

The art of anthropology and B2B communication

 By [Claire Denham-Dyson](#)

24 Nov 2017

When I tell people I'm an anthropologist, many of them say: "Oh, isn't that the study of dinosaurs?" Well, no, that's a palaeontologist. Anthropology is actually the study of culture and people, and observing how they behave in their daily lives including the challenges they face. It's a discipline that's often misunderstood, and many people don't realise that it has many practical applications - especially in a business context. Because fundamentally, businesses are about relationships, and about solving people's problems.

A business-to-human company

Because Demographica is a B2B marketing agency, people have always been at the heart of our direct communication. This is why we often refer to what we do as B2H (business-to-human) marketing. That's also why Demographica employs a team of up to 10 anthropologists to be involved in both the research process and the design of our campaign creatives.



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The benefits of anthropology

While the advertising world is often dominated by psychology, I believe that there are many benefits to using anthropology in B2B marketing:

- Anthropology is the study of the **everyday parts** of a person's life. So unlike psychology, it's not about changing behaviour. It's about understanding the nuances of how a product or service is used everyday as a key insight into what to say to a businessperson about it.
- Anthropology uses **'key informants'** to unearth insights: these are people with specialised knowledge, networks or influence. These individuals can be fundamental in discovering the complex decision-making journeys of businesses in making a B2B purchase.
- Anthropology tries to **delve into the grey areas** between more binary thinking (i.e hot/cold, slow/fast). In business there are often many grey areas that people can't box into categories. For example the sales cycle may be longer because the purchase is a series of negotiations, rather than a yes/no answer. Anthropology can help tell the story of that particular sales cycle.
- Anthropology encourages **explorative thinking**. We like to see the bigger picture and zoom in on what may seem like superfluous detail. For this reason we spend time with the client, looking at what the cultural truths that affect the sale may be.
- Anthropology helps bring the **humanity back to business**. Spending time with people and seeing things from their perspective naturally makes you more empathetic. This pushes businesses to deliver more to their clients, helping them truly connect and add value.

To illustrate how this works, we often use the example of a major brewing company in Europe in 2006 that was facing diminishing sales in bars and pubs, even though it's product was well liked and store sales were up. The brewing company

had conducted all the usual types of research and nothing helpful had emerged so instead, they sent a team of social anthropologists into bars and pubs to see what they could unearth.



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After analysing hours of video, photographs, and field notes, it emerged that bar owners placed no value on the promotional material they were being supplied and that it often ended up being thrown away. They also found that female servers felt trapped in their jobs and resented having to be flirtatious with patrons, plus they knew little about the product they were supposed to be promoting.

This led to a shift in how the brewing company created promotional material for pubs – they began to customise what they did for each bar and bar owner. It also created in-workplace “academies” which trained staff, as well as winning over female staff by offering them free taxi services home after late shifts. The results were astounding and led to a massive increase in sales over the next two years, and an increase in market share.

Bridging the gap

In this way, anthropology discovered the real reasons the brewing company faced decreasing sales. The reality is that the gap between what we produce and what we consume is getting smaller by the day. Anthropology can help you bridge that gap more efficiently.

ABOUT CLAIRE DENHAM-DYSON

Claire Denham-Dyson started studying anthropology at the university currently known as Rhodes and then moved to UCT. After finishing her Honours degree she moved back to Johannesburg and through fate or luck she found that Warren Mbss (CEO of Demographica) was looking for an anthropologist. Claire had never dreamed of using anthropology in advertising but loved the fact that it enabled her to meet so many people and learn about the culture of so many businesses.

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