



MIKE KIPPENHAN
910 SE 42th St., #410
Portland, OR 97215

503-583-0753
kip@compoundmotion.com

www.compoundmotion.com
Instagram: ultratype

Fred Meyer and design anthropological methodology

Introduction

Fred Meyer is a grocery and general merchandise retailer located in the northwestern United States of Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. With annual sales of approximately \$7.5bn U.S., the company's 133 stores are founded upon the one-stop-shopping concept—food, home and, clothing under one roof. With an annual advertising and marketing budget of approximately \$64m, Fred Meyer (herein referred to as FM) directs a majority of their resources to print advertising. Even though print is the industry standard, numerous competitors have recently implemented advanced digital offerings aimed at their more technologically savvy customers—these moves have not been countered by FM.

As FM's interactive art director, it's my experience that the company has little quantitative or qualitative data regarding its customer's shopping behavior from planning to check out. This ultimately leads one to question if FM has any idea of the advertising's effectiveness. Presently, FM has only one avenue by which they can gather customer insights—the Customer Insights Marketing (CIM) team. Utilizing "specific, highly practical questions" that Anderson (2009) considers the hallmark of traditional market researchers, the CIM teams solicit their 15,000 members for feedback on any number of topics. While this method is effective for providing cursory level customer insights, it is not designed to explore topics beyond their predetermined scope. Madsbjerg and Rasmussen (2014, p. 82) add to this by stating that customer profiles created by this type of research are "far from complete and are often misleading." Additionally, the CIM panel members represent highly engaged shoppers, many of whom regularly participate in marketing research—this leads to a question of objectivity. Considering that approximately 43,000 customers transactions weekly in urban FM stores, the relatively small CIM panel proves that only a small percentage of FM customers are being engaged. In the case of FM, the company clings to assumptions about customers based on the company's biases (Madsbjerg and Rasmussen 2014, p. 82) which are founded in individual employees' first hand experience, not research conducted by unbiased experts. This environment of being in a highly competitive retail market, yet having little quantitative and qualitative data regarding their customers is compounded by the fact that most senior managers have spent all, if not the majority of their careers with FM and lack the formal education and training to understand how research can effect business decisions.

While it may appear surprising that FM doesn't place more emphasis on consumer research, I believe it also stems from the fact that over 90% of employees are hourly workers which creates a task-based approach to work not conducive to strategic planning. What this ultimately does is create a risk adverse upper management who are only willing to "try something" after it's been implemented by other retailers. With that in mind, and with hopes of implementing ethnographically based consumer research exploring how customers plan their shopping—which in turn will be used to design the most effective way to communicate to them—a small scale project is outlined.

The project

The ultimate goal of this project is to utilize ethnographic research of FM's customers as the starting point to help define future advertising. As Anderson (2014) points out, the traditional methods of ethnographic study, such as 3 week field trips, are no longer optimal for complex business environments. This, unfortunately, creates a dilemma. In order to "look at the present set of 'what is' conditions and develop a knowledge-supported imagination of what 'could be'" as described by Bezaitis and Robinson (2011, p. 192), the research must be conducted in a manner as not to become merely "descriptive work". This represents a classic design anthropology scenario—ethnography to define past and present states and design to address present and future (Hunt 2011, Halse 2013). In the case of FM where 'tried and true' print advertising dominates the conversation, it provides the ideal playground to conduct research that rethinks both design and anthropology, this is what Gatt and Ingold refer to as "anthropology-by-means-of-design" (Gatt and Ingold 2013, p. 141). In this relationship, design allows for more of a "improvisatory dynamic of everyday life" while anthropology can play with the "speculative inquiry into the conditions of possibilities of human life" (Gatt and Ingold 2013, p. 141). This forward looking interaction is characterized by Gatt and Ingold as "correspondence"—the interweaving of disciplines not to describe the world, "but to answer to it" (2013, p. 141-144). With more emphasis on the interplay of the two disciplines, correspondence is an evolution of the iterative design process as described by Halse (2013).

