

# Remote Access

Design research in the digital age can overcome some limitations of traditional observation.

By Gail Ritacco

In striving for the most effective way for consumers to inform, inspire, and focus the design process, firms from time to time must examine their tools. With today's marketplace being so competitive, a product's packaging has to work harder at shelf to communicate its brand message and product attributes. Therefore, connecting with target consumers early in the creative process ensures that their needs are being satisfied with the package design.

There are times when traditional in-person, contextual observation provides valuable understanding of the interactions of people, places, and things. A

trained researcher captures consumer behavior while the subject may or may not be aware of their objectives. What designers learn at the outset of a project allows them to build on consumer dissatisfiers as well as unmet—and unarticulated—wants and needs.

However, as ethnography moves into the digital age, there may be much to gain in doing this research online, allowing consumers to interact with packaging and record their experiences through a diary, video, or other tools. But can this type of research provide the same depth of consumer insights as in-person observation? Let's take a look at the pros and cons.

## In-person observation

With in-person ethnographies, the subject can forget they're being observed, and consequently, behavior captured can be very honest and truly representative. In-person ethnographies are an appropriate venue for consumer exposure to raw ideas or stimuli early on in the process. It's very effective for engaging with items that haven't gone through the rigor of quality control, and it protects the confidential and liability aspects of the research. However, if the observation is covert, it's not likely happening where consumers are most often interacting with products and packages, and therefore may not reveal "pure" behavior.

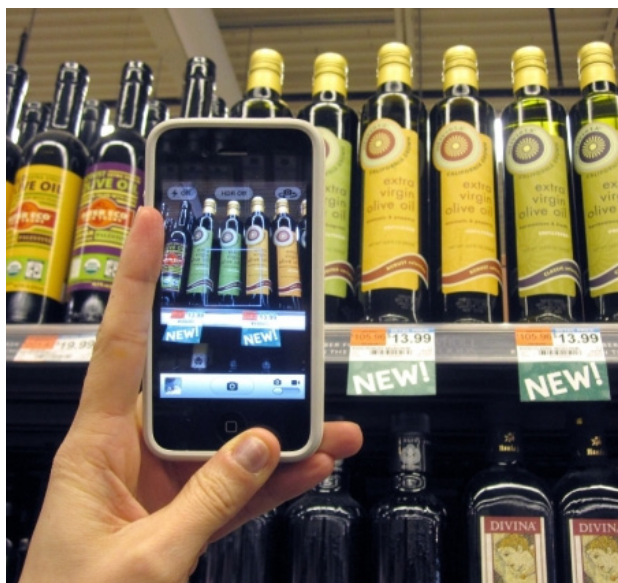
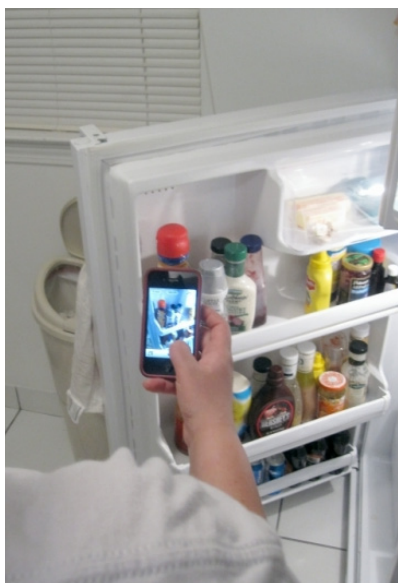
The value of overt observation, where the interviewer is present with the test subject (sometimes in his or her own home), can be compromised for two reasons. For starters, the interviewers' physical presence is often the biggest hurdle to honest behavior. Secondly, there's always the risk that subjects will alter their behavior (or the environment) in response to the artificial nature of the interview.

Traditional ethnography observes how the subject actually uses the product or package. But for in-home research, there are limitations on the amount of time spent with, and the fre-

One of digital ethnography's several advantages is that research participants can blog about their behavior without conscious or unconscious filters.



Online diaries supported by pictures and videos can provide frequent, comprehensive, and extremely detailed observation of consumers using products and packages.



quency of, researcher visits. Consequently, the observer can't be present at each use occasion, nor can the observer completely understand the context surrounding these use occasions. One way around this limitation is extensive, unobtrusive video recordings of consumers in context, but high setup and recording costs can make that prohibitive.

### Expanding digital ethnographies

Here's where the digital age enters in, and you might ask: Why not have consumers record videos of themselves? As the Internet is integrated into mainstream research, digital ethnographies are a logical next step. Many firms are looking to digital ethnographies for a more affordable, accessible window into consumers' lives.

## Early ethnographic research allows designers to discover unmet—and unarticulated—wants and needs.

With digital ethnographies, users document their own experience with a brand or category via online daily diaries. There's no researcher intruding into their lives beyond, perhaps, some specific scheduled activities. The diaries, backed up by photos and videos, can provide frequent, comprehensive, and extremely detailed observation of consumers using products and packages. When executed by trained observers, digital ethnographies maintain

many of the advantages of in-person ethnographies and overcome some of the disadvantages.

One distinct advantage of the digital approach is the anonymity of the online portal. Consumers are often more comfortable detailing their daily interactions in this way. They don't feel "observed" and therefore may not feel the need to clean up their surroundings, stage environments, or use products and packages exactly as directed. For the most part, these participants do what they would normally do, since they're truly alone (or with friends or family) when they experience the product or package.

When consumers upload the photos and videos, researchers then watch what happens, listen to what's said, and read what's written to discover articulated and unarticulated consumer

wants and needs. The uploads allow the observer to be in the moment of use and witness how participants behave in real life, whenever and with whomever that moment occurs.

Digital ethnographies can also help designers discover emotional connections and possible directions for a package's structural and graphic aesthetics. In this capacity, consumers select pictures of people, places, and things that they associate with the brand, attri-

butes, or product benefits and explain their selections. Researchers take these findings and create inspirational boards to capture the moods and feelings that connect the consumer to the package or brand. Boards are shown back to consumers for even more refined direction.

### Many eyes on the prize

Since digital ethnographies are online, viewers of the photos, videos, and conversations are unlimited. All team members can log in to the site in their own time, at their own pace. There's an opportunity for team members to submit their questions to the interviewer. Once the interviewer is satisfied that the observation is pure and honest, consumers' points of satisfaction and dissatisfaction can be examined more thoroughly.

In the end, there's a place within the design process for both in-person and digital ethnographies. While digital ethnographies enable anonymous observation, anywhere and anytime, in-person ethnographies can still be a very valuable venue for consumer exposure to unrefined or protected concepts. Digital ethnographies are also relatively inexpensive for reaching out to many participants in various locations. Particularly as we target Millennials who've grown up digitally, this tool will become more relevant for upstream design research. PD

Gail Ritacco is v.p. of strategy and insights at Product Ventures ([www.productventures.com](http://www.productventures.com)), Fairfield, CT.