

Ethnography and music. Disseminating ethnographic research inside organizations

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In the applied context of ethnography its value depends not only on the quality of the research product alone but also on how it is received by the business audience. This paper presents some variables that describe and hope to overcome common barriers to the appropriate reception of ethnographic research in the business context. We are using music as a metaphor to the discussion of barriers and research use.

Ethnography is an invaluable method for any organization, its wide range of applications can benefit different areas and levels; from Human resources, Finance, Manufacturing to Innovation. The advantages of ethnography are somewhat obvious to ethnographers but still almost imperceptible to most members of an organization. Every day there is more and more evidence that the word “ethnography” is slowly shifting from academic “jargon” to almost becoming business cliché. A lot has been done, mostly in the US over the last 10 years toward ethnography in business, and positioning this term in the mainstream. The media has been an important ally for this, magazines, newspapers, pundits and blogs have disseminated the benefits of ethnography; from the pioneering FastCompany¹ article portraying the work of E-Lab (1996) to the most recent story in BusinessWeek² (2006) in which several columns are dedicated to explain what ethnography means for business, giving examples of successful ethnography projects. As this article puts it “... ethnography has entered prime time”. However, there is still a long road ahead to disseminate the real value of ethnographic research within organizations and to turn it into an indispensable tool for businesses, both in the US and even more in other countries.

As professional ethnographers we are most times involved in communicating the results of ethnographic projects, making sure our clients understand the value of our work and that it turns into actionable solutions. However, most of our clients are not ethnographers and may lack the training or sensibility of an ethnographer, they are also already busy with their different roles, such as marketing, human resources or product development. This makes it harder for ethnographers since the value of our work is not just measured in rigorous fieldwork, our exhaustive analysis, or our dense descriptive writing (all attributes which

¹ Posner, Bruce, The Future of Marketing is Looking at You, FastCompany Magazine, Issue 05, Page 105, October 1996

² Ante Spencer E., and Cliff Edwards, The Science of Desire, BusinessWeek Magazine, June 5, 2006.

ethnographers value) but also in the case for the EPIC audience on how useful the work is for business.

Even in-house ethnographers in corporations with some ethnography history (i.e. Intel, Microsoft, Motorola, P&G) are often challenged when trying to justify their project or when presenting final results to non-ethnographers. The fact is that the responsibility of ethnographers working for corporations (both internally or as consultants) does not end with the product itself, but in making sure the product is disseminated and used. “Being heard” is nowadays a responsibility of ethnographers, and the more we can do to make ourselves heard, the more we will be able to justify the value we can deliver.³

In this paper, music is to be used as a metaphor for the assimilation of ethnographic results by a business audience. Music is the product of our work, whereas playing is the delivery of our work. We believe that music is intended to have an effect on the audience the same way the delivery of ethnographic work can have an effect on business clients. There are crucial components to the performance which make for a better or a worse experience with music or ethnographic research. For example, if you are alone, driving a convertible in a sunny Italian autostrada you might choose loud, and cheery music, but if you are at home and want to put your baby to sleep what you need is a soft lullaby. The same way we adapt music to our lives, we need to adapt the delivery of ethnographic research to the business context. If you conduct research for exploring potential opportunities using a new technology to an R&D team, you require different formats, interactions, and content than the one you need to describe a customer segment to a marketing team.

As with any ethnographic project, music is composed of two parts: production (turning information into knowledge) and play (disseminating sound). Both are equally important as the right effect is achieved by the right mix of both parts. Listening to Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony in AM radio is not as compelling as being in front of a live symphony orchestra. Music is useless unless it is played, just as knowledge is useless unless someone does something with it. Disseminating ethnographic knowledge within an organization is crucial for delivering value, and accomplishing the right dissemination is key. Most of us have had the experience of doing the work and not carrying across our message, the implications of our research. Research like music sometimes fails to deliver its full effect. Distortions, noises, environments, bad reproduction or many other factors can affect the listeners’ complete appreciation. As with music, the delivery of ethnographic research to business sometimes falls short of delivering the right experience to businesses.

