Strangers or Kin? Exploring Marketing's Relationship to Design Ethnography and New Product Development

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Marketers represent a particularly significant class of colleagues that corporate ethnographers must engage with, with a central role both in commissioning fieldwork and converting its findings into marketplace offerings. This paper explores the interaction between the two functions, asking, "What is the relationship between marketing and design ethnography and how does each function inform—or inhibit—the other?" A review of the various streams of academic literature related to marketing's role in product development and innovation is presented, with particular emphasis on scholars' growing attention to the cultural context(s) of consumption as well as the use of ethnography in consumer research. Consonant with the 2008 conference theme of (In)Visibility, the paper considers how the divergent perspectives of marketers and corporate ethnographers create mutual tension and can render each discipline "blind" to the value of the other's work.

INTRODUCTION

Corporate ethnographers, relatively new to the product development family, often feel more like adopted kin than blood relations to the marketers, product designers, and engineers with whom they work. Are such colleagues literally "un-familiar" with ethnography? If recent conference presentations, articles, and blog posts by practitioners of applied ethnography are any indication, many corporate ethnographers experience professional marginalization within what has traditionally been a highly positivist and "metric-focal" space. Whether by offering strategic advice for getting ethnographic analysis acknowledged and/or accepted by engineers and marketers (D'Hooge 2007); disassociation with marketing's reputation for "myth, fiction or spin" (Rodriguez 2007); or in calls to "consciously [play] with the shifting values of our fieldwork, our corporate expertise and cultural politics of our work [in order to] fruitfully engage with our colleagues" (Thomas and Lang 2007, p. 79), there is evidence of a persistent tension between the producers (ethnographers) and consumers (marketers, designers, engineers) of corporate ethnography.

Marketers represent a particularly significant class of colleagues that corporate ethnographers must engage with. Despite the integral role marketers can play both in commissioning fieldwork and converting its findings into marketplace offerings, to date there has been only limited consideration of the role that corporate or design ethnographers[1] play vis-à-vis the marketing function. While articles by Maish and Wesolkowska (2007) and Sherry (2007) represent notable exceptions, the former limit their discussion to what they

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[1]Because this paper focuses on ethnography in the context of product development, the terms "corporate ethnography" and "design ethnography" are used interchangeably and refer both to in-house and outsourced ethnographic research.

term "marketing ethnography" (defined by a focus on brand strategy and innovation that does not consider product design and development) while Sherry (2007) only addresses ethnographers' experience of marketing's orientation indirectly.

As such, when marketing is considered at all, its perspective is regularly constituted by corporate ethnographers as out of touch with the realities of the very marketplace from which it derives its purpose. That this should be so is particularly striking considering that in both the marketing literature (cf. Kohli and Jaworski 1990; Narver and Slater 1990) and organization science literature (cf. Atuahene-Gima and Ko 2001), marketing is the functional area most closely associated with the consumer's needs and desires. The present discussion addresses this disjuncture by considering marketing's foundational paradigms and pursuits vis-à-vis corporate ethnography in an effort to reveal those activities that bridge the divide between marketing and corporate ethnography and those that widen it. Consonant with the 2008 conference theme of *(In)Visibility*, the paper examines the divergent perspectives of marketers and corporate ethnographers and how they can foster tension, rendering each discipline blind to the value of the other's work.

WHAT CLAN ARE YOU FROM? CONSUMER RESEARCH AND PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

Influenced by the work of economist Joseph Schumpeter, who defined innovation as "setting up a new production function" (in Robertson 1967, p. 14), scholarly inquiry on innovation and new product development has been present in the marketing literature since the 1930s. For example, in a paper presented to the American Marketing Society[2] in 1936, Nash defined four activities associated with product development: laboratory research; product research, industrial styling and coordinated planning (Nash 1936). In an early recognition of the power of consumers still invoked today, he asserted:

> We are in and moving more strongly into a buyer's market where consumers will have more to say. What manufacturers think they would like to *sell* will have to compete with products designed to give consumers what they want to *buy* for better living (Nash 1936, pp. 254-5, italics in original).

