

Inspiring Brand Positionings with Mixed Qualitative Methods: A Case of Pet Food

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Abstract

Qualitative research is often used by marketers to develop new brand positionings. This case illustrates how two sequentially applied qualitative approaches were used to generate positionings for a pet food brand. The methods included psychologically oriented focus groups and anthropologically informed ethnographies. When implemented independently by a single market research company, the two approaches inspired highly distinctive brand positionings. The focus groups sparked a positioning on the resolution of cognitive dissonance; the ethnographies spawned a positioning that entailed a re-conceptualization of the pet food category as a means to elevate the brand. The case concludes by considering the merits and limitations of the methods and the interdisciplinary approach overall. This research design may have promise for marketing practitioners and academics, and for consumer anthropologists in particular who have concerns that mixed qualitative methods can compromise anthropology's discipline-specific strengths.

Key words

brand, marketing, positioning, anthropology, psychology

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JBA 9(2): 251-274
Fall 2020

© The Author(s) 2020
ISSN 2245-4217

DOI:
10.22439/jba.v9i2.6124

Introduction

Creation of a brand positioning, a primary way that companies differentiate a brand *vis a vis* its competition, is well served by a profound understanding of a brand's target audience (see Ries and Trout 1981 on positioning). Although quantitative research is preeminent among contemporary marketers, qualitative studies produce a range and depth of knowledge about consumer ideas, beliefs, values, and behavior that are typically not uncovered in quantitative studies. For this reason, qualitative investigations are undertaken frequently by marketers who seek to develop new brand positionings. This case describes two qualitative methods used in a research project that aimed to generate positionings for a pet food brand. The approaches included psychologically informed focus groups and anthropologically informed ethnographies. When implemented independently by a single research company, the two methods inspired highly distinctive brand positionings that each had the potential for brand building. The sequential interdisciplinary research design described here may have promise for marketing practitioners and academics who engage in brand positioning projects, and especially for consumer anthropologists who have concerns that mixing qualitative methods can compromise anthropology's distinctive conceptual strengths.

Qualitative Market Research and Mixed Methods Research

Qualitative research has a long tradition in marketing overall and for brand positioning in particular (Milliken 2001; Belk et al. 2013; Hackley 2019). Among qualitative techniques, focus groups are one of the widely used methods despite acknowledged liabilities and limitations (Krueger and Casey 2015; Malhotra and Dash 2017: 137-161; Morais 2010). The marketing application of anthropological methods, especially ethnography, began in the 1980s and has driven the growth of anthropology's role in consumer understanding and insight (Sunderland and Denny 2007; Malefyt and Morais 2012; Jordan 2019; McCabe and Denny 2019). The selection of the type of qualitative research to be applied in marketing studies depends largely on learning objectives. When information and insight are needed on consumer attitudes and emotions, psychologically oriented focus groups and in-depth interviews are a good choice. When marketers seek to access how a brand category fits into consumers' lives in real time, identify thoughts that consumers might not articulate in a controlled setting, and view their experiences contextually, holistically, and symbolically, anthropologically informed ethnography is a potent methodology.

Mixed methods, e.g., combining qualitative and quantitative methods or applying different types of qualitative and quantitative modes to answer a learning need, have been in use for decades (Pelto 2015; for a

discussion of triangulation in mixed methods, see Jick 1979; for a hybrid approach termed “statistico-ethnography,” see Patel 2014:148). When mixed methods are applied in market research, they add value because they bring methodological and theoretical breadth and have the potential to spark insights that singularly designed studies might not (Morais and Malefyt 2010; Okraku et al. 2017; Ladner 2019; for a related example, see Rodriguez-Mejia et al. 2020). Stated another way, mixed methods can yield an especially robust understanding of research subjects, and are, in that sense, “a merger of the best of both worlds” (Gummesson 2005: 309). Qualitative market research is not monochromatic; it can incorporate numerous methodological and theoretical orientations. For example, qualitative research can be conducted via focus groups, in-depth interviews, diaries, and in-home and/or in-store ethnography, and be fielded face-to-face or online synchronously or asynchronously. Theory can be sourced from fields as varied as anthropology, psychology, sociology, phenomenology, and semiotics (Madsbjerg and Rasmussen, 2014; Denny and Sunderland 2014). Qualitative market research methods in their myriad formats are valuable for uncovering not only what consumers say they do but why they do it, e.g., their core beliefs and values, motivations that might not be revealed in quantitative studies, for unveiling needs that consumers do not express or do not know they have, and for adding, through ethnography, naturalism and “thickness” to marketers’ understanding of consumers. Despite all of these strengths, there can be perils to mixing qualitative methods; blending research designs, especially theory, can dilute the strength of each of the combined analytical frameworks. For example, in consumer anthropology, that might entail compromising a discipline-defining theoretical concept such as culture, an argument that Sunderland and Denny make when they contrast psychological and anthropological approaches in market research: “...for advertisers and marketers, ethnographic inquiry is too often embraced as a means to obtain a deeper psychological understanding of a target audience” rather than providing a cultural analysis (2003: 188). Although these concerns bring a note of caution to the application of hybrid approaches, the rewards of applying more than a single lens can outweigh the risks for market researchers. Sunderland and Denny recognize that: “One of the most successful studies we have undertaken succeeded because we were able to unwind and make visible the strands of both psychology and culture” (Sunderland and Denny 2003: 194). This case builds upon a previous argument for interdisciplinary complementarity, especially between psychology and anthropology, in market research (Morais and Malefyt 2010). To help obviate the risks of mixing methods in this study, the methods were executed separately.

