It's a jungle out there

Corporate anthropology: Dirt-free research

By Sharon Walsh

NEW YORK (IDG) -- When Susan Squires joined Andersen Consulting in the 1990s, she quickly found that her job title was the source of some misunderstanding.

As a corporate anthropologist, Squires was there to research consumer behavior. But clients couldn't see past the Ph.D. After one client quipped that he didn't realize there was an archaeological dig on Andersen's campus, Squires began calling herself an "evaluator."

When people hear the word "anthropologist" they "think of Indiana Jones," says Squires, now director of interaction services at GVO, a consulting firm based in Palo Alto, Calif. In her line of work "there is buried treasure," she concedes, "but it's buried in people's brains."

Anthropologists like Squires are now turning up on more and more company payrolls alongside accountants and analysts. Much to the ire of their academic colleagues, doctoral candidates who once competed over a shrinking pie of academic slots and research grants are being snapped up by companies before they can finish their dissertations. Graduates are eschewing New Guinea and Bora Bora for Motorola and Intel.

Corporate anthropology got its start 20 years ago when applied-anthropology legends Lucy Suchman and Julian Orr dropped in on Xerox's Palo Alto Research Center to study how people interacted with technology. Since then, anthropologists, psychologists and other social scientists have dropped their curricula vitae for résumés and infiltrated the corporate world, calling themselves "knowledge liaisons," "ethnographers" and "evaluators."

The influx has grown in recent years as companies have tried to get more tactical about consumer research, evaluating increasingly technological products before their release.

At DaimlerChrysler, renowned French anthropologist G. Clotaire Rapaille had a hand in designing the PT Cruiser, one of the most successful automobiles in recent years. And Squires once advised an engineer not to build a washing machine that could "talk" to the drier simply because it could be done. Another anthropologist narrowly prevented an engineer at Motorola from producing a television that could be worn on a belt -- a cool idea, perhaps, but not the sort of thing the world is waiting for.

At Sapient, a tech consultancy based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a team of 70 corporate anthropologists advise clients on how to design user-friendly products. The team is run by the company's chief experience officer and eLabs co-founder Rick Robinson, who boasts his own academic pedigree as a developmental psychologist. The team has even survived the company's recent layoffs.

While these executive Ph.D.s may sound like some indulgence of the new economy, their services have become more important than ever in dissecting consumer appetites. These days anthropologists do everything from studying consumers in their natural habitats (the home, usually) to advising industrial design teams.

These efficiencies have only grown more important as the tech boom has subsided. Numerous studies show that at least 75 percent of all new products fail for lack of a market. That's a failure rate that technology companies in particular are eager to avoid, especially since a new product -- a chip, a server, a wireless device -- can cost hundreds of millions of dollars to bring to market. Intel boasts more than a dozen social scientists who've been at the company for more than five

years and who are, says Carmen Egido, director of the Applications Research Lab at Intel, "sought after for our advice at the early stages of development."

This may sound like the job of the marketing department, but there are substantial differences. Marketing involves targeting an audience for a product and then selling it, while anthropologists are responsible for finding out how the product will be used -- if at all. Anthropologists shun marketing's questionnaires and focus groups in favor of studying behavior. By recording in excruciating detail how people live and how products fit into their lives, anthropologists learn much more than what consumers usually tell marketers, since interviewees often lie on surveys or say what they think they should.

Genevieve Bell, an anthropologist with Intel's Peoples and Practices Research Group, calls this "deep hanging out." Her job involves finding out where families in different countries socialize and how technology fits into their lives.

After hundreds of hours of field research, Bell learned that in Europe family and friends spend much of their time in the kitchen, so home computers would have to be small enough to fit there. In China, by contrast, kitchens are small and hot, and people don't linger there. "This kind of research disrupts the idea of one product for the world," says Bell.

But don't call people like Bell and Squires "coolhunters." Anthropologists are quick to point out the differences between themselves and the trendspotters who have garnered much media attention in the past few years.

"We steer clear of them," says Intel's Egido. "We find their work very ephemeral and short-lived, with no fundamental grounding in basic behaviors."

Big business' growing appetite for corporate anthropologists has traditional academics concerned. Marietta Baba, chairwoman of the anthropology department at Wayne State University in Detroit, says corporations may actually violate the anthropologist code of ethics, which stipulates that scholars not use their knowledge to promote products that are harmful or unnecessary.

"Anthropologists are really afraid that the well will be poisoned by people who haven't thought through the consequences of what they're advising," says Baba, citing retailers that have used suggestions for branding to sell clothes to inner city teenagers who can't afford them.

But Squires insists that the anthropologist's job is to advocate for the consumer from within the corporation: "It's better to help find products people need," she says, "than to convince them to buy something they don't need or want."

Still, it seems the corporate anthropologist has come full circle. Many colleges and universities are now looking for professors with business experience to help train what they're euphemistically calling "practicing anthropologists."

And Squires has gone back to her old title -- even if her kind of digging still doesn't require a shovel.

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