Chrysler’s Made-Up Customers Get Real Living Space at Agency

‘Persona Rooms’ Help Marketers to Understand How Target Drivers Think

JENNY’S living room is the ideal getaway from the busy pace of life of a Jeep Compass owner. Candles flicker on the coffee table, a yoga mat is rolled up in the corner, an Elle magazine is on the couch. “A Sex and the City” DVD plays on TV. A pet fish swims nearby to keep her company.

But Jenny is not a real person and her “living room” is located in the offices here at Organic, an online marketing agency for DaimlerChrysler AG’s Chrysler Group. Organic has created what it calls “persona rooms” for several Jeep, Dodge and Chrysler vehicles that reflect the living spaces of typical target customers. For the Compass, a compact, entry-level Jeep that will be unveiled at the Detroit auto show next week, that “person” is career-oriented Jenny, a pharmaceutical products seller who lives in Atlanta.

Creating fake people to represent typical consumers is nothing new in the marketing world. Ford Motor Co. does it for every model and other companies, such as Microsoft Corp., have also delved into the psychological profile of customers. But going as far as creating a physical living space for the made up customer is a novel idea.

Chrysler and San Francisco-based Organic say the persona rooms have helped them to empathize with their customers and to understand what moves and motivates them.

By creating the persona rooms, Chrysler and Organic say they’ve found a way to work more efficiently and accurately in the splintering media landscape, and to also be more authentic so their marketing has an element of credibility.

“As soon as you see the room, you already have an idea of where we are going,” says Colleen DeCourcy, executive creative director for Organic. “In this marketplace where you have to work harder, faster and with fewer resources, that’s exactly what you want.”

Based on the demographic and psychographic data that marketers typically gather, Organic begins by putting together a personal story for the target customer. For Jenny, because of her busy life and hectic career, two important themes emerged: her need for sanctuary and her “metro spirituality,” a sort of stylish, kind-to-the-earth search for deeper meaning that has become a popular theme with marketers. As a result, to make Jenny’s room, the Organic team wanted to make it an escape for her.

The marketing staff admits they’ve become obsessed with their creations. Recently Organic account planning manager Jill Stieber asked herself if Jenny would go see “King Kong.”

After discussing how Jenny shops, they decided she looks around in stores but buys products online, which is helping marketing staff figure out where they can reach Jenny. She also cares 75% about style and admires women such as actress Natalie Portman.

Jenny also likes restaurants but can’t afford to eat out regularly. So she’s the kind of person who would order one drink at the bar of a hot new restaurant and hang out with friends there, but eat somewhere else, Ms. Stieber says.

For the Dodge Caliber hatchback, another vehicle Chrysler is introducing in Detroit, Organic came up with Roberto, a 28-year old who lives in Boston and has just moved into his own apartment for the first time. In the Caliber persona room, an open Lays potato chip bag sits on a scratched end table, a generic pizza box and an empty glass that Roberto stole from a bar are on his coffee table. Posters for the movie “Fight Club” and the animated film “Akira“ adorn his walls.

During one 24-hour period, Ms. DeCourcy held four meetings in the Caliber room to try to understand the typical Caliber customer. “We can look at all of this and see where Roberto is, be there where he is looking for advice or conversing with friends,” Ms. DeCourcy says.

Ms. DeCourcy says the details are im-