Market Context and Project Objectives

Freshpet (<https://freshpet.com>), founded in 2006 and located in Secaucus, New Jersey, is a publicly traded company that manufactures and markets refrigerated dog and cat foods. The brand is distributed widely in North America in pet specialty stores such as Petco and PetSmart and in retail stores including Target and Walmart, among other venues. Freshpet is a relatively small player in the pet food market; it is not listed among the [top global pet food companies](#). In the Fall of 2016, a Freshpet Insight Director contacted New York based market research firm Weinman Schnee Morais (WSM) regarding a new research initiative. The Insight Director had worked with WSM previously on several cereal projects when she was employed by Post Foods, including one that included the two WSM principals, each with different expertise; one (Weinman) is a consumer psychologist, the other (Morais) is a consumer anthropologist. That cereal study was executed with focus groups and entailed the close involvement of Weinman and Morais (Morais and Malefyt 2010). The Insight Director's interest in WSM for the Freshpet project stemmed from the ability of the firm to provide behavioral science and social science perspectives, psychology and anthropology in particular. For Freshpet, she asked WSM to design a research plan that would incorporate these capabilities in order to address several objectives, among them strategic and tactical initiatives based upon a new brand positioning, that could improve the marketing of their refrigerated dog food:

- Determine how to better connect overall with the mindsets of Freshpet users' and the brand's prime prospects¹
- Discover ways to deepen the relationship with current Freshpet users
- Disrupt "autopilot" buying habits among prime prospects who do not buy Freshpet
- Provide the Freshpet marketing team with direction for redefining the Freshpet brand identity and reinvent the brand's positioning

While the research project had broad aims, this case will focus on the elements that included Freshpet positioning. Additional findings that could enhance the marketing of Freshpet will be mentioned.

¹ Freshpet manufactures both Freshpet and Vital dogfood. Vital is a sub-brand of Freshpet; the Freshpet brand name appears on the package. Both brands were included in this study. For convenience, the brand name "Freshpet" will encompass the two product lines throughout this case.

The Freshpet Insight Director specified that the consumer psychologist apply her expertise in focus groups and that the consumer anthropologist apply his capability in ethnographies. The Insight Director believed that fielding each research phase separately (the focus groups first) and blinding the consumer psychologist and anthropologist to each of the other's phases would keep their perspectives "pure" and produce more distinctive insights. As a condition of winning the project, the Insight Director mandated that the two research company principals be sequestered from one other's projects until each of their reports was submitted to Freshpet. Only after the two research phases were completed was a final integrated project report to be written by the research company and presented to Freshpet company management. The research firm agreed, and the project was awarded to WSM.

The Research Project

Each phase of the Freshpet research project will be discussed in turn, tracing the sequence of the project as it was executed, beginning with the focus groups, followed by the ethnographies, and concluding with a discussion of the integrated report that was presented to Freshpet management. The sections that follow include content from the original comprehensive research reports that is most pertinent to brand positioning and related findings.

A few elicitation methods were applied in both the focus groups and ethnographies, e.g., questioning about the status and role of the dog in family life and storytelling about family-dog interaction. Owing to that process, there were some similar findings during the two phases of fieldwork. For example, a discovery that crosscut both research phases was that pet caregivers believe they are doing the best for their dogs by feeding them the brands they currently buy. The caregivers feel that as long as their dog is healthy, has no digestive problems, finishes his/her food, and seems "happy enough" with the food, there is no reason for changing their feeding regimen or their dog food brands. For retaining loyal, heavy Freshpet users, that sentiment was good news to the marketing team; for increasing Freshpet usage among current buyers and converting prime prospects to Freshpet, it presented a substantial challenge to the marketers. In both research phases, respondents talked about (and in the ethnographic phases demonstrated) their love and affection for their dogs as family members and how important it was to them for their dogs to be content. Findings such as those were essentially a rediscovery of what the Freshpet marketing team already knew about their consumers. Covering previous territory in a market research project is a common occurrence; experienced researchers design their studies to be sure they will traverse new ground that can help advance a brand in the marketplace. Of note, other market researchers have examined the

pet/pet parent relationship in a feeding/brand preference context (Maschio 2015; McCabe 2014). More broadly, the pet/human relationship has been studied (e.g., Belk 1996; Bettany and Belk 2011; Charlies and Davies 2008; Fox 2006; Porter 2009; Shir-Vertesh 2012). Some of the findings in this study, e.g., the close connection between pets and pet families, echo the findings of this previous research.

Psychological Phase: Focus Groups

Methodology

The first phase of the research project consisted of eight 90-minute face-to-face focus groups scheduled over two days. Thirty-seven pre-recruited respondents, all women pet owners, participated in the groups. The respondents represented the following customer segments: Freshpet users (9 respondents); Freshpet prime prospects (8); users of a Freshpet company sub-brand, Vital: Vital loyal users (10); Vital prime prospects (10). Prime prospects were users of competitive super premium dog food brands. The focus groups were fielded in a professional research facility equipped with a one-way mirror in Morristown, New Jersey. In the design and analysis of the focus groups, the research company used a wide array of techniques to identify the drivers of dog parent attitudes, emotions, and behavior.²

The Freshpet focus group moderator's guide was developed by WSM with input on the areas of inquiry from the Freshpet Insight Manager. The main focus group interview topics included:

- Reasons for brand use, and the perceived uniqueness and benefits of the respondents' preferred brand.
- Attitudes toward the respondents' own and their dog's food, tapping functional and emotional characterizations.
- The sights and sounds of the feeding experience for the pet parent and dog based on diaries that respondents completed prior to the focus group sessions.
- Questions regarding the respondents' perceptions of the dog's enjoyment of the eating experience.
- Benefit Laddering, which entailed a series of questions about what an experience accomplished functionally and emotionally for the pet parent and dog, with probing queries repeated after each response so that the moderator could elicit increasingly "higher-order" emotional benefits. The laddering exercise included

² Pet parent is the term preferred by many primary pet caretakers and by the marketers who target them.

responses regarding home cooked food to obtain the deepest emotional benefits of eating food by the respondents and their families.

