

# **In Search of Real Consumer Insights?**

## **Add Art to the Science of Qualitative Research**

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Steve James is an award-winning documentary filmmaker who's been in the game for a long time. "Hoop Dreams," "Stevie," and "The War Tapes" are some of the classics under his belt. Curiosity, seeking to understand, and developing empathy with his subjects drive Steve's successful work — and when we are at our best as an agency, we do the same.

Recognizing that connection, we recently invited Steve to visit Draftfcb to share his art and his methods, to explore what we could learn and perhaps link to our own work. For planners, the links became very clear.

Here are six practices now in our planning toolbox. They bring art into the science of understanding and can help any agency or client improve their development of empathy and insights.

## **Get comfortable (and get your team comfortable) with shifting objectives.**

"Hoop Dreams" started as a documentary about basketball on the playgrounds of Chicago. When completed, it was a documentary about urban youths' Darwinian-like struggle to make it out of their neighborhood, facing seemingly insurmountable challenges along the way. Basketball became the backdrop. Steve could have made his film vision, but he let the story unfold, found a way to get to know the people and learned about them far beyond his initial vision. At face value, this means spending more time building relationships with people rather than designing research for them. Everyone needs a plan, but know that the plan may just be a starting point.

## **Give interview subjects permission to be themselves — by being yourself.**

Not a researcher. Not an interviewer. The first step in getting real insights is to obscure the boundary between "you" as the explorer and "them" as the subject. As a documentary filmmaker, Steve accomplishes this by minimalizing the experience. He emphasizes and lets his subjects know — in every way possible — that theirs is not a performance. And along the way he really lets them get to know him, warts and all. Unlimited transpar-

ency and openness develops a sense of trust that helps reveal the truth. Think of it like gardening: If you prep the soil well along the way and create the right conditions for insights to reveal themselves, your efforts will bear fruit. Neglect to do so and you may only scratch the surface.

## **Admit your stereotyping bias — and confront it daily.**

We all need to be aware of the human tendency to stereotype. Beware of what you think you know about someone. If you assume it's the truth, you stand a good chance of missing what is really true and interesting. One of the most powerful insights Steve related was how, in the creation of his films, he forces himself to proactively undermine his stereotype beliefs. It's a process he finds liberating and enlightening, one that he reminds himself to follow everyday, knowing that it often results in strengthening the trust he's building with his subjects. Actively working to undermine our built-in stereotyping bias can help everyone in marketing get to better, more interesting work.

## **Know that learning is not asking.**

Asking questions is like going on the offensive. All too often we go into our conversations with consumers banging away in rapid fire from a list of things that we would like to know. People know how to play that game and fire back the answers they feel are right (because no one wants to be wrong). When we ask questions, we get answers — but seldom get off the beaten path enough for something interesting to occur. Better to think in terms of subjects of conversation. Develop "openers" for those areas and you might get somewhere and something you never expected.

## **Give people alternate ways to reveal themselves.**

Not everyone responds the same when revealing themselves. A particularly poignant example of this occurred in "The War Tapes." Each of the participating soldiers was given a video camera to film their experiences. What came back was a riveting view of what they saw everyday in Iraq. One soldier, however, also journaled his experiences. His journal, in contrast to the camera, got to the real underlying struggles and issues the

soldier felt. The two resources highlighted the duality of the experience. Without this “other point of view,” only half of the story would have been told — and insight into the truth of this particular soldier’s experience surely would have been missed. Give subjects more than one way to tell their story, look for the contradictions, and you might be surprised what you find below the surface.

**Get your subjects involved — design the research together.**

Getting to the truth requires developing a sense of connection with your subjects. If real insight comes from a sense of trust and transparency, why not work together? Profoundly simple in concept, the challenge we should all attempt is that of opening up to subjects on what we plan to do — and then partner with them.

Ask some consumers in to help you design the research you are going to field. Find the right persons and provide the right framework and inspiration. You will be amazed at all the things you didn’t think of that will help you understand their lives. Furthermore, share your results. Give your subjects a look at how you are going to report out on who they are and what matters to them. Their reaction will surprise you. Recycle your findings as a stimulus, and you’ll learn more about who your subjects really are.

Making a documentary film, essentially a film about the unseen truth, is never about a product. Therein lies the final lesson for us, and perhaps the hardest one for marketers to truly grasp. Research about any product, even the rare, truly exceptional product, will never be as interesting to consumers as their lives. And if it’s not interesting to them, what you learn won’t be interesting to you. Get above the product you’re working on and into the issues and spaces it can be connected to — and be prepared to make the connections. Channel your documentary filmmaker and you will channel real insights.

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