Prior to starting this research, the Q.A.M.E. for FM must be defined. The central question being the phenomona: "How do consumers construct their food and home goods shopping experience." Based on this, three pertinent assumptions arise: first, that people plan, which implies looking at ads; second, that people shop in-store because viable online alternatives don't exist; and finally, that retailers benefit from consumers shopping in-store as they inevitably will find something they did not plan for (i.e. not on their shopping list). These assumptions help identify the "Big Unknowns" as outlined by Madsbjerg and Rasmussen as "highly unfamiliar business problems." (2014, p. 87). For FM, even though they are a successful retail chain with an established customer base, the company has not created the foundation by which to begin the research process. The methods and evidence will be discussed below.

FM's need to answer this question and exploring its associated assumptions goes without saying, the point, instead, is to define what ethnographic methodology to use. Returning to the idea of a playground, it would be interesting to experiment with two wholly different ethnography methodologies to determine if/how they yield different/similar results as well as which would be best suited for FM. Additionally, the utilization of two methodologies and the ensuing design conceiving reinforces



Fred Meyer and design anthropological methodology, *continued*

the idea of correspondence as well as helping answer how FM can create a dialogue with customers in a evolving retail marketplace.

The first in-store methodology would be similar to what Lucy Suchman undertook at Xerox PARC. Briefly, when Xerox was faced with customer complaining of “too complex” in regards to a new photocopier, the design team thought they could address the dissatisfaction by installing a larger video display (Suchman et al. 1992). Suchman realized that the designers were only assuming they understood the root of the complaints and instead she recognized that only through in-context observation could they identify the root cause. This specific task-based form of ethnographic observation has both its strengths and weakness. The ability to observe in detail specific tasks enabled Suchman not only identify users' difficulties, but also make larger observations in regards to how users interpret new technologies. While this method of observation offers tremendous insight into closely related tasks, it does not seek a larger understanding of the end user. Therefore, the following question can be asked: Is grocery shopping planning indicative of how consumers shop as a whole. Assumption associated are: In-depth analysis will yield enough data to develop a design concept; and, participants are willing to divulge in-depth insight into their grocery shopping behaviors. To conduct this methodology, the design anthropologists would ask consumers specific questions regarding their grocery shopping planning. These questions could explore behaviors such as where they viewed the ad (online, newspaper); how important sales are; how did they go about discovering non-list items; and, how much of the store did they visit during the shopping trip. By focusing questions on participants' grocery shopping only, design anthropologists can generate a comprehensive knowledge base for this behavior.

The second ethnographic methodology would be derived from the framework created by Garson and Read (1892) for laymen providing descriptions of foreign cultures to anthropologists at the height of England's colonial empire. Garson and Read's methodology is ideal when a design anthropologist is uncertain of what they're looking for. The very strength of this broad and shallow methodology is that by gathering as much information as possible, an understanding of the participant will hopefully emerge. Conversely, a broad and shallow framework such as this may result in information, that would otherwise only be found through in-depth study, being missed and therefore an inaccurate representation of the participant arises. Another potentially beneficial aspect of this method is that patterns, which would be missed in a specific task based method, would be captured. For example, while Suchman discovered that complaints arising from the photocopier were the result of users' orientation to new technologies, she did not explore whether the same users had difficulty with new technology as a whole. Or, if their orientation towards office technology differed from home technology. For this broad and shallow methodology, the same question used for the specific task based methodology is relevant: Is grocery shopping planning indicative of how consumers shop as a whole. The associated assumptions, however, are different: A broad and shallow documentation of a participant will yield enough data for a relevant design concept to be developed if participants are willing to provide a broad overview of their lives. Shopping planning patterns, or the lack of, would quickly emerge from this methodology. It can offer insights to the relationship between shopping for food and shopping for luxury items, as well as how one shops on-line versus in-store. At the end of this methodology the design anthropologist would have compiled enough data to provide a broad understanding of shoppers. The next phase of the research would be for both methodologies to implement a series of methods.