- Projective techniques:
 - Guided Retrospection: Respondents discussed emotions associated with feeding their pets, and then, with guidance by the moderator, transposed those emotions to unrelated experiences. Additional emotions associated with the transposed experience were then elicited by the moderator. This process extended and enriched an understanding of the initial emotions by the research team. This is a proprietary WSM technique.
 - Deprivation Scenarios: Respondents were asked what they would do if their preferred dog food brand was not available in their usual purchase location. That question can reveal how consumers might choose alternate brands or, if they are brand loyal, when they might seek their preferred brand in another shopping excursion.
- Opening of the product package in the focus group sessions by respondents and demonstrating how they use it (no dogs were present in the focus group sessions).

Findings Related to the Positioning

When the family's eating experience is joyful, it is a signal to the caregiver that her efforts are appreciated. For mothers – in this research, most of the respondents were mothers – the family's appreciation of what they do for them engenders a feeling of success and validation as a parent/spouse. When the dog mom provides a joyful eating experience for her dog, the dog's appreciation, conveyed when dogs devour their food and wag their tail, is a moment of success and validation for the caregiver as a dog parent. Freshpet users in particular noted that feeding their dog Freshpet results in a meaningful connection, expressed by a grateful look, a lick, a cuddle, and the perception by the caregiver of a dog's smile. The pet parent feels that she is valued by her dog when this occurs; she believes that she has the ability to make her dog happy. She thinks that the dog is being treated as if he/she is truly part of the family, and that treatment is a significant component of enabling the entire family unit to run smoothly and blissfully.

Representative Focus Group Statements on the Dog Mom/Dog Relationship:

- "She definitely smiles at me when I give her Freshpet."

- "After she eats, she's in a great mood. She just looks at me with a different expression. She jumps on the couch and licks me. It's like she's saying, "Thanks Mom for taking care of me."
- "I know it's healthy and my dog is happy. I mean, she's VERY happy – and I think -- somebody really likes me."
- "I look forward to feeding time because I know they'll enjoy it. I spoil them – and it makes me feel good about myself, makes me happy."
- "I'm being a good Mom – taking care of my child."
- "It validates you as the Mom. You are nurturing your family."
- "It's my baby, it makes me so satisfied to see her enjoying her meal. I feel like a good caretaker, and like I'm being kind."
- "He looks up – trying to tell me "Thank you, Mommy."
- "I feel like the provider. Very maternal. I feel appreciated and valued."
- "When my dog doesn't like his food, he looks at me like the way my kid does when I give him vegetables, like really? You want me to eat THAT?"

Arriving at the Key Positioning

As the WSM principle with expertise in consumer psychology listened in the backroom while a colleague moderated the focus groups, she reasoned that a connection could be made between the respondents' feeling that their dog, as a member of the family, should experience eating enjoyment at the same level as other family members and the caregivers' emotional states. An insight was informed by the psychological theory of cognitive dissonance originally developed by Festinger (1957; Dravcott and Dabbs 1998). Pet parents love their dogs as they love their families and Freshpet users feel that their dog's eating experience is at the same level of their family's experience. The consumer psychologist inferred that if a pet parent is not serving Freshpet, she might feel that she is treating her dog less well than she treats her family. If she does indeed love her dog as she claims, there is – or could be – an attitude/behavior discrepancy that might be resolved by the Freshpet brand. When serving Freshpet, the caregiver is treating her dog like the part of the family he or she is. She is making everyone in her family happy at mealtime, the humans and the dog, and she is a successful caregiver for all. A new Freshpet positioning could be expressed as: *Make your dog's eating experience as enjoyable as the rest of your family. Feed your dog Freshpet.* The brand's messaging could render the caregiver's love for the dog salient, communicate the attitude and behavior discrepancy of not using

Freshpet, and assert that feeding the dog Freshpet is a way to restore cognitive balance. (See Figure 1)

