

Shrink Rap Radio #17, December 8, 2005. Psychology and Technology in Consumer Research

Dr. David Van Nuys, aka “Dr. Dave” interviews Dr. Renee Frengut
(transcribed from www.ShrinkRapRadio.com by Jo Kelly)

Preamble: Today’s interview blends psychology, anthropology, technology, and consumer research. Back when Margaret Mead, the famous anthropologist was working on her seminal book, *Growing Up in Samoa*, she was doing a form of what has come to be known as ethnographic research. The idea was to live with the natives, so to speak, and try to fade into the background and then to record observations of their lives within their natural cultural context. Later research on research revealed that try as hard as they may to be objective, the researcher always has an impact on what is being observed. The Samoans couldn’t totally ignore that there was a strange white woman living in their midst; and of course both consciously and unconsciously they adjusted their behaviour to that fact, to the fact that they were being observed. Still, the learning from this sort of ethnographic observation is better than none at all.

Similarly in psychology there have been scores of research studies showing that by and large studies are likely to have findings that conform to the researchers’ expectations. This is why many such studies have what is known as a “double blind” design, in order to isolate the researcher from being able to influence the data collection and analysis process. Another frequent criticism of psychological research is that the experiments on human subjects are often conducted in the laboratory, which is an unnatural environment and which therefore may limit the value of the findings.

Similarly in market research we often conduct focus groups in a room with a mirrored, one way window, called the Focus Group Room. While the findings are often useful, there are those who argue that consumer research is better conducted in the consumers’ own environment. Of course it could be argued that this is about as natural as the white lady taking notes among the natives of Samoa. Much like the reality shows on TV these days where we are invited to forget the fact that there is a camera crew and production team in the middle of all this so-called “reality”.

While true objectivity may ever be elusive, there is a real movement in the consumer research arena toward the ethnographic approach, that is interviewing consumers in their homes, or their places of work or play. The use of video and audio can provide a vivid documentation of consumer behaviour in their own settings. All of this leads into today’s interview.

Introduction: Renee Frengut, Ph.D. is a clinical psychologist, whose market research company [eQualitative Research](http://www.equalitativeresearch.com) is based in Florida.
www.equalitativeresearch.com

Dr. Frengut is on the cutting edge in the use of new technology for ethnographic consumer research.

Two of her favorite books are the science fiction classic, [Stranger in A Strange Land](http://tinyurl.com/5nswlr) <http://tinyurl.com/5nswlr> by Robert A. Heinlein, and the Samurai suspense novel, Shibumi by Trevanian. At the end of the show, there is a bonus pod safe music piece, with clear psychological relevance. It is [Awakening](http://tinyurl.com/6pqhdh) by Anne Davis. <http://tinyurl.com/6pqhdh>

Dr. Dave: Dr Renee Frengut: welcome to Shrink Rap Radio.

Frengut: Thank you David.

Dr. Dave: Very glad to have you here. Now you are both a market researcher and a psychologist. Which came first?

Frengut: Actually, being a psychologist came first and then I evolved very strangely into market research.

Dr. Dave: Very strangely (laughter) - well tell me a little bit about that evolution.

Frengut: I was making a geographic move, and if you're a therapist that's an opportunity to make a professional change because there is a great deal of responsibility to your patients, and it's traumatic for a therapist to just give up on a practice and leave. So I was leaving an area anyway, so it gave me an opportunity to look for some alternative things that were interesting to me. And one of the things that was fascinating to me was the emerging, important role of television in the American family. And I had a friend who worked in the television industry and I called him, and I said, hey Dan – what do shrinks do in the business world? And he said “well, mostly the shrinks I know do a thing called market research. You know they do audience research, they study the behaviour of their constituents”.

Dr. Dave: That's a really interesting way to get into it. Let me back you up; I want you to go more into the market research part but before, let's pick up a little bit on the psychologist part. When did you first know that you wanted to be a psychologist?

Fregut: Well it must have been some time during high school, probably as a tortured teenager of some sort.

Dr. Dave: Wow, that's early. I hadn't heard of psychologists when I was in high school. (laughter)

Fregut: Well I went to a very avant-garde high school in New York City called Music and Arts. So we were all very into things like therapy, and self analysis which was very in at the time.

Dr. Dave: Right; which were you, music or art?

Fregut: I was art.

Dr. Dave: You were art; I didn't know that about you.

