

# *The Hidden Power of the Pinky Swear*

Why marketers and qualitative researchers  
must pay attention to rituals

November 2, 2021 | The Quirks Event, New York | Tom Rich – President, Thomas M. Rich & Associates

# Why Rituals?

What people think and feel  $\Rightarrow$  What they do

What people do  $\Rightarrow$  What they think and feel

# Some Heartwarming Anecdotes





**When my kids were little, they made a lot of promises.**

Some they kept, most they probably didn't. But my wife and I are pretty sure that they hardly ever broke a promise that was sealed with a pinky swear.

To be clear, they were quite judicious in their pinky swearing: they generally weren't willing to pinky swear unless they were pretty certain they would keep the promise.

**They didn't want to violate the sacred oath of the pinky swear, and that simple ritual made the promise more important and raised the stakes.**




I once conducted research among men enrolled in a clinical trial for a multi-drug therapy.

**During the interviews it came out that a few of the patients said a prayer when they took one of the three pills.**

After some probing, we discovered that these patients had learned that this particular tablet was viewed by the clinical research team as being the least effective of the three.

**Had we not noticed the ritual around that one pill and followed up on it, we wouldn't have discovered an issue with the trial** – that the clinical methodology wasn't as clean as we had thought.



While conducting in-store IDIs with convenience store owners, we discovered that the **participants who engaged in some sort of ritual before reviewing sales figures and cash receipts at the end of the day were nearly all in financial trouble.**

That's a difficult thing for researchers to ask about and for store owners to admit to, but **our discovery ultimately led to the client developing a program to help struggling store owners.**

When I worked in the feminine hygiene category, we learned that **women who had some sort of ritual around the expected beginning of menstruation were often either hoping or afraid they might be pregnant.**

*Rituals included going to morning mass, burning incense and giving food to a homeless person on the way to work.*

Again, this question was difficult for the research team to ask, but **because we did, we were able to gain important context that helped us understand participants' perceptions and behaviors.**



# ritual

[/'riCH(oō)əI/]

noun

---

*a religious or solemn ceremony consisting of a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order*

- Behaviors associated with specific events or locations
- Actions that have a significance and purpose beyond the functional or practical
- Practices that elevate the commonplace to something profound, even sacred
- Signals of change or transition



# Rituals are different from habits

Habits are mechanical-- they happen automatically. (Although there may have been conscious intent when establishing the behavior.)

Rituals are not invoked without thought. Rituals without thought are just rote.

Habits serve no higher purpose. They exist purely for their own sake.

# The line can be blurry

Habit

Ritual



What  
can  
rituals  
signify?



Importance  
Change  
Transcendence  
Anticipation  
Insecurities  
Risk  
Self-perception  
Emotional bonds  
Affiliation  
Connection



## Common Rituals

Saying prayers

Lighting candles

Offerings

Ringling bells

Using objects

Playing music

Speaking or singing together

Sharing ritual food or drink

# Why should researchers look for rituals?

Can point toward findings about peoples' thoughts and feelings that are unexpected

May signify that something is more important than it appears

Can reveal hopes, fears, underlying beliefs

Can uncover information that is difficult to ask about directly

Sets professional qualitative researchers apart

Can lead to new hypotheses for further exploration and testing

# How to look for – and find – rituals:



Ask about them directly

Be flexible in your language (ritual, habit, tradition, rite, superstition, unofficial procedures, etc.)

Write it into your guide, discuss among the research team, ideate about rituals you might see

Observe – don't always be asking questions; have others watching as well

Identify key phases and transition points, then pay close attention to them (physical, temporal, emotional state, occasion)

Listen closely to the stories people tell

Model responses by sharing your own rituals

Get in the habit

# If you think you've spotted a ritual, dig into it:

## Document it:

- Take photos
- Make videos
- Draw diagrams
- Probe for, and document, stories
- Capture and describe it in detail, in your own words *and* the participants' words

## Discuss it:

- "What does this mean?"*
- "Why do you do this?"*
- "What does this ritual say about you?"*
- "Have you always done it this way?"*
- "When did it begin?"*
- "What led you to start?"*
- "Is there a story behind this?"*
- "Do you think you'll always do this?"*
- "What would lead you to stop?"*
- "What would it mean if you stopped?"*
- "When do you do this?"*
- "How frequently?"*
- "On what specific occasions?"*
- "In what places?"*
- "Is this something you do alone?"*
- "Do you do it with others?"*
- "How does this make you feel?"*
- "Have those feelings changed over time?"*
- "If you eliminated this ritual, how would it change the meaning of the occasion?"*
- "If you eliminated it, would it change how the occasion feels?"*
- "Is this really a ritual?"*
- "Is it actually just a habit?"*

## Share it:

- Describe the ritual to other research participants, share your documentation
- Discuss, get their perspective and interpretation



# Get out there!



*If you want to find rituals and see them in all their glory and messiness, you need to go where they happen. A lot has been gained by the migration of so much market research to the virtual world. But there's still no substitute for going out into the world and meeting people where they are.*



THE ART & SCIENCE OF MARKETING



Contact:

**Tom Rich**

Thomas M. Rich & Associates

PO Box 1037

Mountainside, NJ 07092

(908) 884-6217

[tomr@thomasmrich.com](mailto:tomr@thomasmrich.com)

[www.thomasmrich.com](http://www.thomasmrich.com)