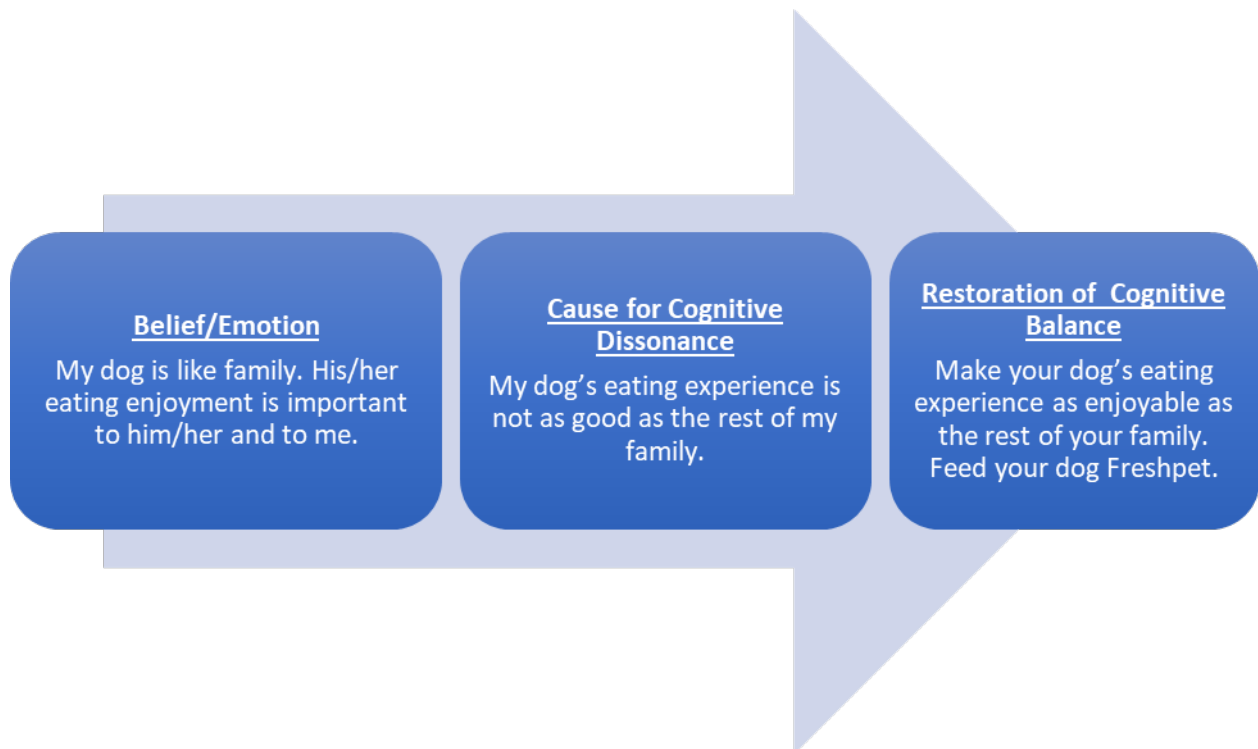


Figure 1: Cognitive Dissonance and Resolution

Additional Strategic and Tactical Considerations

Product Form: Freshpet was viewed by the focus group respondents as a unique form, situated conceptually in between dry and wet dog food; for some respondents, Freshpet was superior to dry and wet dog food. A few respondents felt that Freshpet had the substance and texture of dry dog food and was superior to wet dog food because of its sensory benefits. One respondent said, "This is more solid than wet food. It's not wet – it's moist. Wet food is glop; this is more solid, in-between wet and dry." Another respondent commented: "It's like people food." Stemming from these findings, the research firm suggested that the Freshpet team should consider anchoring Freshpet *between* dry and wet dog food in order to differentiate the brand as *moist* rather than wet. That designation might cause pet parents to perceive Freshpet as more similar to the human food eating experience than when the dog consumes dry or wet dog food. As will be discussed in the ethnography section, a discussion about Freshpet *vis a vis* dry and wet dog food with respondents during that research phase yielded dissimilar findings and a different recommendation on brand positioning.

Health, Taste, and Mixing: Some focus group respondents viewed Freshpet as better than both dry and wet dog food because it "comes out of the refrigerator," as does human food. In that context, several respondents characterized the Freshpet brand as incorporating both good health and good taste, which they saw as unusual in the dog food category. That

perception presented another opportunity for brand positioning, e.g., conveying that Freshpet is a balance of health and taste or, perhaps the ultimate in health and the ultimate in taste, *The Best of Both Worlds*. Those claims would require technical support, which Freshpet management might or might not be able to provide. Additionally, recognizing that pet caregivers often mix pet food forms, and in light of its taste and health benefits, Freshpet might be positioned as the ultimate mixer. That could increase product usage among lighter current users and attract new users. Mixing will be discussed in greater detail in the section on the ethnographies.

Anthropological Phase: Ethnographies

Methodology

The second phase of the Freshpet research project entailed anthropologically informed ethnography. Six respondents were recruited for three-hour face-to-face visits in their homes and to participate in “shop-alongs” in the stores where they most often bought their pet food. The ethnographies were conducted in suburban New Jersey. The respondents were dog owners and all women representing the following segments: Freshpet loyal users (1 respondent); Freshpet non-users, but prime prospects (2); users of a Freshpet company sub-brand, Vital: Vital loyal users (1); Vital non-users, but prime prospects (2). As in the focus groups, prime prospects were users of competitive super premium dog food brands. The ethnographies intended to explore real-time behavior and, through questions and close observation, uncover the respondents’ attitudes, values, beliefs, emotions, rules, and symbols of and for human-dog behavior, especially those associated with dog feeding, and to observe how the respondents shopped for dog food. The ethnography research team included the WSM principle with expertise in consumer anthropology, a colleague, and selected Freshpet marketing managers, primarily the Freshpet Insight Director. The team was interested in the experience of the dog parent and the dog within the family and as a dyadic dog parent/dog relationship. An ethnographic guide was created by the research company with the input of the Freshpet Insight Director that included the topics and the sequence of the inquiries. Market research ethnographic encounters are less structured than focus groups and more conversational, so this research phase was freer flowing and more improvisational than the focus group phase. The blend of questioning, conversation, and observation helps reveal how respondents’ lives are lived and enables storytelling to unfold. The process helps ethnographers access needs consumers might not know they have and behaviors that they may not realize they engage in; those kinds of findings are seldom captured in formal focus group interviews or surveys. Consumer ethnography, like all ethnography, is interpretive

research; an anthropologically trained consumer anthropologist views respondents as fully as possible in the context of their lives and their culture, attempting to understand their world holistically. In consumer ethnography, a major objective is to determine how people make or could make meaning in their engagements with brand categories overall and, in this instance, the dogs they parent and the food they feed them.