Fregut: I still actually love to paint. I just bought myself a new easel for a Christmas present.

Dr. Dave: Hey, congratulations.

Fregut: Thank you.

Dr. Dave: So way back there, when you were in high school, and I guess later in college, what was it about psychology that called to you?

Fregut: Well I think I have always been a very introspective person and it just fascinated me, what made us all tick. And I still to this day maintain that fascination.

Dr. Dave: Right, right. And I can see how that would easily translate into your work as a market researcher. Briefly, just take us through your education as a psychologist. Did you major, for example as an undergraduate in psychology?

Fregut: Yes. That's why I said it must have started as early as high school, because I chose the college I went to because it had a very famous and good psychology department. It was Clark University up in Worcester, Mass. and it was the place where Freud gave his famous American lecture series.

Dr. Dave: Right; Freud and Jung, both.

Fregut: Right. I was a psych major from the beginning, and then I made some of my extra money that I needed by doing experiments for the graduate students in the psych department. So I spent a lot of time up there. And it was a very gestalt, neo-Freudian kind of orientation. There were two schools: the behaviourists at Harvard and the more humanists at Clark.

Dr. Dave: Right, and so then what about your graduate work?

Fregut: I did both my masters and my Ph.D. at Yeshiva University in New York City. And I did my clinical internship at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons Col. Psychiatric Institute. I'm very well educated!

Dr. Dave: Yes you are very well educated and it sounds like you are a well trained psychotherapist. What school of psychotherapy would you say you practice?

Fregut: Well I'd say neo-Freudian; it was Sullivanian orientation at the school I went to.

Dr. Dave: OK, and how did you feel about the practice of psychotherapy while you were doing it; was it hard for you to leave it?

Fregut: Well it's very demanding to do. In my school it was really an unwritten law that you had to have an analysis yourself. They couldn't make you do it, because they wouldn't pay for it, but there was a real understanding that you were expected to do it. And to this day I think it was the best investment I have ever made in my life.

Dr. Dave: OK so then you ended up in market research, because of a move you said, and you were telling us how you asked a friend who was in business: how can I bring my background in psychology to bear in the business world.

Fregut: Correct. And I was specifically interested personally in the enormous growth of the role of television since I was a child, at that point in my life. So this gentleman was in the television field and had some connections, and put me in touch with a couple of people and I actually started out doing consulting work for a market research company that is still I think in existence, that analyses what makes successful news teams versus the competition. And that was my very very first project, it was a content analysis. I designed the questionnaire and then I wrote up the report and they

loved it. That was how I started really, then I worked for NBC for a while and after that I just sort of slowly evolved and I worked for a sort of think tank where we did long term strategic planning research up in Greenwich, Connecticut for a few years. Then I was lured away by a big company and made president of the qualitative division of a large general research company in Manhattan.

Dr. Dave: So your experience as a researcher is just as extensive as your research as a therapist, it sounds like.

Frengut: It's probably more extensive; it is more extensive. And I also taught college for a number of years on a part time basis.

Dr. Dave: Oh, OK. You know in my experience market research often sounds very boring to people when I try to tell them about it. What is it about market research that appeals to you?

Frengut: Well, I'm very spoiled in that I sort of evolved my own niche. What I do is absolutely fascinating to me. I do a very specialised sort of work. I do very in depth, very often individual in depth interviews where I really try to understand the motivations for product usage or for reactions to an advertising campaign or for a new product evaluation and it is fascinating.

Dr. Dave: Talking about in depth interviews, you're trained as a psychologist and you use many of the tools of depth psychology to get as deep as you can into consumers' minds, to understand how their needs might be addressed by your clients' products or services. And something I struggle with sometimes is about the ethics of psychology being used in this way. Do you see any ethical issues here?

Frengut: Well I agree with you, this is a very sore point with me. Because there are a number of people who have no training at all in psychology, who use all kinds of fancy psychological tools and projective techniques and things that I think absolutely cross the line. I have one job, and that is to help my clients address the needs and wants of consumers; that's as I see it. If I'm capable of discriminating between understanding on a deeper level than someone else, then that's my skill. In terms of I think anything beyond that crosses the line that I consider the contract. No-one is coming to me for their opinion; they are not allowing me to invade their secret thoughts.

I think it's completely inappropriate for people to use anything other than - for example, projective techniques. I am legally licensed to use any projective technique that there is, because I am a licensed psychologist.