³ This is not to different from what Van Maanen described as the three moments of ethnography; data collection, writing the ethnography, reading and reception of different audiences. Van Maanen, *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. Chicago Guides to Writing, Editing, and Publishing. University of Chicago Press. 1988

During our years as professional ethnographers our work has suffered exposure to several listening “distortions” or situations where ethnography fails to deliver its full value. These distortions are really barriers which prevent businesses from reaping the rewards for good quality ethnographic work. Although we recognize there are many other barriers, the most prominent ones we have encountered are:

Don't like the music (the first time I listen to it)

Ethnographic research is a relatively new discipline within business; a lot of people have never been exposed to it and therefore lack an appreciation for the type of research we do. Constant questioning arises, such as: “So, you interviewed only five families?” or “Did they say that or it is your interpretation?” This lack of appreciation happens because the audience is used to another type of music (such as focus groups or quantitative research) and they need to understand ethnographic research in order to appreciate it and feel confident using it.

The same happens the first time one listens to a new band; with the first exposure it is quite hard to turn into a fan, but once you are familiar with the style, you may like most of the songs played in that style (even willing to pay for it). This is what happens with companies who have a positive experience doing their first ethnographic research. Suddenly the second project gets more receptiveness.

The piece is too long to be appreciated in its totality

Ethnographic research takes time, results are often very detailed, and sometimes ethnographers feel they need to communicate everything they learned in the project. Research methods and disciplinary stands are sometimes at odds with the demands of marketing and product development. The patience required to conduct ethnographic research is not always something business can do, where time is one of the most important assets. So taking more time than needed to produce ethnographic research can be disastrous.

This not only applies to the length of a research project, but also to the presentation of results. Many times researchers have a hard time synthesizing their work in a business presentation format, thus falling short of expectations with the audience.

If all you need is a jingle and you are exposed to a 30-minute Mahler symphony, appreciation for the piece could be incomplete, only partially understood, or simply ignored.

Too many different non-rhythmical sounds (think John Cage)

One of the things that ethnographers strive for is exhaustive documentation and detailed descriptions. At the end of the data collection phase, we may end up with thousands of images, hours of video and booklets with notes. Analysis is no exception as we may end up with a collection of different messages, theories and frameworks, all true but not all

equally relevant. A common situation for ethnographers is having too many ideas on our plate, too little time and usually an urgent need to communicate everything we have learned. Condensing all this information and aligning all the messages into a single song can be challenging, and business audiences lack the interest to follow an intellectual whirlwind like the ones we enjoy.

If you have heard abstract music by John Cage you will feel what some business audiences experience when they read or listen to reports of ethnographic research..

I have heard that song before, therefore I know it already (boring repetitive)

Business people must process different types of information every day, and ethnographic research is only one of these forms. This information deluge is used as input to make decisions: introduce a new product, invest in a specific technology or solve a particular issue. In a sea of information, ethnographic research may look similar to other types of information, so it becomes hard to distinguish how it is different from market research if close attention is not paid.

It is like a version of an old song that does not seem to introduce anything new or interesting, inviting us to jump to the conclusion early that we have heard it before and to tune out.

Many business people are not accustomed to looking for the subtle differences that are easily distinguishable to ethnographers. They are less sensitive to the results, and this increases the chance of being perceived as the same as they knew before.

These barriers are just some situations which we have seen hinder the assimilation and dissemination of ethnographic research inside an organization. Sometimes the problem lies in the product (bad research), but in most cases the problem lies in the way it is being delivered. Finding a way to improve the delivery of ethnographic research is key.

A Formula for improving the delivery of ethnographic research

In order to fully appreciate music, we need the highest standards in: 1) the product (music) and 2) the delivery (play). Likewise, the value of research in an organization depends on the research product and the way it is being disseminated.

$$V \text{ (value of research)} = Rq \text{ (research product)} * Df \text{ (Dissemination factor)}$$

(Df = Speed, Transcendence, Reach, Excitement, Exposure, and Involvement)

This formula highlights the connection between the outcome of a research product and the way it is delivered. The research product when multiplied by a high Dissemination

Factor, brings more value to the company. If the Df is low, it may undermine even the most insightful and well-run research project.

Dissemination factor

But the Df is composed of several variables. We have uncovered six of them which make contribute to the good or bad dissemination of research inside organizations. These are: Speed, Transcendence, Reach, “Compellingness”, Exposure, and Involvement. These principles (or variables) help us enhance the quality of our work and help the audience better assimilate the results of ethnographic work.⁴

Understanding these principles can aid the organizational ethnographer in the task of “being heard” inside the organization and offer a way to increase the value that ethnography can deliver to business customers.

Speed: The rate at which new knowledge is spread inside organizations. This is important because research knowledge for business purposes expires earlier than knowledge for academic purposes. And just as some types of music depend on trends or yearly seasons (have you tried listening to Christmas music in April?) ethnographic research can be awkwardly perceived if communicated in an untimely fashion.