The Freshpet ethnographies proceeded as follows:

- After entering the respondent's home, the research team asked for a room-by-room tour. Special attention was paid to locations that dogs interacted with the family, ate, and slept.
- The ethnographic interviews were marked by naïve probing. For example: What is a pet? What is a dog? What is food? What is feeding your dog? The objective of this line of questioning is to encourage the consumer ethnographer to be open to new ways of thinking about a subject area to reduce bias and, from the respondent's point-of-view, to reveal the most fundamental meaning of a thing, entity, experience, or relationship (See Sunderland and Denny 2007 for an extended discussion of this approach in market research).
- After each question, the ethnography team allowed time for the respondent to elaborate. Follow up queries consisted of open-ended probes such as, "Tell me more" and "Help me understand."
- Stories were elicited about human-dog interaction in different areas of the home, where the dog interacted with the primary caregiver and other members of the family, covering memories about events that occurred where the dog played, ate, and slept.
- Respondents were asked to compare dry and wet dog foods *vis a vis* Freshpet.
- After spending about 90 minutes in the home, the research team accompanied the respondent on a visit to the store that she preferred to shop for pet food. The respondent was asked to shop for pet food as she does normally. Respondents were first observed at a short distance, without questioning, and then asked to share their thoughts as they considered products. If they did not notice the Freshpet refrigerator case, the consumer anthropologist asked the respondents to look at it and discuss the case and the items that it contained.
- After the store visit, the team returned to the respondent's home, and observed and asked questions about the process of preparing, serving, and consuming dog food.
- Photographs, audio recording, and video recording were used with the permission of the respondents.

Findings Related to the Positioning

As found in the focus groups, pet caregivers love their dogs and consider them part of the family; a recurrent theme in the ethnographies was that dogs “complete” a family and that they can be like sons or daughters.

Representative Ethnography Statements on Dogs Completing the Family:

- “My girl, my baby girl.”
- “Like my third child.”
- “It’s like watching my kids play soccer.”

Dogs are companions who return love and loyalty. They are “forever babies” who demand special care but, unlike children, dogs have no tantrums, poutiness, school anxiety, social concerns, or dating worries, and they do not engage in drugs. Among the ethnography respondents, their dogs are integrated fully in family life; many have free reign in the home, and they accompany the family whenever possible, including visits to pet stores. Dogs often share a bedroom – or bed – for sleeping with the primary caregiver. Some dog parents anthropomorphize dogs, ascribing human thinking and feelings to them, thereby enhancing the meaning of their dog’s experiences and their role in family life. One dog parent told a story of how her daughter and the family dog are like sisters. When the daughter and the dog do something wrong, the dog “doesn’t like being blamed when the two get into trouble.” It was clear to the research team that the anthropomorphizing enhanced the family’s bond with the dog; the more human-like the dog’s thoughts and feelings, the more the dog had in common with ways the family members thought and felt.

Feeding time is an occasion for doing more than providing nourishment or, as one respondent characterized it, “fuel.” Caregivers are attuned to the “happy anticipation” that their dogs show when the caregiver prepares their meal. Dogs often sit nearby, look up to the food preparation spot, and wag their tails. Feeding time is an occasion for pet parents to show caring and connect with their dog. Sometimes children in the family are assigned dog feeding tasks but, in this study, the primary feeder was the caregiver, and she relished the role. Some comments that illustrated how caregivers perceived Freshpet included:

Two Freshpet users:

- “What I like is that I see the carrots and all the veggies in there.”
- “These are the ingredients I like to feed myself and my family.”

A prime prospect who was seeing Freshpet for the first time in a store:

- “They would enjoy this much better than wet food. They’d think they were eating our food.”

The consumer anthropologist spoke with the respondents about the types of foods that they feed their dog. These included wet or canned dog food, packaged dry dog food, dog snacks, human home cooked food, which could be table scraps served at or after family mealtime or when the dog is sick and they want to give the dog something special. The relative merits of these food types were discussed along with a task that asked the respondents to show on their kitchen table a continuum how they viewed the forms relative to one another and explain the reason for the placement. Several of the respondents did not classify Freshpet as a dry or a wet food. After saying that wet dog food was superior to dry dog food in terms of taste and their dog’s eating enjoyment, they indicated that Freshpet was close to home-cooked human food because it was in a cylindrical form and bought from a refrigerator case.

Arriving at the Key Positioning

Reflecting on the respondents’ anthropomorphic thinking about their dogs and informed by applications of phenomenology in market research (Madsbjerg and Rasmussen, 2014: 78), the consumer anthropologist speculated that there might be an opportunity to communicate to dog parents that they could improve the way their dog experiences – in a human-like way – eating. Freshpet could be the brand that enables pet parents to deliver that experience. This insight might have been linked to the cognitive dissonance positioning discussed above had the anthropologist been aware of that positioning at the time of the ethnographic research; instead it provided an emotional underpinning for the major positioning that arose from the ethnographies. Based upon the conversations with respondents about the classification of Freshpet *vis a vis* dry and wet dog food and home-cooked human food, the consumer anthropologist had an epiphany based upon the anthropological concepts of emic and etic (Kottak 2006:43). Could there be a conceptual shift from an etic (outsider, in this case, marketer) view to an emic (native, in this case, consumer) perspective? Perhaps Freshpet should not reflect the marketer’s binary category classification of dry and wet dog food; the category could be reconceived as a *hierarchy* with Freshpet positioned above dry and wet food and below the “gold standard” of home cooked human food. Adapting a phrase from psychology familiar to most marketers, the *Hierarchy of Needs*, (Maslow 1943), the consumer anthropologist labeled the proposed positioning *The Hierarchy of Feed*. (Figure 2), elaborated as: *It’s not wet food or dry food. It’s Freshpet*. Such a reclassification of the dog food category could help distinguish and elevate Freshpet in consumers’ minds and in the overall dog food marketplace. Coupled with messaging that stressed the dog’s

anthropomorphic-based eating enjoyment and the visible vegetables in Freshpet, which appealed to pet parents, *The Hierarchy of Feed* positioning could reinforce current users' commitment to Freshpet, compel prime prospects to purchase the brand, and convince light Freshpet users to use more of it. *The Hierarchy of Feed* reconceptualization could inspire the Freshpet team to develop initiatives based upon the way that consumers think (or with marketing *could* think)

