objects in their houses that they most liked and least liked. They were also asked to record their comments in a journal book that was provided, and to return the camera and journal in a prepaid express mail envelope.

The instructions were intentionally limited in this way to give the participants maximum freedom concerning what to document and how. This technique offers a chance to get a glimpse into a customer's private world while giving them a sense of creative participation and control. It is also surprisingly cost-effective because some of the work is done by customers themselves, using simple tools.

The results revealed a number of interesting and possibly important trends. From the photographs and the journals, we learned that the participants strongly prefer places in their houses that they had designed or arranged themselves and natural materials that express a lot of feeling. They like furniture where they can display small objects that express something about themselves and their lives. They dislike built-in systems where they had no input into the design or arrangement. Cheap, artificial materials make them feel sad and lonely and were the target of many negative comments.

One pattern that was communicated unintentionally by the photographs was the degree to which people choose their furniture and spaces independently. Unlike previous generations, it appears that Gen Y'ers do not seem to have a strong sense that certain kinds of furniture belong only in tatami rooms and others only in western style rooms. They ignore these traditional "rules" and put what they like where they want to in the house.

Daishinsha confirmed and expanded on these findings through depth interviews with a few of the families that participated in the self documentary study. We also interviewed people in related businesses such as home builders, architects and furniture manufacturers and did some quantitative research using the internet that focused specifically on how current Gen Y homeowners feel about the bathroom vanity they have now.

This additional research assured our clients that our findings in the ethnographic research were in fact quite solid and aided the process of connecting the observations to business goals. Two themes came across very strongly: young Japanese homeowners are moving away from preference for sets designed and arranged by others. They want more control over each element. They put more importance on the feeling of the materials and design, and in having room for self expression, than on famous brands and newness for its own sake.

Daishinsha created personas for two segments within the Gen Y homeowner group. These personas are not statistical, demographic portrayals but rather fully fleshed out descriptions of people including their values, lifestyle and preferences. Each persona has a name and photo. These are not real people (though the photo is borrowed from someone real) but rather created characters built from a composite of the input collected through the ethnographic research techniques. These personas offer a customer model that is closer to a real person than models built just on demographic data. They give the client a specific focal point to aid in the many judgments and tradeoffs they must make throughout the product development process.

One of Daishinsha's deliverables to the client was a series of sketches of bathroom vanities we feel might meet the needs we perceived. This helps translate our own reactions and responses to the people we observed during the study into a form that provides input the client's product development process.

Another technique used in ethnographic research is videotaping. For a catalog retailer of women's fashions and accessories, Daishinsha videotaped long interviews of good customers showing how they use the client's catalog, from the moment they get it in the mail to when they place an order. We saw what parts of the catalog they turn to first, how they select and mark items for consideration, narrow down their choices and place the order. We also videotaped their reactions as they opened the box when the order arrived a few days later.

The client was able to learn a lot about their good customers that the company's order history database could not reveal. Seeing the real reactions of customers to the merchandise offerings, the organization of the catalog and the packaging of the products helped the company get to know its customers much more closely. Video footage can be particularly useful in making a company's customers very real to top executives who don't have frequent customer contact. Seeing the joyful anticipation a customer feels opening the box, or watching a customer throw an entire flyer into the trash without even reading it, can make a strong impression. Such input stimulates deep thinking and intuition that can lead to innovation in products, sales and marketing strategy and even a company's fundamental sense of its role in its customers' lives.