Consumer research as a marketing sub-specialization is approximately forty years old. However, as in many fields, there is divergence on what constitutes consumer research—both ontologically and methodologically—as well as at least three streams of marketing

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[2] Now the American Marketing Association.

scholarship that relate to product design: cognitive studies of consumer behavior; marketing strategy and consumer culture research.[3]

Researchers studying consumer cognition have been strongly influenced by the field of psychology. The unit of analysis is the individual, and laboratory experiments are the most common research method. Notably, given the influence of consumer psychology, studies by marketing researchers interested in cognition are not positioned as contributing to research on new product development *per se*. Rather, their research questions are more likely to consider how environmental (e.g. sensorial cues), product (e.g. shape, category) or personality attributes can affect consumer's processing outcomes such as perception, memory, learning, decision-making and emotion as they relate to products and services.

For example, Moreau et al. (2001)'s paper, "What is it? Categorization Flexibility and Consumers' Responses to Really New Products" uses two laboratory experiments with consumer subjects to consider how consumers use cues from different product categories to develop expectations and preferences for novel categories. The authors offer the example of Proctor & Gamble's Febreze™, a product designed to remove fabric odors, that, while technically a new category of product, could also be linked to the laundry detergent (because it works on fabric), or air freshener category (because they also eliminate odors), and demonstrate that consumers will associate new products with existing categories in order to evaluate them. This paper has implications for development teams working on innovative products, because physical attributes and packaging can be designed to guide consumers or to suggest one category over another and therefore position the product within a specific competitive landscape.

In contrast to consumer cognition research, scholars focusing on marketing strategy generally take the firm or market as the unit of examination and conduct multivariate statistical analysis on data gleaned from sources such as surveys of firm managers or industry activity data. This literature stream draws on constructs from the field of social psychology including trust, conflict, power and learning. In addition, economic theory is sometimes employed to understand the conditions and effects of marketplace transaction.

If marketing strategy has a "grand theory," it is probably *market orientation* (Narver and Slater 1990; Kohli and Jaworski 1990) and the related *market concept* (see Day 1994). The market concept says that to achieve strong performance, firms should identify and satisfy customers' needs and wants better than their competitors (cf. Kotler 1999). Accordingly, market orientation refers to a firm's behavioral and cultural activities directed at fulfilling the market concept (Narver and Slater 1990); in other words, *how* firms identify and satisfy consumers' needs and wants to gain competitive advantage. Related research has examined

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[3]While market research is reflected in peer-reviewed journals such as the *Journal of Product Innovation and Management* and *Design Management Journal*, space does not permit inclusion of work from these and other interdisciplinary publications in the current literature review.

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how firms gather and internally disseminate intelligence about the market; how they work to craft relevant responses to this knowledge and the effects that external factors such as technological turbulence have on their efforts (see Kirca et al. 2005 for a meta-analysis of this topic). Product development, design and innovation are relevant to market orientation because they reside at the heart of "satisfying customers' needs and wants." However, the objective of most innovation-focused studies is to determine how product design and development operates at the level of firm strategy rather than how to engage with consumers.

An illustrative example of this work is Im and Workman (2004). In "Marketing Orientation, Creativity, and New Product Performance in High-Technology Firms," the authors demonstrate that creating meaningful products (defined as being "appropriate" and "useful") is a stronger predictor of firms' financial performance and competitive advantage than merely novel products, but they do not offer guidelines for creating such products.

The third stream of marketing research—as well as the research perhaps most ontologically related to corporate ethnography—has come to be known as *consumer culture theoretics* (Arnould and Thompson 2005; 2007). This perspective construes individuals as meaning-producers and -consumers rather than information processing machines, and was a sharp departure from extant theorization when it was introduced by pioneers such as Sid Levy. In Levy's seminal article, "Symbols for Sale," (1959a), he articulated a radical new proposition for marketers to consider: "People buy things not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean." Levy was also among the first to argue that marketing could benefit from an anthropological perspective. Indeed, Levy credited the work of Levi-Strauss among his influences in his work on marketplace mythology (Harris 2007).