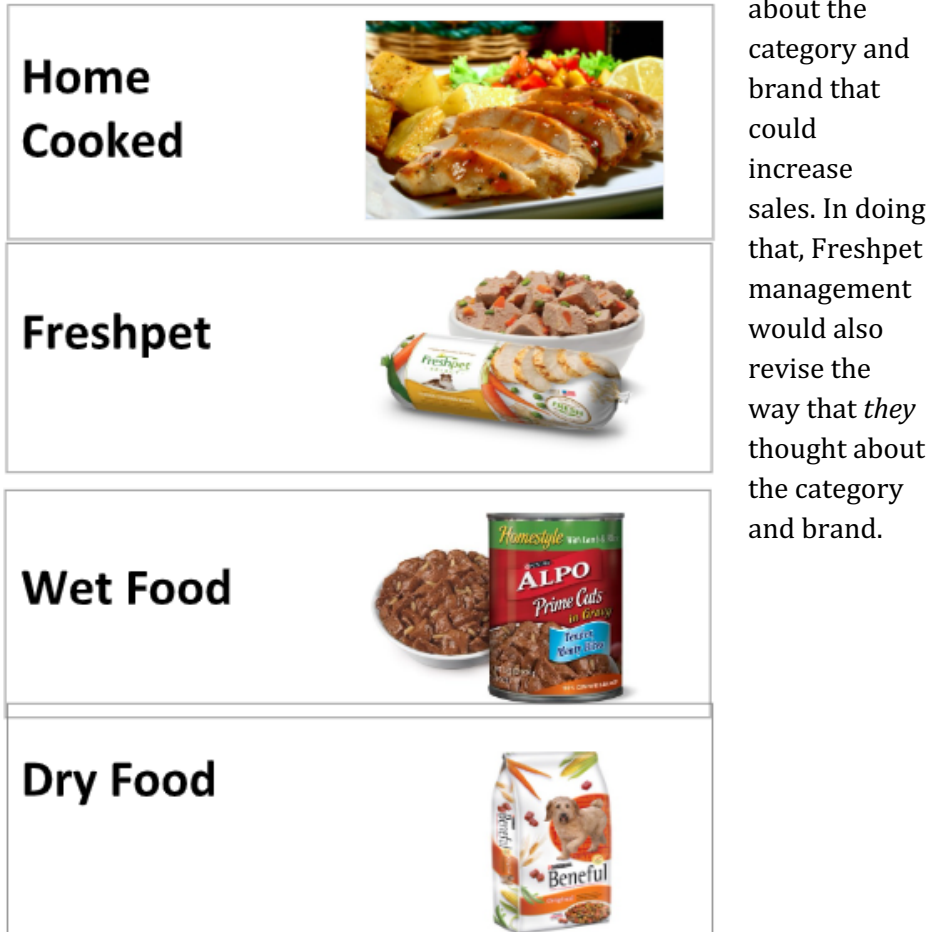


Figure 2: *The Hierarchy of Feed*

Additional Strategic and Tactical Considerations

Shopping Experience: The refrigerated form of Freshpet is displayed in stores in a large Freshpet branded refrigerated case. Although in-store refrigeration of dog food brands is not unique, it is unusual. During the planning phases of the research, the Freshpet marketing team decided to explore if the location of Freshpet in a refrigerated case and the cylindrical form of some of the brand's SKUs were assets or liabilities for the brand. The in-store ethnographies revealed mixed results. Refrigeration conveyed freshness and quality, but the location of dog food in a store refrigerator caused some respondents who did not use the brand to bypass the refrigerator in the pet food section simply because they did not think to look at a refrigerator case when shopping for dog food. The cylindrical product form, which a few respondents described as looking like a "roll of pepperoni," was perceived as odd, but intriguing. These findings sparked an insight. Anthropologists have long felt that a part of our professional mission is making "the unfamiliar familiar," e.g., explaining the seemingly exotic behavior of foreign cultures to non-natives of that culture. The unfamiliar to familiar agenda inspired a recommendation by the consumer anthropologist that Freshpet management should consider creative ways to make the refrigerator location for the brand and the cylindrical product form more familiar looking to target consumers shopping for dog food. That action was hypothesized to be imperative if Freshpet's marketing executives were to disrupt "autopilot" buying behavior among prime prospects and encourage them to buy Freshpet. The research firm recommended that the marketing team collaborate with design specialists to increase the impact, including the "stopping power," of the Freshpet in-store refrigerator case and to reconsider the brand's package design to appear more category-familiar to potential buyers.