People inside the organization need to make use of research knowledge when it is still relevant and can be put to the best use as it becomes available. Business decisions need to be made in a timely manner, and often ethnographic research arrives too late to influence crucial decisions.

Speed is measured in a scale of slow (research arrived too late to influence decisions) to fast (research results communicated in time to influence various decisions, even those that were not directly targeted to benefit from the research outcomes).

One way to increase the speed of dissemination is by making our research process transparent and visible to others as a way to communicate intermediate results throughout—even if these have not gained a final form. Having a physical or virtual space for collaboration that is easy to understand—even for people not directly involved in the research project—proves to be an effective way to influence business decisions before the final outcome is crafted. But even this collaboration needs to be encouraged, so using social networks (inviting information brokers to the project room) or offering moral incentives, such as a sign-up sheet in the project room, are practices which will help increase participation and the speed at which knowledge is transmitted inside an organization. For example, during a project, we designed a WIKI in which members of the team would add comments and analysis. The WIKI would record the number of times that people had

⁴ Most of these principles have been drawn from our experiences with companies in United States, Europe and Latin America that are less familiar with ethnography and ethnographic methods.

accessed as well as the type of changes they did to the analysis. Anyone on the team could see who was the most constant collaborator.

Transcendence: The ability that research outcomes have to influence crucial aspects of the organization. This is one of the most important variables because research is a means to an end, *not an end by itself*. “Some music has a moment of popularity and fades quickly, while other music, some of the Beatles songs or soundtracks from movies such as *The Sound of Music* transcend time and continue to impact new audiences.” Likewise, to have lasting impact, the intent of research needs to be justified with a resonating sound and transcendental business proposition.

Transcendence is measured with an “impact” scale. A low score means research has influenced marginal, low-risk decisions, for example: measuring brand recognition. A high score means research influenced crucial, important and high-risk business decisions, such as a product portfolio for the coming five years.

One way to affect transcendence is for the research lead to gain a better understanding of the business strategy that will be informed with the research and also the business context in which this takes place. Sometimes, research teams are short sighted in their business perspective, don’t have a legitimate understanding of the business implications of their research, or are simply not exposed to the business imperatives. The best research proposals we have been exposed to have been co-created between researchers and business managers, and are iterated several times before a final agreement is made on a prioritized set of objectives, methodologies, and expected outcomes that everyone understands and can buy into. Objectives of a research project should be prioritized and the transcendence should be explicit from the beginning of a project. Having a problem definition session between the different members of a project helps. One in which all constituencies define what they intend to obtain from the research and jointly get at the real source of the problem/issue or generate hypotheses together.

Compellingness (or excitement): The excitement created due to the format in which the research outcomes are communicated, which increases the memorability of the results.

Very often slideshows are used to communicate research findings and the most excitement is an occasional video throughout the presentation. The easy way out for presenting ethnographic research is either a document or a slideshow; however, passive presentations are not the only format useful for disseminating information and certainly not the most compelling.

Music also has different formats, and each format is more or less compelling according to the context and situation. Listening to music on an iPod allows for ubiquity but is not as compelling as going to a live concert.

Compellingness is measured in a scale of engagement: A low score goes to “very boring / audience not engaged” and a high score goes to “highly entertaining / audience very engaged”.

We have used several techniques to increase the level of engagement of the audience when presenting ethnographic research materials, and the most effective ones include some level of interaction. Engaging the audience in an exercise, quiz, or a more elaborate activity, such as role playing, helps the audience be more engaged and results from the research get assimilated more efficiently. For example: During a project presentation, we developed a game in which two teams were formed. Each team would represent a user type (we had two segments). Each team was given a set of cards with questions related to the behavior, characteristics and needs of their customer segment. Each team would then ask these questions to the other team and the other team had to answer these questions using as input the information that was presented. The end result was that members of both teams had exposure to the results of both customer segments.

Reach (vertical and horizontal): The ability for research outcomes to cross-pollinate other areas and levels inside the organization. This reach is accomplished to a greater or lesser extent depending on the organization type, structure and communication policies. Nevertheless, it is important for an ethnographer to understand the way the organization communicates and actively push for assimilation of results both vertically (different levels) and horizontally (different areas), even if those areas are not directly related to the project. Both depth and breadth are important, vertical reach is important because it increases the likelihood knowledge will influence top-down decisions and strategic (vs. tactical) plans; horizontal reach is important because it allows for convergence of ideas and approach and for interdisciplinary work to happen more efficiently.