Despite prescient work by a limited group of marketing academics (cf. Levy 1974; Sherry 1983; Belk et al. 1988) as well as scholars in other disciplines (cf. Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Miller 1987), it was not until postmodernism and reflexive scholarship gained momentum in the late 1980s that an increasing numbers of marketing scholars warmed to the concept of consumption as a contextually-situated social act. More than twenty years later, while the interpretive research tradition has a first-tier journal "market share" of only approximately 20% (Simonson et al.), there has, nevertheless, been a "flurry of research addressing the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic and ideological aspects of consumption" (Arnould and Thompson 2005 p. 868), with more than fifty ethnographic studies published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* since 1988 (Fischer et al. 2008), Newer journals, such as the *Journal of Consumer Culture* and *Consumption, Markets & Culture* feature even more research in this tradition.

However, like research in consumer cognition and market strategy, little work in consumer culture theoretics takes the design of products as its primary research objective or context. Instead, it focuses on the "commercially produced images, texts and objects that groups use—through the construction of overlapping and even conflicting practices, identities and meanings—to make collective sense of their environments and to orient their

members' experiences and lives (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Kozinets 2001). Only rarely have explicit connections between ethnography and product development been drawn in the consumer culture literature (cf. Elliott and Elliot 2003; Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Arnould and Price 2006; Thorpe 2003). For example, in "Market-Oriented Ethnography: Interpretation Building and Marketing Strategy Formulation," Arnould and Wallendorf (1994) describe conceptual and methodological issues surrounding ethnography, and provide examples of scholarly studies which explicate the managerially-relevant use of thick description (Arnould and Price 1993), thick transcription (Wallendorf and Arnould 1988) and thick inscription (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), respectively.

COMING OF AGE IN MARKETING

Despite the extensive and rich marketing literature and its growing appreciation for contextualized, naturalistic research, most academics' contribution to marketing is limited to theory, as few scholars have lived experience as corporate managers (Simonson et al. 2001). Therefore, in considering the dynamics between marketing managers and design ethnographers it is helpful to examine the socialization process (educational training) that prefigures their interaction.

Marketing is taught at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, but, excluding doctoral programs, most American and Canadian schools offer marketing as a concentration within broader business programs rather than a program unto itself. In fact, the terminal degree for most marketing managers (as opposed to market researchers) is a Masters of Business Administration (MBA), which is a professional degree. The MBA differs from the less common (in North America) Master of Science in Management degree because it does not require a thesis and as such, places less emphasis on theory. A typical full-time MBA program is two years and is structured by foundational coursework across functional areas of management in the first year (e.g. finance, accounting, operations, organizational behavior, human resources, marketing, strategy), with coursework in the area of concentration and elective opportunities in the second year. Because most MBA programs require prior work experience but do not limit admission to applicants with previous business education, first-year introductory courses are true to their label and assume no previous experience with their subject area.

Common marketing course topics include supply chain management; services marketing, sales force management, consumer behavior and market research as well as advertising and new product development. American business schools typically offer a marketing curriculum based on textbook material, case studies, books and articles from the "popular" press and occasionally, software-enabled market simulations. It is rare for either undergraduate or graduate students to read extensively from academic journal articles or to conduct theoretic (i.e. versus industry-level) research, although such material is certainly trickled down to them via textbook content drawn from research published in scholarly publications. Based on a review of a top professional association's resource bank for

members which includes exemplar course syllabi, with few exceptions marketing is overwhelmingly taught as a quantitative topic and with an epistemologically positivist orientation (American Marketing Association Academic Resource Center 2008).