Mixing Fast and Slow: Dog caregivers often mix two or more types of food, e.g. wet, dry, home cooked, and, in the case of Freshpet, combining Freshpet with any of these options. The in-home observation of dog food preparation revealed that mixing can be done with care, like cooking a special meal for the family, or quickly to get the job done as fast as possible. Given that one objective for Freshpet marketing was to increase the amount of Freshpet that is mixed in with other forms, the *manner* in which pet caregivers mix the dog's food could present an opportunity for growing the brand. The anthropologist considered the phases of feeding a dog as a rite of passage, moving from the dog's anticipation of a meal and the parent's preparation of it to the dog's consumption of the meal to the dog's and the parent's satisfaction after the meal is consumed (cf. Van Gennep 1960/1909). The middle phase of this progression, a liminal period, has been analyzed by numerous anthropologists, most notably by Turner (1964; 1969) and explored more recently in business

anthropology (McCabe and Briody 2016). When pet parents prepare their dog's meals, the process can be viewed through this lens and combined with the psychological concept of mindfulness (Bishop et al. 2004). During the ethnographic observations of dog feeding, the caregivers' procedure of mixing was observed closely and discussed with the respondents. The pet caregivers' mixing rituals – some slow, some fast – spawned an idea regarding how Freshpet could increase consumption of its product. By encouraging consumers to be more mindful during preparation of their dog's food – the liminal phase when mixing occurs – in the same way they are mindful of the way that they prepare a special meal for their family, the brand could encourage pet parents to mix in more Freshpet, which their dogs enjoy more than other dog food brands. Conveying to caregivers that the dogs often pick out the Freshpet when it is mixed with other dog food (especially dry food), returning to their feeding bowl later to consume the balance of the food, could underscore the high appeal of Freshpet to dogs. The view of Freshpet as balancing health and taste, discovered in the focus groups, might be a component of this message. These appeals could be wrapped within a message that mindful mixing is a way for the caregiver to express love for her dog, in the same sense that attending closely to preparation of a special family meal is an expression of love for the family.

The Integrated Report and Managerial Perspectives

The final integrated research report, which was crafted for presentation in a meeting with both the owner and the CEO of Freshpet, was designed as a seamless document, incorporating the findings, insights, and recommendations emanating from the focus groups and the ethnographies. The report defined the research objectives, briefly outlined the mixed methodology, and described the main areas that would be addressed in the presentation: (1) "Autopilot" consumer shopping habits during which non-buyers bypassed the refrigerator case that contained Freshpet because it was not a familiar location for dog food; (2) questions about the acceptance of the refrigerated roll packaging in the dog food category; (3) classification of the Freshpet product in the dog food category; (4) the mixing process, e.g., mixing Freshpet with other forms of dog food, which was known from previous research to be a common user practice; and (5) the dog's eating experience. These areas previewed the findings and insights that would be covered in the report in order to render the presentation more digestible to the company owner and CEO. The specific approaches and sequencing of the psychologically informed focused groups and anthropologically informed ethnographies were not dwelled upon. Moreover, the research findings, insights, and recommendations were presented without reference to a specific methodology. For example, the anthropomorphism displayed by pet parents for their dogs was

integrated with both the cognitive dissonance and the Hierarchy of Feed positionings. While the Insight Director received two separate reports, one for each phase of the overall project, she reasoned that Freshpet management would be interested in the results, not the process. She was correct.

The presentation of the integrated report was scheduled for 90 minutes and lasted three hours. The Insight Director felt that the final report delivered on her objective: a dual perspective that maximized the power of each research discipline and produced valuable consumer insights and intriguing new brand positionings that had marketplace potential. The company owner and CEO were highly engaged for the entire meeting. The session pulsated with thoughtful questions and discussion, and the entire marketing team exhibited excitement about the applications of the report. With all of this enthusiasm, everyone present understood that the positionings and the other research company recommendations would require further strategic development, and many would have to be re-expressed in “consumer friendly” form by creative teams. Before launching the key positionings and/or the additional strategic and tactical considerations into the market, the research company suggested, and the team concurred, that they would need to be exposed to consumers for assessment. The first step in this process would be qualitative research for message optimization; the second step would entail quantitative A/B testing to determine more definitively if the initiatives merited advancement into the consumer marketplace.

Market research firms do not always learn the outcomes of their research projects, especially when they serve as consultants or “suppliers” to companies. That lack of knowledge may be because a research firm is only hired once by a company or because the use of the research the firm conducts is not shared with them by their clients. Based upon tracking of Freshpet company promotion and advertising nearly a year after the presentation, it was difficult to determine the direct impact of this research project. To ascertain if indeed the findings, insights, and/or recommendations were tested and/or applied in the marketplace by Freshpet, an email was sent by the author to the Freshpet Insight Director to learn whether and how the research project was used by the company. The Insight Director’s response was positive, but not specific: “Packaging, TV, website were all influenced by the learning.”

The Two Approaches in Summary

Both of the research methods incorporated in this project contributed to viable, or at least testable, brand positionings for Freshpet. The focus group insights and the cognitive dissonance positioning could enable Freshpet to demonstrate a deep-seated understanding of the perceived

emotional needs of dogs – to *enjoy* eating – and the desire of dog caregivers to express through feeding love similar to the love they convey when providing family meals and achieve personal satisfaction in the process. The ethnographies sparked a positioning that could encourage dog parents (and Freshpet management) to think about the dog food category in a new way, more actively celebrating the distinctive form and the refrigeration of Freshpet. That could situate the brand in consumers' minds more closely to human food than dry or wet dog food. Freshpet could offer a way for the caregiver to enhance the dog's eating experience and express their love for their pet. As different as the research methods and the positionings were, both emanated from the status and role of dogs in families and the love that pet parents have for them. (See Table 1).

TABLE 1: Summary of the Approaches

- **Analytical Framework**
 - Psychology
- **Method**
 - Focus Groups
- **Insight**
 - Resolve cognitive dissonance of dog's eating experience not being as good as entire family
- **Positioning**
 - Make your dog's eating experience as enjoyable as the rest of your family.
- **Analytical Framework**
 - Anthropology
- **Method**
 - Ethnography
- **Insight**
 - Dog food is hierarchical not binary
- **Positioning**
 - It's not wet food or dry food. It's Freshpet.