What I use are pictures that I cut out from magazines that have actually very, very stereotypical draws, and use those as my stimuli. I have never used a psychological tool in a market research project and I never would.

Dr. Dave: OK, well that's reassuring to hear. I know some people are even using brain scan equipment to understand consumer behaviour, and for me that sort of begins to raise questions about the boundaries of privacy. And I have even speculated, gee, what if we had some perfect truth serum that would let us get right into a person's unconscious? I know some people have used hypnosis for market research purposes, and I just really wonder if we should be doing that?

Fregut: Well I've seen that, at conferences I have seen people do these things. I think they are absolutely an abomination. I really do, I think they cross the line; I think they are inappropriate, I don't think it is part of what I consider to be the contract. This is market research, this is not psychology and I have very, very strong ethical feelings against all of those sorts of techniques and ironically they are often the people who have no training in them that use them.

Dr. Dave: OK, now tell me how you really feel about it (laughter) No, I'm just kidding. Now one of the things that fascinates me about your work is that, with all your other skills you are also very interested in technology and you've built your company, eQualitative Research around some new technological approaches to understanding consumers. So tell us about what you've put together.

Fregut: Well the only reason I put it together was that I was a total technology nerd, and I really didn't know that you couldn't do what I wanted to do, so I just refused to take "no" for an answer and kept going. I developed a way to bypass the traditional, what I call the artificial environment of our focus group facility with the one way mirror, by developing multi-point video conferencing software that was designed to absolutely replicate what I knew all my clients would demand. And I have mostly fortune 100 companies as my clients. So it was designed with that as its goal and I believe I have accomplished that.

Basically we send little cameras to people ...

Dr. Dave: Little webcams? To hook up to their computer?

Fregut: That's right, for them to keep, that's part of their initial incentive. And then we do an additional cash incentive the very first time, which is a

smaller amount. And then once they are in our database then they get a full, traditional qualitative incentive for their participation.

We meet online in a very secure virtual environment: on all private, password protected, very secure servers and we conduct the interviews on a one to one basis for IDI or we did a study -

Dr. Dave: Oh, I have to interrupt you, because some of our listeners won't be familiar with terms like IDI's.

Fregut: OK, that's an "in depth interview".

And we have done work with couples, which was absolutely fascinating.

Dr. Dave: On what sort of product, can you give us a situation?

Fregut: Actually I can tell you; that was a mattress.

Dr. Dave: OK so you were interviewing couples about their mattresses -

Fregut: In their home.

Dr. Dave: In their homes, and they were sitting in front of their computers and you were watching them on video.

Fregut: That's correct, we have an up close view of their face and a little webcam sits on top of their monitor. And in that case we have an audio splitter, so they each had a microphone and a headphone that was hooked in. And they were sitting next to each other and so we put them on a wide angle lens, and we interviewed them both. And of course for this particular subject it was ideal, and the clients were absolutely astonished. They just felt they could never have gotten the level of openness and intimacy that we got using this technique. You know, people are comfortable in their own home, they are sitting in front of their own computer, to use a Marshall McLuhan expression "it's a very hot meeting", and friendships are formed very quickly.

Dr. Dave: And sometimes you send people cameras that they can move around their house, right? And take pictures of mattresses or something. Can you tell us about a study where you did something like that?

Fregut: Yes, we send video cameras with built in mikes. Let's say we were doing a tissue study. The client and I would decide what it is we wanted

to see in the house; what the house looked like, what all the bedrooms looked like, what the furnishings were. We would ask the woman to walk around and speak and describe, “this is my daughter’s bedroom” show us all the walls and what her bedroom looks like. And then if there’s a box of tissues have her go over to it and explain what it is and why that particular type is there. They then send us back the camera with the chip in it, and we send them a very substantial incentive for this. Then we upload that video on our server, and we do an in depth interview, live, that can be observed by the client.

Dr. Dave: This sounds so “now” somehow (laughter), you know with reality TV. It sounds like a version of reality TV there.

Frengut: Well that’s my sub logo: virtual reality market research. (laughter)

Dr. Dave: Oh right! That’s just the right catch phrase for the time. So some people might wonder, what good is it doing you to be looking in the daughter’s bedroom and be looking all over the house. How does that help you in your research?

