



# New Thinking About 'Cycle of Use' And Ethnographic Package Research

By Simon Gainey

Newly evolving research techniques enable package designers and developers to truly understand how consumers relate to and think about packaging as they pursue their busy, multi-task, complex, over-scheduled, hectic lives. These techniques can help provide the consumer insight to enable future innovation and improvement, and create a platform of knowledge. These insights also carry the potential to re-apply that knowledge across other market segments.

Everything we see these days suggests that the consumer trends of today will continue to change and challenge our traditional paradigm of what consumers want and expect from packaging and product delivery systems in the future. These are the trends that seem inevitable:

## Convenience Is Everything:

Consumer expectations about convenience will drive us to think radically different about how product and packaging can make using a product simpler, easier, faster, and more effective than ever before.

**Quick Consumption:** Consumers are increasingly consuming products away from traditional meal times, away from the home, in a frenzy.

**Demographic Camels:** Baby Boomers, the Gen-Yers, small household growth, "changing teens," and growing ethnic diversity of the population all have different expectations about how they spend time and the choices they make.

## Have It Your Way Customization:

A solution that "fits all" can never meet the expectations of most, and in fact typically leads to the lowest

common denominator.

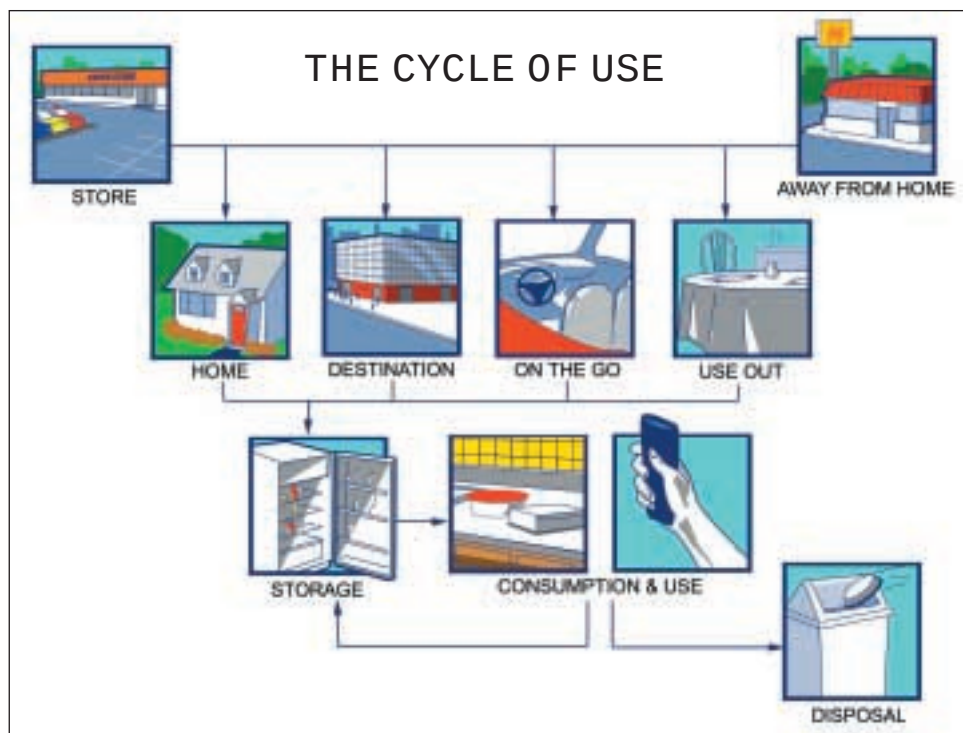
**Trade Delta:** The traditional retail channels are no longer channels but have been morphing into a wide delta of cross-linked shopping choices.

**Interactive Technology:** Future packaging will be forced to evolve to interact much more with the outside environment and consumers in ways it has never done before.

As these trends continue to evolve, the pressure for innovation in packaging and product delivery systems will never let up—and will probably intensify. As designers and developers look for opportunities to innovate and create new packaging solutions, the challenge is to not only find ways to step "out of the box" and think creatively, but also to reach deeper into understanding how

consumers relate to and think about packaging as they go about their daily lives.

Truly understanding your consumer and recognizing their highly varied shopping habits, purchase preferences, usage behavior, and demography is by no means an easy task. The craft of reaching out to consumers has been the domain of "Consumer Research" using a variety of techniques and approaches for many years. Traditional focus group research has been one of the vehicles to talk with consumers and more recently, ethnography has emerged as a technique to provide a deeper understanding. The issue for many package designers with these approaches is that frequently the common skews and shortcomings in



Today's package designers are compelled to understand every aspect of how their packaging is used in consumers' lives, from purchase through to use in various settings, often with convenience in mind.

these research approaches dilute the consumer insight required to target true innovation and improvements.

