

CONDUCTING GLOBAL CONSUMER RESEARCH: CONSIDERATIONS AND PITFALLS

Susan L. Mendelsohn, Ph. D., Chip Walker, and Hank Bernstein, Ph. D.
D'Arcy Masius Benton & Bowles, Inc.

Susan L. Mendelsohn, DMB&B, 1675 Broadway New York City New York 10019

Key Words: Global Research, Marketing Research

This paper will explore some of the problems market researchers may encounter when doing studies in multiple countries and will provide some practical advice on conducting global research. In addition, this paper will use two real-world examples to help researchers avert major pitfalls and improve the overall quality of the global research projects they conduct.

The findings from the research we have been conducting at D'Arcy Masius Benton & Bowles (DMB&B) indicate there are three factors that underlie most difficulties in conducting international research. These are:

- Differences in cultural context. The topic being researched will often have different contextual meanings from one country to the next. This affects what questions one asks, how one asks them and even the overall objective of research in a given country. Obviously, language presents a myriad of challenges that must be addressed.
- Varying levels of experience with research methodologies. Market research as we know it does not exist in many areas of the world. As a result, the researcher frequently has less control over the process and end product than he or she is used to.

In addition, respondents' attitudes toward participating in the research may vary greatly from country to country, affecting comparability of the results and thereby bringing into question the validity of those comparisons.

- Executional dilemmas. Researchers often get trapped by not realizing that global research is more than doing local research on a broader scale.

In many countries, the telecommunications, data processing and transportation industries are generally not as sophisticated as they are in the United States. As a result, communication instructions, monitoring progress and even getting your results out of a country can prove challenging.

Insights derived for this paper are from the perspective of researchers with U.S.A. perspectives when undertaking global research. Our key question was: Is global research the same type of process as domestic research, only with more countries? We found out it is not. There are issues at two key phases of the research endeavor which set global research apart from domestic research. These two phases with their concomitant issues are:

<u>Phases</u>	<u>Key Issues</u>
I. Planning Phase	• Understanding the cultural context
II. Executional Phase	• Varying levels of research sophistication • Executional dilemmas

Although we have been conducting international research on a number of projects, this paper will use two specific studies we did at DMB&B to illustrate some of the more common issues that can occur during both phases. These studies are:

- A World Youth Study of teenagers (aged 15-18 years) from 26 countries that focuses on their attitudes, beliefs, behavior and consumer brand awareness. The goal of this research was to better understand young people around the world. A self-administered questionnaire was distributed in both public and private schools.
- An Analgesic Study consisting of qualitative and quantitative research on pain and

analgesics among adults in four countries: Indonesia, Mexico, Germany and England. The goal of this research was to understand the market potential for a new analgesic brand and, more specifically, to study the perception and treatment of headache pain.

PHASE ONE: PLANNING YOUR PROJECT

The key issue in this phase of a research project is understanding the cultural context and meaning of the country where the research is to take place. The researcher must ask: Is my research subject viewed similarly or differently in the countries I am studying? This is important because the answer affects both the study's objective and its design. Thus, the researcher must discover what they can realistically expect and what should be asked and how it should be asked?

For example, the research objective for the World Youth Study was to discover what it was like to be a "teenager" around the world. However, we realized "teenage-ness" did not necessarily exist around the world. As a result, we modified our research objective to see how prevalent the U.S.A. concept of teenagers was around the world.

Our research questions took into account our ethnocentric perspective by:

- Asking lifestyle and attitude questions relevant to western teenagers.
- Creating one questionnaire to explore the "fit" of western teens to people of the same age globally.

PHASE TWO: THE EXECUTIONAL PHASE

Research problems can occur at any time during your research project. Problems are created by: 1) an increase in the number of variables involved in doing research in multiple countries and 2) a decrease in the researcher's control over closely monitoring a project.

Less control over global projects are due to: 1) geographical distance, 2) time differences, 3) cultural differences (e.g., conceptions of time and speed differ by country so "the next day" can mean different things to different people), 4) telecommunications problems (e.g., in the Analgesic Study the phone lines went dead in Jakarta which was one of our sites), 5) government influence and control (e.g.,

ensorship of material was an issue when conducting the World Youth Study in Saudi Arabia), 6) package delivery complications, and 7) unexpected events (e.g., Carnival in Latin America delaying the World Youth Study; a principal dying in Brazil and his staff being unable to find the completed questionnaires from his school for the World Youth Study; an earthquake in Los Angeles, California delaying statistical results from our Analgesic Study).

Other executional dilemmas can occur when you are ready to look for research suppliers to help conduct your study. You might be lucky enough to find one supplier who can do research in all the places you want to be in. You also may be lucky enough to afford such a supplier. At the other extreme, you may be dealing with a different supplier in each country you are doing research in, or you may have a combination of multiple suppliers who can cover several countries at a time.

However, no matter how you collect your data, you need to be aware of the effect your decision may have on the comparability of your data with other countries you are studying. We found that there are: 1) different "grades" of suppliers within each country as well as research outfits, and 2) different levels of experience in doing research across countries.

In the Analgesic Study, we wanted to add a quantitative component to the qualitative research in order to measure incidence rates of people who medicate at the onset of a headache compared to people who wait to medicate. We thought we could simply add a few questions on to the qualitative screening and tally it all up. Much to our surprise we were informed by several of our suppliers that this could not be done. The reason for not being able to comply with our needs was simple: the suppliers were not trained in data collection and could not keep tally. There were only trained to get people for focus groups. In addition, the suppliers did not use telephones in order to recruit, therefore we had to hire a separate supplier to conduct door-to-door quantitative interviews.

CONCLUSION

As researchers we have found that you cannot simply look at differences across countries, but must also look at similarities given the globalization of consumer marketing. For example, in our Analgesic Study headaches were reported to be caused by stress and tension in the four countries studies

although the causes of stress and tension differed.

In summary, global research poses three major challenges: differences in cultural context, lack of local research sophistication and experiences and executional dilemmas. These issues have an impact on each stage of the research process. Luckily, most of these problems can be avoided by tapping into the growing knowledge base of professionals in the international research field. We know there is no way to overcome all the hurdles, however, being aware they exist makes research life a little bit easier. Of course nothing can substitute for careful planning and learning from research you do yourself.