

Rules of the Road For International Research

Your product or service is enjoying success in North America, and you have a clear notion of the next stage of maturity in that market. But you may want to consider how it will play on an international stage. To begin thinking about international research, ask yourself these questions. How will you start to develop an international research road map? And more importantly, what do you need to know when you arrive at the end of the road?

International research is largely based on one overarching premise. You need to understand what's universal, what's unique, what's variable and how the three interact. You're not looking at your product or service so much as at the ecology in which your decision makers function. Understanding diverse geographical, cultural and economic backgrounds while acknowledging commonalities will help you grasp the full picture of what works where and how to plan based on a far-reaching range of needs and realities. Regardless of local culture and other life style issues, we will find answers wherever we seek them, but the well-grounded international researcher knows it takes patience and willingness to adapt and flex to determine how the pieces fit (or don't fit) and what the answers really mean to your business.

Planning for international research means awareness of a spectrum of concerns, but we'll focus on just a few for now:

- **Regional differences**
- **Local culture**
- **Legal hurdles**
- **Language challenges**

Regional differences. Where in the world do you want to go? What are the research benefits and challenges of each region? We'll tackle the most accessible regions, recognizing research in regions like the Mid East and Africa is another topic, entirely.

Western Europe. Traditionally, if you need a broad picture of how decision makers think in Europe, you may elect to start with Germany, France and the U.K. Talk to decision makers in Germany, the thinking goes, and you're likely to have a proxy for understanding Belgium, Austria or The Netherlands, too. But that might be like planning a dinner around the main course, overlooking the importance of end to end preparedness. You may well need a snapshot of Europe that begins with a multi-country baseline of

where the current opportunities are in addition to where new opportunities might grow. You could find an eager but overlooked market in Scandinavia, for example.

Eastern Europe. You have options, so consider the range of countries. As an example, we get requests for research in the Czech Republic because it's perceived as one of the more progressive of the former Eastern bloc countries, but it's also a country where decision makers have had the luxury of a range of choices for a relatively long time. However, think instead about Poland where buyers are newly excited about having more than one brand or one option available to them. You may benefit from exploring the opportunities in a country like Poland with a large population of consumers, eager to learn more about what it's like to have choices. And for less stable countries like Romania, putting off research until the economy grows and finds firmer footing might be a good option.

AsiaPac. Because of geography, a wide range of governing styles and a disparate historical background, AsiaPac is a fragmented region. China, Taiwan and Singapore share history and a root language, but they are strikingly different in many ways, too. India and Australia are often selected as the most accessible targets for AsiaPac research because there's no language barrier, but think first about the real nature of their relationship to the region. Japan is so different from its nearest neighbors it's sometimes considered a region all by itself. And we can probably make a case for Russia as Eastern Europe, AsiaPac or

yet another single-country region. With a spread like this, AsiaPac is a region where each country is best considered an entity and thus researched over time to see developments within the country as opposed to across the region. Finding the right way to enter this market means careful consideration up front of the risks and benefits from each component country. No one country will serve as a proxy for any other country or for the region as a whole.

Latin America. Cultural heritages and economic and political underpinnings differ across the region. Language presents unique challenges. Spanish is the official language—except in Brazil—but Argentine Spanish sounds very different from the Spanish spoken in Mexico or Chile. Brazil, Argentina and Mexico are most often selected for research, and probably rightly so because they are the primary economies in the region. However, it's best to use a separate in-country source for each country to ensure data collection is sensitive to localized needs.

Beyond this regional basis, we need to overlay the dynamics of local culture, legal hurdles and the unique importance of language and translations to ensure success.

Local culture. First, a few thoughts about holidays as a good way to launch into local culture and customs. Most of the world beyond North America protects holiday time very carefully; and regardless of your timeline for results, you're wise to know when to and when not to try to engage in research. For example, February is not a good idea in China and South Korea because of the Lunar New Year celebrations that go

on for days. Similarly, no one in Brazil and Argentina is likely to want to attend to business during Carnival. August is the holiday month when no one stays at home in most of continental Europe, particularly in France; but calling into other countries, Italy for one, can yield only an out of office message that says something like, “we’ll talk to you in September.” In many European countries, Christmas extends from 24 December through 6 January, and Easter is a four-day celebration, Good Friday through Easter Monday. Protocol for conducting successful research makes an interesting study in and of itself, and attention to the way things are typically done locally makes research both easier and more effective even if the customs are counter to what we’ve come to expect. A few examples include: separate focus group sessions for men and women in some Asian countries; reluctance to share any personal contact information that could lead to fraud or extortion in Latin America; extended, chatty responses to fairly direct questions in France, Italy, Spain or Latin America. Regardless of the necessary extra time and patience dictated by these customs, allowing interviewees to feel at home in the research setting will always lead to more honest and accurate data.

Finally, be prepared for surprises that grow from cultural differences. For example, we went looking for ways to adapt existing office equipment for use in developing countries, expecting to learn about modification of features and functions. Instead we heard, “*I’d like it to start when I press the start button*” and “*I hope it will still work when a cockroach falls into it.*”

Legal hurdles. Being aware of localized legal issues as part of the initial planning will preempt speed bumps and enhance the overall research experience and facilitate the timeline. Countries in the European Union, as an example, have much stricter rules about the use and disposal of lists to identify and recruit research participants than we are used to, and the U.K. in particular has very stringent guidelines to delineate research from telemarketing and thus protect consumers from unwanted solicitations. The government in Mainland China may restrict access to Web sites—potential interviewees may be blocked from the survey when they click on the invitation link. And the Chinese government has the right to review all research materials for use in China. In Japan, only businesses that opt in to research by registering with a recognized data base are available for research.

Language challenges. Think of international research in these terms—every respondent everywhere must see or hear the same questions; however, the underlying consistency lies in the universal communication of the same concepts but not necessarily the same words. A successful set of international translations rests upon the ability of the translators to understand a concept as presented in English and then replicate that concept in another language. When the process works correctly, interviewees the world over will hear and react to the same concepts regardless of the translated words and phrases. Not only do the localizations need to sound smooth and fluent, they must not betray their roots in another language. Language is the vessel for

thinking—and in order for interviewees to think to the best of their capability, they need a framework of language and concepts that feels and sounds natural. Word for word translations or electronically generated translations will undo all the other preparations of an otherwise sound research plan. And as a part of a commitment to quality research, recognize in the design phase anything that might be essentially untranslatable in some of all of the targeted languages. Imagine the dismay of translators around the world who faced the task of translating the product attribute, “The device looks hip and cool.”

International research is stimulating, exacting, sometimes frustrating, but the rewards in terms of business success from a well-crafted and executed project are far-reaching and well worth the time and attention to details. Set the course with an educated eye for where you need to arrive—and then appreciate and learn from the diversions and surprises on the way, along with the expected and anticipated findings.

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