For the specific task based methodology, triading can be highly effective. Martin and Hanington (2012, p. 186) describe triading as “a technique that can be used to elicit constructs that people create in order to make sense of the world around them.” In this method, the participant would be presented with six forms of grocery advertising—newspaper, direct mail, in-store, on-line ads, TV, and radio—from which they would pick three. From these, the participant would then explain how one differs from the remaining two. The object is for the participant to construct meaning of all three, which in-turn will provide the design anthropologist a “framework to capture people's deep-rooted sentiments and perceptions” (Martin and Hanington 2012, p. 186). The importance of this is that by requiring the participant to analyze and differentiate one from the other, an insight into preferences and how they relate to one another will be revealed that otherwise may have been missed in standard interviewing. By utilizing triading the participant reveals aspects of two additional advertising vehicles that otherwise would not have been explored. For example, there is considerable difference in answering “newspaper is my preferred advertising” than “TV and radio advertising is intrusive, newspapers are not.”

Another effective method for specific task-based methodology is time-aware research. By engaging with a participant in real time, in this case when they are planning their grocery shopping, the design anthropologist can present a series of related questions that provide “insight into how they accomplish self-directed goals” (Martin and Hanington 2012, p. 182). The design anthropologist could quickly determine why the participant chose one form of advertising over another and how they determined what went on their shopping list. The importance of this is its implementation during, or immediately after, the planning event—thus, the information gathered reflects actual behavior and not hind-sight.

Given the cursory nature of the broad and shallow methodology, selected methods would have to adhere to the same approach—personal inventory is the first. By examining a collection of artifacts associated with the participant's shopping, from planning to check-out, the design anthropologist can construct the participant's orientation to event. For example, does the participant have specific items such as coupon notebooks or websites they utilized when planning, or reusable shopping bags? In the case of coupon notebooks, this type of specialized tool implies a level of consistent planning utilizing print of



Fred Meyer and design anthropological methodology, *continued*

web-based advertising. Included in the artifacts are smart phones which could illustrate if customers access FM's app or website when in-store, or if they call family members during shopping. Personal inventories, as Martin and Hanington (2012, p. 130) state, "allow the designer to see and understand the relevance of objects in a user's life from the participant's point of view..."

A second method useful for the broad and shallow methodology would be shadowing, where the design anthropologist tracks a participant as they shop. This method would be useful in understanding the planning process as well as become invaluable in understanding how shoppers navigate a store. It is this in-store time where questions such as "how do individuals select non-list items, and if in-store advertisements have any bearing on purchasing?" arise. Considering the large square footage FM stores occupy, shadowing can help understand if/how the features of the app can be enhanced to assist customers' in-store experience. While FM offers smart phone optimized digital coupons, clerk and technical issues often arise at check out which could dissuade further use, thus impeding the company's digital initiative.

Comparing the methods for specific task-based and broad and shallow methodologies on an XY axis mapping depth of inquiry (deep/shallow) and data type (quantitative/qualitative) illustrates that between the four, they occupy all quadrants of the map (Figure 1). Considering the highly subjective nature of grocery shopping, this diversity of methods assures that a broad spectrum of customer experiences will be captured. This spectrum is further enhanced by the fact that time aware research and shadowing are based on the participants' present actions, and triad and inventory are based on present/past. This ability to capture a spectrum of consumer data and experiences is especially important considering FM stores attract a wide range of customer demographics. When comparing the urban areas of Portland and Seattle to rural hubs such as Klamath Falls and Pocatello, one sees not only a variety of demographics and technological aptitude, but also shopping behavior. For example, customers in rural areas often make fewer shopping trips, but purchase more per visit than urban customers—this is a direct reflection on rural customers having to travel further to reach a store.

Bring it all together

In the traditional design anthropological sense, anthropology and design work through participatory design to visualize a design concept appropriate for the participants—Gatt and Ingold's "correspondence". This project, however, is only focusing on the first component, the ethnographic research. The reasoning is two fold. First, due to the fact that ethnographic research is not utilized at FM, it must be demonstrated to upper management that ethnography yields valuable insights which in turn directly translate into actionable processes. It is only with evidence on how consumers construct their shopping experience that FM will be willing to go to the expense of examining their customer communications. Communications, including the majority of their budgetary expenditure—newspaper advertising—that have seen only incremental changes since the company's founding in 1922. In short, a business case must be made, and ethnography is the first step. Second, considering the breath of the question "How do consumers construct their food and home goods shopping experience?", it would be almost impossible to speculate on the research's outcome. Coupled with the fact that each of the assumptions creates an additional level of depth, any participatory design and concepting could only be implemented in a fashion that is not rendered impossible by addressing too much. Take for example the assumption "People shop in-store because viable online alternatives don't exist." Beyond the initial inquiry of on-line grocery shopping opportunities, this assumption will require exploring consumer's willingness to order fresh foods without seeing the product prior to purchasing. Or, if it is in-store experiences (smells, sounds, sights, etc.) that result in a satisfying atmosphere on-line shopping can never emulate. It will be this collection of data and its subsequent interpretation that will create the foundation by which design concepting can begin.