In addition to the positionings, the psychologically oriented focus groups yielded marketing tactics in the realms of product form and health/taste, while the anthropologically informed ethnographies generated insights regarding the shopping experience and mixing Freshpet with other dog food forms.

Discussion

The business value of the project described here is apparent, and the research protocol helped reduce the risk that the distinctive qualities of psychology and anthropology would be attenuated. However, there may still be a concern among anthropologists who participate in interdisciplinary studies that their discipline-specific assets can be compromised, especially the diminution of anthropology's core concept of culture. This merits discussion beyond the arguments raised by Sunderland and Denny (2003) and Morais and Malefyt (2010).

Anthropologists have long claimed hegemony with regard to the culture concept. As Kuper observes, following World War II, "cultural anthropology was granted a special license to operate in the field of culture"; in more recent years, the expertise endured, but anthropologists "no longer enjoy a privileged position in the packed and diverse gallery of culture experts." (Kuper 1999: ix-x). Although anthropologists may not own exclusive rights to the culture concept, anthropologists in business often merchandise their authority vis-à-vis culture as a point of distinction (see, for example, Sunderland and Denny 2007 and McCracken 2009; for a business anthropologist on "ethnographic thinking," see Hasbrouck 2018). That is understandable. Given the robustness of the culture concept as an analytical framework, there are benefits to leveraging it as a qualification in the competitive business marketplace. However, there can be downsides for anthropologists who silo themselves conceptually or operationally. As Pink and her co-authors argue, "unless anthropologists are prepared to build bridges with other disciplines and practices...anthropology is unlikely to flourish as an active and influential discipline" (Pink et al. 2017:5-6; also see Malefyt and Morais 2012: 149-154). Fortunately, for decades, anthropologists have collaborated in and with "agriculture, development, education, marketing, medical researchers and clinicians" (Pink et al. 2017:10). Anthropologists are increasingly members of design and user experience teams and are working with data scientists (Malefyt and Morais 2019; Rattenbury and Nafus 2018). In all of these ventures, the skills and sensibility that are distinctive to anthropology can be retained (see, for example, McCabe 2016). There are indeed risks of disciplinary attenuation inherent in collaborative projects, but there are numerous ways to mitigate them. The Freshpet case illuminates how, with a research design that stresses interdisciplinary collaboration rather than methodological and theoretical integration, anthropologists can work intimately with another field without compromising their strengths. In this context, it is worth noting that anthropology contributes more than the concept of culture *per se* to solving business problems; in the Freshpet project, anthropological perspectives on familial status and role, cognitive classification, emic/etic distinctions, ritual, and making the unfamiliar familiar triggered analytical insights.

Did the sequestering of the consumer psychologist and the consumer anthropologist during the two research phases make a difference in the outcome of the Freshpet project? The protocol appeared to the research company principals to avoid the theoretical “fuzziness” that a single, integrated methodology might have prompted, and it resulted in a broad array of findings and recommendations; the Insight Director believed that the mode in which the research was conducted was especially productive. Would an alternate sequence of data collection and analysis, e.g., initiating the project with either one of the two disciplines, and then using the findings to craft a research design and new questions for the other discipline, have been a better approach? The use of one type of research to inform a subsequent research phase is a common and valuable practice in market research (For an example, see Jedidi et al. 2019). However, in the Freshpet study, disciplinary purity might have been compromised. For example, if the anthropologist had been aware of the cognitive dissonance positioning based upon the focus group findings, that knowledge might have influenced or inhibited generation of the ethnography-informed hierarchical vs. binary positioning. Without a more expansive and controlled study of the current case and alternative research designs, it is not possible to reach a conclusion as to its relative effectiveness. Nonetheless, a “separate, then combine” interdisciplinary protocol might have promise for other market research projects, including, but not limited to, brand positioning. For marketing clients, it can generate a rich array of insights; for consumer anthropologists, the approach can help assuage their concerns regarding the conceptual perils of interdisciplinary projects. Taken in full, mixed methods have two dimensions (1) *ways of executing the research*, e.g., focus groups, ethnographies, surveys, big data, etc. and (2) *ways of thinking about the research*, e.g., disciplinary theoretical traditions and modes of analysis. This case has demonstrated the potency of applying different ways of executing and thinking about qualitative positioning research.³

For this particular type of interdisciplinary approach to be applied broadly, a few issues must be addressed. First, while marketers’ appreciation of anthropology is increasing, it is still limited. Consequently, business anthropologists must convince their marketing partners that the return on their investment in anthropology will be equal to their return from more traditional research. To make that point, case studies will be helpful. Second, clients, researchers, and their organizations must be receptive to and active participants in the protocol. Finally,

³ Freshpet executives were not made fully aware of the theoretical underpinnings of this research project. Some of the more academic concepts were discussed while others were kept “under the hood” to avoid a report that would appear pedantic. Based on the author’s experience in the marketing research industry, that mode of operation is common, especially in consumer anthropology research.

anthropologists who are not accustomed to interdisciplinary collaborative teamwork must become comfortable with it. If these conditions are met, consumer anthropologists have an opportunity to increase their impact without compromising their practices and their identities as anthropologists.

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Acknowledgements

The author thanks Kamel Jedidi, who encouraged him to write this article, and the anonymous JBA reviewers for their valuable input. Appreciation is also expressed to Freshpet management who kindly granted permission to the author to use the company and brand name in this article.