The self-conceptualization of marketing management, therefore, is that it is an analytic, rather than theory-driven, function. Moreover, taught within a "normal science" paradigm (Kuhn 1962), the attendant assumption is that the analysis conducted within this rubric is inherently unbiased and predicated on "objective" (historic) data sources including consumer surveys, scanner (sales) data and census demographics, among others. To aid in forecasting, students are also commonly taught calculations and introduced to statistical models whose output is regarded as predictive of consumer behavior and/or reliable aids to decision making, for example, formulas for inferring utility or predicting the diffusion of new products (cf. Urban and Hauser 1993).

SIBLING RIVALRY

This identity of marketer-as-detached-analyst is highlighted for two reasons. First, it stands in stark contrast with ubiquitous perspectives of the profession and its practitioners as manipulative persuaders. Marketing is often believed to be synonymous with advertising and, as the function associated with mediating interactions between the firm and its customers (Ulrich and Eppinger 2008), has a reputation for privileging so-called "soft skills," and drawing managers with "creative" versus "scientific" interest and instincts. Indeed, my experience with MBA students from educational backgrounds in areas such as engineering and accounting is that they consider marketing to be less rigorous and "more intuitive" compared to their own training.

Marketing practitioners are regularly vilified in the media as corporate puppeteers with ulterior motives, determined to persuade consumers to buy things they don't want or need. While this is sometimes attributed to the advertising industry's mid-century work with psychologists and popular books of the time, particularly Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957), marketing-bashing has evolved into a rhetorical art, with books such as Naomi Klein's *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* (2000); Barber's *Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole* (2007) and assertions that marketing creates and facilitates "America's suicidal consumer binge" (Lasn 1999) perpetuating the discourse. In this "cultural authority narrative," marketers are "portrayed as cultural engineers, organizing how people think and feel through branded commercial products" (Holt 2002, p. 244).

The second reason for emphasizing the formal education of marketing administrators is to contrast it with that of many design ethnographers, who (based on a survey of conference presentations, user groups and blogs related to design ethnography) predominantly hail from the fields of anthropology (e.g. Susan Squires, Melissa Cefkin, Jay Hasbrouk, Elizabeth Tunstall), sociology (e.g. An Jacobs, Sam Ladner, Nina Wakeford, Nick Agafonoff) and

psychology (e.g. Elizabeth Churchill, Tony Salvador), implying that their training (commonly undertaken at the doctoral level) was theory-driven. It is also noteworthy that disciplines such as anthropology have undergone the kind of reflexive philosophical interrogation (cf. Marcus and Fischer 1986) that demands of its community both awareness and conscious affiliation with an ontological commitment, something marketing managers are unlikely to have (and despite the fact that such assumptions drive their research projects and privilege their expectations).

The resulting disparity of subject positions between marketing managers and corporate ethnographers produces distinctive frames for marketing managers—trained as analytic administrators (i.e. plan, goal and action-orientated)—and corporate ethnographers, who trained as analytic mediators (i.e. interpretation, reflection and theory-oriented). Yet productivity on design teams and projects—from design brief, to data collection, to sense making, to product development, to the notion of productivity itself—depends, in part, on common frames of reference.

Scholars of organizational identity emphasize that while professional self-concept might be partially formed within formal settings such as educational or organizational institutions, it is strengthened and revised through role enactment and performance (cf. Simpson and Carroll 2008; Beech 2008). With this in mind, it is useful to note that many marketing managers experience a complex and potentially conflicting set of role expectations that may influence their behavior. Most have multiple responsibilities and conduct analysis at multiple levels and temporal frames. These include management of and communication with external constituencies (consumers, suppliers, consultants) as well as accountability to internal constituencies. Marketers are often asked to conduct both short- and long-term strategic planning as part of brand, geographic and functional units, and they may have financial responsibility for activities measured over incompatible time periods (e.g. quarterly reports versus the duration of a product development cycle). Moreover, marketers are required to integrate these multiple levels and frames of knowledge into coherent yet essentialized output such as market segmentation reports; strategic plans and promotional campaigns that will deliver emotional resonance for end consumers and positive return on investment for senior managers. These wide-ranging activities call for both quantitative and qualitative analysis, although the latter skills are rarely taught.

