



We also left recruiting flyers at auto dealerships, distributed flyers at an auto show, and contacted unused candidate participants from a prior study of vehicle owners.

The interviews took place at the participants' homes, so that we could view any information the participants had collected while researching the new vehicle. We scheduled interviews at lunchtime, in the late afternoon, and in the early evening to accommodate participants' schedules and to make it easier for family members who might help select the vehicle to join us.

We started the sessions by asking participants about their current vehicle and how they determined to get a new one. We then asked questions about the key attributes of the new vehicle, the information needed about the vehicles under consideration, and the steps taken to find the information such as talking with friends, visiting dealers, and doing research on the Web. Finally, we took a closer look at the artifacts participants had saved, such as magazines, dealer brochures, and handwritten notes—something we wouldn't have been able to do in phone interviews.

Effective ethnographic interviews collect in-depth qualitative information about participants. In this study, we learned about:

- Roles of personal associations/experience
- What kinds of information people need, and where they look for it
- Why people do or don't keep physical information
- What people like about the Internet and how it can complement their experiences at the dealer

JWT was particularly interested in the steps participants said they took to research a vehicle, and in their need for more—and more robust—comparisons.

Most participants were focused on collecting “hard” or “technical” information from the Web, brochures, and other publications. Pricing information was critically important. However, participants were also interested in finding specific textual information on models, options, safety, and so on—preferably in tabular form, the artifacts showed us.

Virtually all participants wanted information presented in a way that lets them make quick and easy comparisons. They wanted to be able to compare different versions of the same vehicle, as well as different vehicles.

Finally, participants wanted to learn as much as they could about the vehicles they were considering before they went to the dealer to see the vehicles “in person.” They believed this preparation would make the sales process more efficient for buyer and seller alike.

## HOW JWT IMPROVED THE FORD VEHICLES WEBSITE

JWT began immediately to apply the field research data. The website information architects reviewed the authors' findings and discussed how to address buyers' information needs while also supporting the desired branding for the site. The changes they made included:

- Making pricing information easy to find. For example, now prices are always visible on the vehicle showroom pages (previously they showed up only on rollover).
- Enabling site visitors to make quick and easy comparisons, even for vehicles that have many models (for example, sedans and wagons).
- Keeping model-level comparisons on the vehicle home pages, which usage data show are the most visited pages on the site (often, the only pages visited).

Based on the study data about purchase influencers and about participants' experiences at auto dealerships, JWT has begun adding printer-friendly pages to the site so that pages printed on black-and-white printers look appealing. People can show these hard-copies to family members and also take them to the dealerships for reference purposes.

In usability testing of the redesigned site, participants were able to find pertinent vehicle information faster than in previous tests. JWT and the Ford Division also plan a customer survey to measure the effects of the site changes.

Although conducting field research under time and budget constraints is challenging, the authors and JWT were able to collect and apply a great deal of important information about the target user community. This case study should encourage other usability specialists and design groups to undertake field research, even when conditions aren't ideal.

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