The failure to recognize food shopping as a phenomenon—the experience of shopping and the inherent fickleness of human nature—has resulted in FM reducing their customers to a monetary transaction divorced from the human experience. Ethnographic research would make understandable how diverse the act of shopping can be—an act most consumers perform on a regular basis with little self-reflection. It can help FM understand the nuances of their planning and if/how changes occur between the time customers enter the store and when they check out and what, if any, advertising had to do with it. It is this idea of shopping as a phenomenon that reframes the act as sensemaking, which Toit (2012) describes as reducing the complexity of an individual's world. Furthermore, Madsbjerg and Rasmussen (2014, p. 82) describe it as: "...starts by examining the roots of their behavior—the complex interplay between their interior lives and their social, cultural, and physical worlds. It digs deep for insights that elude more-traditional business tools." Sensemaking goes beyond asking simple marketing questions such as "Do you prefer newspaper or email advertising?" to challenging customers with questions such as "How do you go about constructing your shopping experience?" Once sensemaking has been engaged, grocery shopping transforms from a faceless singular act analyzed at the cash register to a reflection of each customer and how they've constructed a grocery shopping plan suitable for their life.



Fred Meyer and design anthropological methodology, *continued*

Figures

Figure 1. XY mapping of the depth of inquiry (deep/shallow) and data type (quantitative/qualitative) for the four methods (after Plowman 2003).

Sources

- Anderson, K, 2009, Ethnographic Research: A Key to Strategy, *Harvard Business Review*, 87(3):24.
- Bezaitis, M, and Robinson, RE, 2011, Valuable to Values: How 'User Research' Ought to Change, pp. 185-201, in Clarke, AJ, ed. *Design Anthropology: Object Culture in the 21st Century*. SpringerWien, New York.
- Garson, JG, and Read, CH, eds, 1892, *Notes and Queries on Anthropology: Edited for the British Association for the Advancement of Science*, 2nd ed, The Anthropological Institute, London.
- Gatt, C, and Ingold, T, 2013, From Description to Correspondence: Anthropology in Real Time, pp. 139-158, in Gunn, W, Otto, T and Smith, RS, eds. *Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice*, Bloomsbury, NY.
- Halse, J, 2013, Ethnographies of the Possible, pp. 180-196, in Gunn, W, Otto, T and Smith, RS, eds. *Design Anthropology: Theory and Practice*, Bloomsbury, NY.
- Hunt, J, 2011, Prototyping the Social: Temporality and Speculative Futures at the Intersection of Design and Culture, pp. 33-44, in Clarke, AJ, ed. *Design Anthropology: Object Culture in the 21st Century*. SpringerWien, New York.
- Madsbjerg, C and Rasmussen, MB, 2014, An Anthropologist walks into the Bar..., *Harvard Business Review*: 80-88.
- Martin, B, and Hanington, B, 2012, *Universal Methods of Design: 100 Ways to Research Complex Problems, Develop Innovative Ideas, and Design Effective Solutions*, Rockport Publishers, Beverly, MA.
- Plowman, T, 2003, Ethnography and Critical Design Practice, pp. 30-38, in Laurel, B, ed., *Design Research: Methods and Perspectives*, The MIT Press, Cambridge.
- Suchman, L, Blomberg, J, Orr, JE, and Trigg, R, 1999, Reconstructing Technologies as Social Practice, *American Behavioral Scientists*, 43(3): 392-408.
- Toit, A du, 2012, Postmodernism and Organizations, in. Sim, S, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, 3rd ed., Taylor and Francis, Hoboken.



Fred Meyer and design anthropological methodology, *continued*

Figure 1

