Marketing

The way Ellen Moore saw it, the natives were getting restless. A professional ethnographer with 15 years experience, Moore was observing the negotiation rituals among a group native to the Eastern Seaboard of the United States. Most of the members were seated on humble and, judging by their pained expressions, rather uncomfortable seats. Only two males had secured more luxurious accommodations. This, Moore noted, created much tension in the room.

When one of these alpha males left to get some water, a competitor snatched his coveted position. When the first male returned, he was furious and spent the rest of the gathering on his feet. "He moves around a lot," Moore scribbled in her notebook. "His arms are crossed over his chest -- he looks bored and irritated."

Moore wasn't in an exotic locale, observing a primitive tribe -- that is, unless you consider the white-collar employees of a large federal government agency attending a meeting to be exotic. She was in a conference room at the Pier 5 Hotel, a boutique hotel in Baltimore's Inner Harbor. And she delivered her observations not to a conference of academics, but to Ken Conklin, general manager of the Pier 5 and two other hotels, who had hired Moore and another anthropologist to conduct a comprehensive ethnographic study of his guests.

Armed with their findings, Conklin knew what he needed to do: Order new chairs. That small change, as well as dozens of others, has helped bring about a 23% rise in meeting business since last spring. "Sometimes you don't
want to hear what you need to hear," says the 45-year-old hotelier. "Ethnographic research opens up your eyes."

If the term *ethnographic research* conjures up sepia-tinged images from your Anthropology 101 textbook, you're on the right track. Look it up in an encyclopedia and you'll probably find a picture of its best-known practitioner, Margaret Mead, famous for her groundbreaking research among the people of Samoa. Traditionally, ethnographers have traveled to the world's distant corners seeking answers to some pretty big questions: What is society? What is culture? What do we, the members of the human family, share?

Today, of course, unknown primitive cultures are pretty scarce, and academic jobs are even scarcer. So more ethnographers are heading into boardrooms, bedrooms, and bathrooms, bringing new insights to a less exotic, but just as complex, tribe: consumers. And why not? The U.S. consumer market is made up of thousands of "individual little cliques, subcultures, really, that all have their unique way of looking at life," says Robbie Blinkoff, co-founder of Context-Based Research Group in Baltimore. An anthropologist who cut his teeth in Papua New Guinea, Blinkoff now studies consumers for clients like Kodak, Campbell's Soup, and Guinness beer. Consumer groups, he says, have their own language, rituals, symbols, and values. Crack the code, and you can develop new brands, products, and services that more effectively serve your unique tribe of customers.

That was Conklin's goal. Seeking to create a new identity for his hotels, he needed to know more than what his guests thought about things like customer service and the softness of the pillows. He already had stacks of comment cards for that. And traditional focus-group interviews struck him as stilted. "I needed to take a walk in my guests' shoes and see things from their point of view," he says.

Consumer groups have their own rituals and symbols. Crack the code, and you can create new, better products.

So he hired a small Baltimore outfit, Carton Donofrio Partners, to send ethnographers into the Pier 5, Brookshire Suites, and Admiral Fell Inn. The ethnographers painstakingly observed the myriad customs and rituals that
characterize hotel life, keeping track of all that transpired -- what people said and did, and also what they didn't say: the body language and small gestures. Moore and her partner also took some unusual steps. They gave guests disposable cameras, asking them to photograph things they considered "magical." The idea was to get a better understanding of exactly what guests did during their stay. "We met with them at the end of their stay and interviewed them about their experiences," Moore says. The pictures helped guests tell vivid stories about their experiences -- stories that Moore and her team combined with their own observations to provide dozens of specific recommendations for Conklin.

For example, while the hotels had long offered packages to families, the ethnography revealed that children were essentially ignored at the hotels. Now, when families arrive, the front desk ignores the parents and checks in the kids. That tiny gesture has been wildly popular, building lots of goodwill -- and promises of return visits. Thanks to these kinds of changes, leisure business is up some $500,000, Conklin says. Not a bad return on the $45,000 he spent on the ethnography.

Most professional ethnographers have years of training. But that doesn't mean you can't do it yourself. Aspect Medical Systems, a 210-employee medical-device manufacturer in Newton, Mass., turned its own executives into ethnographers to redesign its signature product -- a device that measures the degree of consciousness of a patient undergoing surgery to help an anesthesiologist deliver the appropriate dosage of knockout drugs.

Aspect employees put on surgical scrubs and headed into operating rooms, where they obsessively chronicled every detail of an anesthesiologist's activities. It became clear that their original big, bulky design simply would not work in actual hospitals. For one thing, doctors preferred to look at their equipment as little as possible and focus instead on the patient. They also realized the product had to be strong enough to withstand a lot of abuse.

Following hundreds of hours of observations, Aspect created the A-2000, a super-rugged device that requires minimal attention from the anesthesiologist. Since its launch in 1998, the A-2000 has sold 16,000 units (listed at $9,500 apiece) and is in use in more than 25% of the nation's operating rooms. "Ethnographic research isn't glamorous and it takes a lot of standing around,
but when you get that 'ah-ha!' it's worth it," says John Shambroom, Aspect's director of engineering.

That "ah-ha" moment can be elusive. Even experienced ethnographers can find themselves buried by data, futilely hunting for the pattern that ties it all together. To avoid that fate, you have to make sure you're asking the right questions, says Anne Schorr, a partner at Conifer Research, an ethnographic research firm in Chicago. Among the things to look for: confusion, barriers, wear patterns, and what's known in the business as "user torture" -- when a subject squeezes into a space or process that doesn't fit. Ethnographers also look for "duct-tape-and-string" solutions that customers have devised to solve problems you may not have anticipated.

But the most important element of a successful ethnography is an open mind. Consider SRAM, a Chicago-based bicycle component manufacturer. The company, which had a strong business designing shifters, chains, and the like, thought its next step was to create "a visionary product to lead the industry" -- an ambition that included reinventing the bicycle itself, says Kent Solberg, SRAM's global industrial design manager. So the firm hired an anthropologist, who interviewed hundreds of bikers, put ethnographers on mountain bikes, and even mounted small "lipstick" cameras on handlebars.

SRAM learned a lot from the process. But the most important lesson was that changing the company's focus was a mistake. SRAM instead redoubled efforts to make better components for its bicycle manufacturer clients. "We realized that we're just a piece of the puzzle, not the whole puzzle," Solberg says. And so, it put ethnography in mothballs. But the investment was well worth it. Says Solberg: "We wouldn't have had the insight we had without the ethnographic research."