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Ad firms turn to in-home research

By Joe Ruff

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Eight O’Clock Coffee Co. wanted its advertisements to hit people right where they live — in their own homes, just waking up in the morning, craving that first cup of coffee.

So the company started studying how people actually use its products, taping them in their homes and in the process using an increasingly popular form of research: commercial ethnography. A mix of marketing and the techniques used by anthropologists, commercial ethnography can unearth information that more traditional research methods such as focus groups might miss.

“The idea behind this was to see what people really do and think,” said David Allen, director of marketing for Montvale, N.J.-based Eight O’Clock Coffee.

Jeffrey Wolf, a partner and director of account planning at the advertising firm, Deutsch Inc. in New York, said he first came across commercial ethnography 10 or 15 years ago, but more marketing researchers have been using it the past five years or so.

“We’ve actually called on anthropologists to help us,” Wolf said. “Essentially, it is observational research by a trained eye.”

Jonna Holland, an assistant professor of marketing at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, said commercial ethnography had a slow start because it was difficult for some in the business world to turn from quantitative, survey-type information to qualitative, interpretive research.

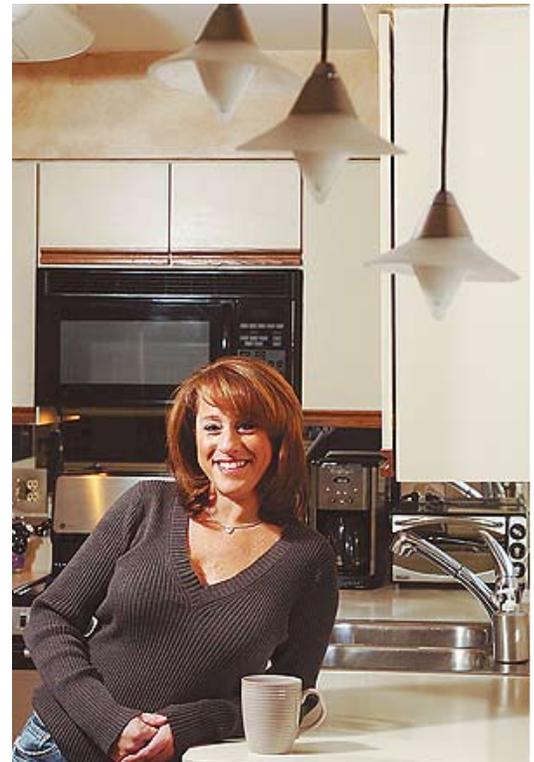
Now, “people are more accepting of it and are realizing its benefits,” she said.

Eight O-Clock Coffee hired New York advertising agency The Kaplan Thaler Group Ltd., which had 14 families in Pittsburgh and Chicago use videocameras to record a typical morning. The “reality TV” segments from that first week in May show a struggle to get moving.

A teenager, for example, slides from her bed to the floor and tries to protect her eyes from a bedroom light. One man waves away attempts to get him up and a distracted woman tips a bowl of cereal she is preparing, spilling milk onto the kitchen floor.

Elisa Benjamin, a mother of two school-age children, participated in the videotaping at her home in Buffalo Grove, Ill., a suburb of Chicago. She said it was interesting and fun to have her morning routine turned into market research.

“I have my cup of coffee when the kids leave,” she said. “It’s my first moment to take a breather. And it gives me energy.”



Elisa Benjamin of Buffalo Grove, Ill., took part in a form of research called commercial ethnography, which combines marketing and the kind of observations done by anthropologists.

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Using the videos as inspiration, Kaplan Thaler created two television commercials that began airing in October along the East Coast and parts of the Midwest in a \$7 million, four-month campaign.

One commercial shows 2004 International Whistlers Competition entertainer of the year Steve Herbst struggling to keep a tune until he has a cup of coffee. The second features 2004 WNBA rookie of the year Diana Taurasi unable to make a shot until she sips some Eight O'Clock Coffee.

The ads play off Eight O'Clock's sense of authenticity, which it has gained as a 145-year-old product of The Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Co., before Eight O'Clock was acquired last year by San Francisco private equity firm Gryphon Investors, Allen said.

Kaplan Thaler's director of strategic planning and research, Chris Wauton, says a milestone in developing commercial ethnography came in 1979 with a book written by anthropologist Mary Douglas and economist Baron Isherwood titled "The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption."

"Whereas the traditional approach was to ask a bunch of questions in a focus group or in a quantitative survey, people began to realize that the observational approach might also be a powerful tool," Wauton said. "Actions speak louder than words."

The videotapes from people's homes helped demonstrate that for many, dawn is not a rosy, romantic moment on a front porch in the countryside, Wauton said.

"In real life, people stumble around, trying to get kids out of bed," and coffee is the fuel that gets them dressed, fed and out the door, he said.

Mike Sweeney, an advertising researcher with The Sterling Group, a brand strategy firm headquartered in New York, has been doing research through commercial ethnography in the town of Wahoo, Neb., over the past six years. Last spring, he visited for several hours with three couples in a home in Wahoo to talk about programming and recipes on cable television's Food Network.

Not immediately disclosing his purpose for being there, Sweeney helped focus the free-flowing conversation on food, then television shows about food, and finally the Food Network. Only later were the surprised couples told that a man sitting in on the discussion was a Food Network executive.