The equivalent of “reach” in Music would be the “volume” at which it is played. If music is played loudly enough it will reach more people—even if those people were not originally interested in that music.

Researchers sometimes favor secrecy over openness; but in order to deliver value to an organization, ethnographic researchers should affect others in the organization for example: Operations, finance, human resources, or strategic planning.

Reach is measured in the number of people exposed to some part or all of the outcomes of the research. The higher the number of people who are exposed, the more the more likely that ethnographic research will deliver value; the fewer the people exposed, the less the chance that research will reach the potential audiences.

Reach is accomplished by companywide presentations, designing research teams as interdisciplinary ones, creating easy to understand frameworks that can carry throughout other areas (people can take these and insert into their presentations), by immersing people in physical spaces or labs or other environments, through internal public relations

(newsletters), by encouraging accessibility of team members through social networks. (could work more on detailing specific examples of how we have done this) This is actually what is happening when organizations organize their internal information with social networking oriented software. Tags are a great way of people defining what things are and then letting others discover or generate new relationships from that information.

Exposure: This variable refers to the number of times that research outcomes are—partially or entirely, consciously or unconsciously—seen by someone inside the organization. Exposure refers to redundancy of the message but not of the message form. The first time we listen to a song, we may not like it as much as we do after listening to it repeatedly. In the same way, people need to be exposed to research knowledge frequently in order to reap its learning. Exposure does not mean repeating presentations over and over, but instead to finding ways to make the results of our work more visible to others in different ways, different formats that reinforce the same messages.

A research document that is seen during a presentation and then is used only for sporadic reference would have a low exposure level. A research outcome that is seen by many people several times throughout the organization could result in better and more informed decisions taken by the organization, in the end it is about the ideas that remain, the actions the research triggers.

One way to increase exposure is to create different formats for communicating research outcomes, such as posters, screen savers or pamphlets that describe parts of the research outcomes that are relevant to specific groups of people. For example, a poster with a framework and several images describing different customer segments was placed within visual reach around the marketing department to reinforce the key outcomes in the research presentation. This allowed for most marketing people to assimilate research implications faster and more accurately than if they had just attended a presentation. This format also allowed for its reuse in more situations since it was really easy to reference.

Involvement: How extensively an organization's employees become involved in the development of the research project throughout all of its phases (from the project design, fieldwork, analysis and communication of results). The consequences of high involvement are: 1) higher perceived, 2) higher commitment to the project, 3) more knowledge "volume" to be shared with business constituencies, not just results, but examples in the form of fieldwork anecdotes and stories 4) Implications that are easier to understand by the organization since they have been part of the making of the research, active learners during the process of research.

Very often, the climax in any music concert happens when musicians engage the public in singing, or clapping their hands in unison. That feeling of the audience being in sync with the musicians is similar to what happens when you are presented with research results you have helped shape.

Involvement is measured in the number of people involved and their degree of involvement: A low score is “I sat down in a couple of focus group sessions”. A high score is “I was present in interviews, participated in analysis and was present in final presentation”.

There are different ways to achieve involvement, both formal or informal. An example of the former would be having high-level executives officially endorse the research project or make participation obligatory. But we have seen that the best way to increase involvement is by creating a fun, relaxed and engaging participatory interactions. Well planned fieldwork, intellectually-stimulating debrief sessions, empathy (i.e. avoid the customary 12hr. fieldwork days), and having interesting researchers with good interpersonal skills also helps. It is amazing the effect that good food can make.

Concluding remarks

In the last ten years we have come a long way in positioning ethnographic research within businesses. The research product, like any good music is fine, but there are still a lot of improvements that can be made in the delivery of our music. Research outcomes need to reach a wider audience inside organizations; understanding and applying our formula is one step toward accomplishing this goal. Once we know the variables—and we are sure there are many others besides those presented in this paper—we can begin to work on the specifics.

These variables make up the dissemination factor, which can increase or decrease the acceptance of ethnographic research inside organizations. We are sure there are other variables and solutions for improving dissemination. The point is that the value of ethnographic research in an organization does not depend solely on the research product, but on how that product gets disseminated and used in the organization to create value.

As more and more companies work on the delivery of research and its effectiveness, the value and the relevance of ethnographic research to the bottom line and to the organization’s competitive advantage will become more and more widespread.