Frengut: Well, if you’ve ever done ethnographic studies, which I have done for many, many years, you usually want to see what the household looks like, especially if you are trying to understand brand identity. What’s the difference between brand X’s households and brand Y’s households? You can have them take pictures of their whole family, you get the person in their own natural environment, in the context, and that’s the whole point of ethnography. That in a traditional place you go out and spend 3 or 4 hours with a videographer in the old days, you know someone else who would follow you around and listen and take notes. Or you would just take an audio tape recorder with you and do it that way.

They are extremely intense, and what you get is an amazingly rich piece of information on each consumer. It’s very gruelling but it’s extremely enlightening. And many, many clients, while it’s very costly, seem these days to be returning to this ethnographic approach with some fervour.

Dr. Dave: Yes, just for our listeners, the term ethnographic may be new to some people: it’s a research technique that originally comes out of anthropology I believe. Market research people are always eager to import whatever new tools they can, from whatever disciplines might have something to offer, and this is an example where we’ve done that.

Now there is another technology that you have developed, which is an online bulletin board, but you put a new wrinkle to that. Maybe you can tell us about that?

Frengut: Yes, we believe in humanity I guess, and also since I never learned to type, this was a personal failing of mine. So we developed an audio bulletin board; we call it a talking bulletin board. Instead of people having to come to a computer and type their answers to the daily questions on a traditional bulletin board, they can call into our call centre; it's an 800 number. The moderator or person conducting the groups can, in his own voice, ask the question and they can just speak their answers. As soon as they're finished, the moderator gets notified by an email that someone has responded, and they go to a website and listen to the response. It can also be transcribed if people do want to have written transcription of it.

Dr. Dave: Yes that sounds really great. I have to try that out some time soon. I know you've been encouraging me to do that (laughter)

Frengut: Well I hope so. Again it answers a couple of the issues that people have. One, you are sure that it's not an 8 year old boy, versus a 44 year old woman in that there's a voice associated with it. Secondly it puts the consumer in control. They can do it from their car, on their cell phone, it allows them to work it into their world, as opposed to feeling that they have to get back and go to their computer and answer the questions. And it's a whole lot of fun, because the researcher can either decide whether they want other people to hear everybody's comments, or whether they don't want it. So you can have it either threaded or unthreaded, where people can respond to other people's comments or just respond to the main question that the research professional has put in.

Dr. Dave: OK, well you do make it sound like a lot of fun. What if somebody who is listening says: "gee this sounds like kind of an interesting line of work? I'd like to get into it". What advice would you have for them?

Frengut: In general, or in doing bulletin boards?

Dr. Dave: No, in general, in getting into market research; because not everybody has a Ph.D. in psychology. (laughter) That's one path that both you and I have taken.

Frengut: That's true. Most of the people who do what we do don't have those kinds of backgrounds at all. Many of them have just come from the world of advertising, or marketing background, something like that. In fact

they offer degrees today in market research, which they certainly didn't when I was around at school time. I think it's a fascinating profession. I think a lot of what is done today is absolutely poor, and passes for research and I feel strongly about that. But I think really good market research, with a fine understanding of the ethics we discussed earlier, is a fascinating career and one that, at least in my case, keeps me very interested. It's varied, because you are always talking to people about different things; and it keeps you in touch with what's happening in the world.

Dr. Dave: Yes, great. I found that to be true too. As we wrap things up here, I wonder if there are any books that have been important to you in your personal or professional life that you would like to recommend to our listeners? Are there one or two that come to mind, perhaps?

Fregut: Yes it's funny, because the two books that come to mind, in fact I have many copies of them; I've always asked the people who come to work with me or who are involved with my business to read these two books. And they're not academic books, either of them. (laughter) One is called Stranger in a Strange Land, by Robert Heinlein.

Dr. Dave: One of my favourites.

Fregut: Is it? OK and the other one is a thriller called Shibumi, by the author Trevanian, which is a pen name.

Dr. Dave: I read that one too!

Fregut: Yes, and those are two of the books that are really interesting and you can read them many times, and keep getting stuff out of them. So, do you grock that, Dr. Van Nuys? (laughter)

Dr. Dave: I do grock that! Those are interesting choices. Really, I highly recommend those; particularly, Stranger in a Strange Land. "Do you grock that", that was a word that at least for a time really came into the culture

Fregut: Absolutely. There are certainly many, many books but those are two of my classic favourites.

Dr. Dave: Well, Renee I really want to thank you for sharing your background and all of this great information with us, and I hope to have you back in the future.

Fregut: Well thank you very much, the time just flew by David.