Traditional focus groups do not often put the packaging into the context of consumers' lives and how they use it. Their behavior is acted out in the focus group to replicate their beliefs about what they "think" they do or what they think they "should" do with packaging.

Consumers play out their dislikes and likes within the framework of the group dynamic rather than acting out of real life. Frequently, they are unable to articulate what they mean or wish for. If the objective is to truly gain consumer insight, the structure of focus groups never allows this to get started.

### **Toward deeper research**

Ethnographic research, or one-on-one, open, in-depth, in-environment research with consumers is a powerful research approach to understanding much more about how consumers, products, and packaging co-exist together. The design of the research approach, the observation process, the structure of the interview, the quality of analysis, and the quality of researchers are all critical factors in developing successful ethnographic research.

Frequently, these studies are conducted by generalists who have well-formed processes and methods but lack the experience and skill to truly understand packaging. Listening for, understanding, and then interpreting packaging insights from consumers requires a completely different approach and skill set than supporting a segmentation study through ethnographics. If the objective is to truly gain consumer insight and do something with the findings, a specialist expert research approach is required.

Competitive Innovation LLC has developed a unique, ethnographic package research technique that marries the insight and depth of one-on-one research with the technical and packaging skills and expertise required to get value and meaning from the research. Termed "Cycle of Use" packaging research, the company integrates ethnographic methods and processes to deep-dive packaging with experts who have the capability, know-how, and experience to explore how consumers use packaging in their daily lives.

What this means in a practical sense is that the Cycle of Use approach can be used to help understand how consumers interact with packaging—what they expect, what they need, what they wish for, and how packaging plays out within the environment where it is used.

Competitive Innovation's researchers can often be found shopping with consumers at club stores, observing the purchase of food through a quick-service restaurant take-out window, attending family barbecues, or following consumers' daily routines as they do the laundry.

The trick with this research approach is to go beyond "I want the package to be easy to open" or "I want it to be portable." Research has to get past those general requests to truly understand, in-depth, how consumers' environments, habits, and behaviors shape their needs and desires, and then to define what "easy open" and "portability" really mean.

### **The big "IF"**

In their studies, Competitive Innovation has seen several examples where a plastic tube (form-fill seal pouch) of snack product frequently consumed "on the go" is easy to open IF: The consumer has two clean, dry

hands to grab the package, can locate the right opening sweet spot, can watch the process of opening to quickly adapt for better opening, is in a stationary and still situation to open the package, etc.

Needless to say, these conditions are rarely seen, and consumers typically experience three to four frustrating attempts at opening, have initial openings too small for the product to dispense, or end up with split packages and mess. The notion of "easy open" clearly needs to fit in the context of the consumer and their environment, and has to be better defined by functional, performance, and ergonomic "need-states" to a greater degree of detail.

Studies are almost always conducted in the field, following the path of usage with the consumer from purchase at the store through to disposal and clean up at home, and can last from two hours to six hours per interview. Typically, 20 to 30 interviews are conducted in any one "research" area. (Above 30, the incremental cost of an extra interview delivers an ever smaller return in terms of new insight.) These studies can be supplemented and customized by video diaries, an "all family" dimension, calibrating packaging performance with common benchmarks, and innovative "What if?" discussions. One of the most powerful aspects of the work is that sponsors of this work can really get into consumers' minds to understand what they think, and then use this internally to educate and drive change.

For a consumer goods business, however, the real advantage of using an expert ethnographic approach is that companies like Competitive Innovation have the skills and design expertise to interpret consumers' needs, wants, and wishes, and then

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## RESEARCH: ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

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create solutions that can work in the real world. This link between the voice of the consumer and design bridges some of the traditional organization “silos” and provides a real opportunity for new insight, innovation, and speed to market. No longer are consumers’ words “lost in translation.” Now packaging experts can hear, observe, and interact with consumers to create future innovation and improvements.

The “Cycle of Use” approach takes packaging research to a new level. Now designers and developers have a new tool that they can use to explore every aspect of packaging and product delivery in a way they never had before. The application of such techniques is enormous as companies strive to understand how to better meet consumer needs, appeal to the diverse demographic changes, satisfy trade needs, and compete with new innovative solutions. ■

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