Given the ever-narrowing window of competitive advantage, corporate ethnographers have been adopted into this familial maelstrom. Although marketers have little incentive to publicly disavow the value of ethnography (they are, after all, devoting limited time and economic resources to it), most are less familiar with the theoretical orientations that underpin its practice than with its portrayal in the media (see Suchman 2007) or at product management conferences, where ethnography is presented as carnival magic: "Watch, as the consumer in front of you reveals the meaning of products!" While marketers' attraction to the notion of ethnography as silver bullet (or "miracle," see Wakeford 2006, p. 95) may seem naïve, it should be remembered that many are simply enacting a link in a value chain

constructed, in part, by assertions made by design ethnographers themselves: Insight →
Epiphany → New/Differentiated product → Competitive advantage (cf. Reese 2004;
Sanders 2004; Mariampolski 2006).

It is not surprising that magical powers are invoked by popular terms such as
"consumer insight." Dramatic changes including globalization, novel communication
technologies and their attendant cultural practices have made it increasingly clear that the
postmodern consumer is a knowledgeable and powerful force to be reckoned with. Far from
the days when the customer could have a car in any color as long as it was black, marketers
have even abandoned rhetoric related to "harnessing consumer desire," replacing it with an
"innovate or die" rallying cry. So it is that the Product Development and Management
Association has held an annual "Voice of the Customer" conference for more than a decade
and the *Journal of Product Innovation and Management* recently published its first paper devoted
to the benefits of ethnography in product development (Rosenthal and Capper 2006).

Indeed, many marketers have embraced the anthropological adage to "make the strange
familiar and the familiar strange." However, with their blind enthusiasm comes a risk of
misconstruing ethnographic techniques and undervaluing both the resulting data and the
complexity of analysis required for sense-making (Masten and Plowman 2003).

An example of this can be seen in a recent newspaper report of a prominent packaged
food company's deployment of cultural anthropologists to discover new markets. In the
article, the executive accountable for the initiative recounts a conversation he had with a
woman which took place at her kitchen table in Russia. He is quoted as saying, "Her eyes lit
up, she leaned across the table and for the next 30 minutes she told me what soup she likes
and how she makes it. You'd think I'd asked her about her kids" (Jargon 2007).

This excerpt highlights several problems, not least of which is the invisibility of the
ethnographer(s) facilitating the ride-along. Just as troubling is the executive's patronizing
attitude towards the informant: he appears surprised to discover that some consumers are
engaged with and passionate about his company's product category, yet does not seek to
understand why that might be the case. Like many product managers, he may have literally
and figuratively "bought in" to the notion of corporate ethnography, but not yet learned to
appreciate its subtlety or power.

For their part, corporate ethnographers, like the marketing managers who might
obscure their contributions, also experience a complex and potentially conflicting set of role
expectations (van Veggel 2005). Wakeford (2006) notes that "in doing EPIC work…many of
us have found ourselves in contradictory positions, in relation to our discipline, our politics
or our collaborators" (ibid, p. 94). Indeed, the discourse among corporate ethnographers in
the material reviewed for the current article reveals pervasive tension and ambivalence about
their identity as anthropologists versus corporate employees.

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This may be because their "anthropologist identity" is an intellectual one, privileging both academic inquiry as an end unto itself and the relatively contemporary anthropological tradition of advocacy on behalf of vulnerable informants (cf. Ablon 1982). On the other hand, the "product developer identity" is seductive: employment options are potentially more stable, local, plentiful, lucrative and even prestigious than opportunities in academia. In this sense, self-concept is compromised whether corporate ethnographers cast a romantic gaze upon their academic lives (Wilkens 2007, Thorpe 2003) or step forward to embrace a profession accused of fostering materialism and facilitating the homogenization of global cultures.

