

Ethnographic Interviews Guide Design of Ford Vehicles Website

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ABSTRACT

This case study describes ethnographic interviews with vehicle buyers to learn how they make purchase decisions. The research was conducted for J. Walter Thompson (JWT), the digital design agency of the Ford Division of the Ford Motor Company; the authors faced challenges of tight schedule, limited budget, and difficulties in finding suitable participants. We nevertheless obtained valuable data that helped JWT refine the Ford Vehicles website.

Keywords

ethnography, ethnographic interviews, field studies, contextual inquiry, website design

BACKGROUND, OBJECTIVES, AND CHALLENGES

Ethnographic interviewing uses techniques from anthropology to collect concrete information from people in their context of use. Sessions are conducted in work or home environments, where people behave more naturally and where we can explore surroundings and artifacts to add validity to self-reported data.

Ethnographic interviews are useful for learning about the needs, work processes, and preferences of target audiences, whether applied to planning a new product or simply the next release. In this case study, the authors worked with J. Walter Thompson (JWT), the digital design agency of the Ford Division of the Ford Motor Company, as JWT planned enhancements to the Ford Vehicles website.

JWT wanted to learn what information people need to buy a new vehicle, in particular:

- Where do buyers get the information they need, how do they use it, and what do they do with it when they're finished?
- What appeals to buyers about the different kinds of information they collect?
- What hampers buyers in collecting information, and what would improve the process?

JWT had less than a month to collect data and make design decisions, and the research budget was limited. But JWT also wanted insight into the behavior of potential Ford customers, not just answers to questions. We therefore decided to use field research methods rather than a survey

or phone interviews to explore these questions. The authors had to define a cost-effective study that could be conducted quickly—not characteristics of traditional field research.

ADAPTING FIELD RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The multiple challenges of budget, schedule, and logistics often defeat efforts to conduct field studies. Traditionally, contextual inquiry [1] has been an in-depth qualitative method, conducted by organizations that can invest in research for long-term product design improvements. Similarly, the methodology for ethnographic interviews has been developed through extensive projects [3]. However, the authors have successfully adapted contextual inquiry and ethnographic interview methodology for short-term user research projects in our consulting practice [2].

In contextual inquiries, by focusing tightly on key issues, we can collect behavioral and perception data in shorter sessions with the participants. (The usability team often spends more time before the sessions using the product and/or hypothesizing situations we might observe.) In ethnographic interviews, we apply the team approach from contextual inquiry to collect extensive data in sessions of one to two hours. Our two-person teams share the activities of interviewing, note-taking, and photographing or collecting artifacts.

ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEWS WITH VEHICLE BUYERS

The authors conducted ten one-hour interviews in the homes of people looking to buy new vehicles in the San Francisco Bay area of California and the Rochester area of New York. The participants were considering the purchase of cars, trucks, or SUVs, either domestic or imported; most intended to make a purchase decision within three months.

We chose these two locations because (1) Detroit-based Ford wanted to minimize geographic bias by avoiding Detroit-area residents, and (2) we wanted as much geographic diversity as the budget would allow, in this case two widely separated locations convenient to the authors.

Recruiting participants posed a major challenge because the study took place in March, not a time when most people think about buying a new vehicle. To find buyers who met the research criteria, we advertised on electronic bulletin boards (San Francisco Bay) and in newspapers (Rochester).

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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