



Answers Research, Inc.

Global Village: The Keys to Successful International Research

By: Albert Fitzgerald, President

New technologies, booming export markets, and the proliferation of the Internet and e-commerce have helped create a fast-paced global economy. As more companies begin serving international and global markets, international research has become a necessity. But while economic barriers may be disappearing, linguistic and cultural barriers still remain and may become stumbling blocks to international market research if we are not aware and respectful of them. Savvy market researchers need to recognize and respect areas of cultural difference such as language, concepts of time, and customs in order to conduct successful international research.

Language

Perhaps the most obvious cultural obstacle to overcome is language. Language often does not translate literally, and word-for-word translations can lose their intended meaning. Keep in mind that each country has its own idioms, and that some American concepts may not have foreign equivalents. Don't assume one language is an acceptable catchall for a national or regional dialect. A Spanish-speaking translator may understand dialects in Mexico, but not in South America or Spain.

It is not enough to have foreign interviewers and focus group moderators fluent in the local language. It is equally important that they be able to converse in a culturally relevant way, picking up on subtle meanings and non-verbal cues. Using a domestic moderator who speaks the local language will ensure familiarity with the area's market, customs, issues, and events to make research design and implementation most effective. A domestic moderator may also allow respondents to feel more at ease, eliciting more natural discussions. Whenever possible, use back translation to ensure that all questions and responses are properly interpreted and handled. This means translating your questionnaire into the local language and then having it translated back into English by a different translator.

Translation is also of critical concern in computer programming. CRT and Computer-aided Telephone Interviews can't easily accept certain characters and diacritical marks in foreign languages.

Web Surveys

Web surveys present unique opportunities and challenges for market researchers internationally. For example, in the United Kingdom broadband (cable modem and above) internet connectivity has penetrated 6.5% of the market (as of July 2002). This is nice to know if you are about to conduct a web based survey that includes imbedded graphics or streaming video. How many potential respondents will "click-out" of your survey if they are forced to wait 3 to 10 minutes, per question for a graphic download on a dial-up connection? The good news is that broadband connectivity in the UK is expanding rapidly; adding roughly .5% of all connections each month since the beginning of the year. We anticipate that as many as 10% of internet users in the UK will have a broadband connection by the beginning of 2003.

Time

Be sure to allow for differences in ideas about time and punctuality that may affect your research schedule. For example, in South America, many field services don't feel pressured for time, so be sure to account for more relaxed reporting deadlines. In Japan and Germany, where punctuality is very important, the concept of being "fashionably late" is virtually nonexistent.

Deadlines are regarded differently in other cultures; try to be flexible and prepared for scheduling changes that may arise. Not all countries keep 9 to 5 business hours, so time your calls and focus groups carefully. Be mindful of national holidays when scheduling marketing research overseas. Chinese are unlikely to attend a focus group during the three days in late January or early February of the Spring Festival and Chinese New Year, and you won't find too many willing South American participants during Carnival. The European calendar is different from the U.S. calendar and typically, more holidays are celebrated in Europe. Many Europeans also take extensive vacations during certain months of the year.

Cultural Bias

When comparing measurements between various countries, differences in cultural expectations or requirements may result in a research bias. To avoid insulting others, respondents may be more generous with their scores in a research situation than they would

in a real life situation. In some cultures there is more resistance to trying new products and services that may lead to negatively skewed results. The degree of bias differs among cultures, and you may want to probe in depth on the top and lowest scores to determine why the respondents rate high or low.

Taboos

Attitudes toward age and gender vary in different cultures. In some countries it is disrespectful for young people to disagree with their elders, or for women to disagree with men. In these instances it is best to separate groups by age or gender. Dividing groups by social strata and status is appropriate in countries where class distinctions are more apparent.

Some topics can be discussed candidly in the U.S. but must be handled with more sensitivity in other countries. You may want to use a female moderator when conducting a group among women, or an older, more experienced moderator to interview older respondents.

Methodology

Cultural differences may also influence the type of methodology used. For example, telephone penetration in rural areas of China and Latin America is very limited. In some Asian countries it is considered inappropriate to give strangers information over the telephone. If a sample with a broad cross-section of the population is required, telephone recruitment alone may not be sufficient.

Keys to Success

In order to conduct successful international market research, researchers must be fluent in foreign cultures as well as languages. The most valuable research will come from those that are best prepared and familiar with the markets they are entering. Recognize and respect cultural differences, and do your homework before you do your research.

About Answers Research

Answers Research (Solana Beach, CA) is a full service, custom primary market research firm working with clients in hyper-competitive industries. Answers implements research in both the US and worldwide with approximately 40% of our research conducted outside the US in any given year. Targeted panels in the US, Europe and the Orient. A partial list of clients include: Hewlett-Packard, General Motors, Cisco, Cox Cable, Kodak, AOL/Netscape, Sprint and Dell. Answers utilizes state-of-the-art web-based research, computer assisted telephone interviewing, in-person interviews, focus groups and more. Contact Answers today at 858-792-4660.