This Us (ethnographers) versus Them (marketers) ambivalence is evident in Sherry's (2007) description of a "typical" research project and the relationship between a firm's ethnography team and product development administrators. Sherry, an anthropologist, bemoans the insignificance of design ethnography and expresses reservations about its value, since its merit is apparently defiled by commercial interest. At the same time, his text reveals a hint of longing for the value that his labors might have if his assignment had wider legitimacy and greater appreciation.

> The research team comes back and identifies some very interesting patterns in the data, proceeds to tell the suits/engineers/product planners that they were thinking about things all wrong […] And then what? What of true lasting value comes of all this effort? One or two insights might prove useful for whatever is the innovation *du jour*, complete with a pat on the back and a flurry of requests to use some of our pictures, quotes or insights for promotional materials.

> [Fellow…] researchers have taken great pains to point out that the normative/management perspective is at best partial, and have demonstrated how it rendered invisible the real, concrete contributions that actually enable the persistence of the structures that Biz School colleagues hold so dear (Sherry 2007, pp. 21-22).

Note the use of a diminutive epithets for management ("Biz School colleagues"; "suits") and the implicit assertions that managers' fatal flaws include both satisfaction with a myopic understanding of consumers (the "partial" truth of their perspective); as well as a preference for institutionalized structure that obfuscates the "real" and "concrete" contributions of ethnographers. In this way, the perspective of Sherry's managerial colleagues is framed as both misguided and destructive. A similar dialectic tension surfaces on the blog of an EPIC 2007 attendee, as the writer notes the incommensurability of that which marketers and corporate ethnographers value:

> How can ethnographers convince managers and marketing leaders to take them seriously? How do they justify their work both intellectually (methods, data, etc.) and also from a business perspective (actually leads to better business processes or products? Complicating this

argument is the perceived conflict between the reductionist, abstract models that managers and marketing professionals want and the rich, individual "thick" and nuanced descriptions that ethnographers value and provide. (blog post, October 5, 2007)

As a final illustration, on an online discussion forum of design ethnographers, one contributor's post reveals a strongly held belief that ethnography is distinct from marketing research.

If you spend weeks with some family living in their house and the end representation is a marketing customer lifecycle from awareness to loyalty, then you did marketing research, not ethnography. If you spend weeks with the family and come back to the client and can/are willing say that "You're products don't fit into the lives of these people and they don't want you to come because you disrupt their local markets," then, that's an ethnography (if that's what the people really feel). (posted July 10, 2008)

The contributor's closing remarks expose a possible source of unease, framing ethnography as the more accurate reading of informants' experiences. Indeed, the writer poignantly infers that unlike marketers, who are bound to see a receptive audience even where there is none, ethnographers are not afraid of "the truth."

These illustrative passages are not intended to increase tension between marketers and design ethnographers, but rather to demonstrate that each community frames the other's contribution in ways that minimize its value or renders it invisible. Of course in practice, both disciplines have valuable perspectives, ways of knowing and professional objectives.

CONCLUSION

The preceding discussion illustrates how tension between design ethnographers and marketing managers may result from:

1. Differing levels of analysis
2. Divergent theoretic assumptions, particularly about the "appropriate" use and type of data needed to make productive decisions
3. Varying expectations on both the process and product of consumer research
4. The potential role conflict experienced by each.

This exploratory analysis is an initial step in a multi-phase project examining the role of corporate interpretation of informant data in the product design and development process. Future stages of the planned research emphasize depth interviews with all relevant stakeholders as well as fieldwork within firms using ethnographers in the design process.

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As corporations increasingly encourage and enable a "seismic shift in the location and integration of ethnography within the consumer research world," (Sunderland and Denny 2007), it is more relevant than ever before to examine ethnographers' relationship with other corporate stakeholders such as marketers whose function is equally—albeit differently—grounded in the analysis and interpretation of consumers' actions and desires. Uncovering the causes of mutual apprehension, whether due to lack of familiarity or misaligned ontological assumptions, can contribute to corporate ethnographers' ability to engage in productive discourse with marketers in the product development process.

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