

ThinkGen Spotlight On:

Selma Dillsi

Senior Research Director, ThinkGen



Extensive Experience in Habit EngineeringSM and Ethnography Studies

During her time pursuing a master's degree in social work, Selma Dillsi developed a keen interest in deeply understanding human behavior – an interest she continued to foster in her clinical practice, and one that she is now able to apply every day in her work at ThinkGen. While medical marketing research was not even on her radar screen during her academic and clinical training, she's found it to be a career that perfectly matches her interests and natural curiosity.

Selma's first position was with the National Cancer Institute at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center in Seattle, working as a behavior modification specialist in the free public health wing of the NCI. Selma enjoyed examining patients' behaviors to help them conquer challenging habits like smoking cessation, or to address their depression and grief. In working with patients to understand their motivations and barriers around quitting smoking, Selma discovered that so many people turned to smoking because it addressed something ultimately fundamental to them: a comfort to grief or heartache, a moment of stillness amid the chaos of everyday life, an expression of independence—emotional benefits that many popular anti-smoking public health campaigns at the time failed to address.

Selma realized no one was understanding and ultimately empathizing with these patients at a deeper level, and she found great satisfaction in helping develop actionable solutions. In the case of smokers, she would encourage them to substitute the smoking habit with other more healthy ways to find comfort or respite.

After several years of supporting clients in individual and group settings, Selma next moved to a boutique healthcare communications agency, working on patient engagement projects and building out the agency's insights capabilities. In this role, she cut her research teeth organizing and moderating co-creation workshops—with both physicians and patients—and advisory boards, as well as training real patients to share their stories in various disease awareness and branded campaigns. This position provided her with a happy balance between being able to “scratch the nerdy itch in her brain” in research while building and maintaining relationships with patients. In this position, Selma also discovered the satisfaction she gets from elevating and platforming authentic patient voices.

While Selma greatly enjoyed heading patient insights projects, she found that she really wanted to dive headfirst into more traditional medical market research, giving her access to a larger diversity of healthcare consumers – which is what ultimately brought her to ThinkGen.

Joining ThinkGen

In becoming a market researcher, Selma reveled at opportunities to be witness to the emotional depths of respective healthcare consumer experiences, and felt more connected to her roots in public health counseling and social work. She felt she had found her tribe. Based upon her background, she quickly started to garner favorable feedback



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from colleagues and clients alike, confirming that she was in the right place. She quickly became obsessed with determining how to structure the right methodology to address the questions she was trying to answer for her clients.

Today, Selma is able to apply what she learned during her clinical work, particularly implementing projects that incorporate ThinkGen's Habit EngineeringSM methodology.

Why ThinkGen?

What has kept Selma happily working at ThinkGen is that everyone she's encountered is a genuine, curious researcher and methodologist—many with diverse backgrounds such as library sciences, organizational psychology, or statistics backgrounds. She finds that the diversity in technical and experiential backgrounds paired with the collaborative spirit her colleagues have makes for creative methodology building and allows ThinkGen to continue to develop new ways to approach research and innovate new methodologies.

Selma finds it refreshing that the people at ThinkGen are exceptionally passionate about constructing the best methodology, structure, and questions for clients. She notes that it's inspiring to see her colleagues' eyes light up with genuine interest when collaborating on a particular project, or when advancing existing methodologies to make a project even more successful. She appreciates all she learns from working with her ThinkGen colleagues including learning about research in other industries, hearing about the wins and losses, and considering how to apply all this knowledge to her current projects.

Regardless of hierarchies and titles, Selma appreciates that each team member at ThinkGen wears the researcher hat first, right up to the CEO of the company. Selma knows she can turn to anyone to get input about which technology to use or how to best execute a project. She knows she can send the same email to a junior researcher that she could to a senior vice president at ThinkGen because of the equal respect given to everyone in the company. Having worked with agencies where some team members only handle client communication but are never involved in the actual work, she finds the ThinkGen approach far more agile, flexible, and inclusive.

Selma is particularly passionate about and specialized in Habit EngineeringSM and ethnographic methodologies. Her interest and love for Habit EngineeringSM was founded as she entered healthcare at the National Cancer Institute 15 years ago, when

she discovered that habits are rituals about which we aren't always aware. She learned that the most insightful research often involves getting people out of "executive brain thinking," which is what typically surfaces when utilizing a traditional question and answer interview approach; and instead from insights generated from uninterrupted story telling. She's learned that when she lets participants share what's really relevant to them, this is where she finds the gold.

Selma isn't limited by traditional market research approaches for solutions to her healthcare research questions. Many of the methodologies she employs are influenced by and adapted from various academic traditions or other industries, included human experience and ethnographic research. As a methodologist, Selma likes to keep herself up-to-date on emerging methodologies coming out of the academy and industries outside of healthcare and is inspired to adapt these trends to her healthcare research space. Notably, Selma enjoys leveraging digital ethnographic research to understand emotional and behavioral processes in real time, and is excited by the unique design opportunities this type of research offers that a traditional in-depth interview does not.

Outside of Market Research

If Selma had not ended up working in healthcare market research, she would most likely be working in a licensed, private practice, working one-on-one with patients. Alternately, she would be doing the work in an institution, such as a health center for people recovering from addiction or eating disorders where behavior change is a component and compassionate habit and change management could be utilized for health improvement.

Outside of work, Selma can often be found participating in Kettlebell Spot competitions, where she's been lifting as part of an amateur kettlebell team for seven years. She was introduced to it through a friend and practices several times a week, enjoying both the fitness and the community aspects. Selma is also a longtime community organizer and is often involved in local civic economic and social justice initiatives. Selma considers herself fortunate to live in the beautiful Pacific Northwest, based in Seattle, where she loves all the wonderful outdoor activities available, particularly swimming in Lake Washington or hiking Mt. Rainier or the Cascades.

