

Pratfalls and Profit in International Research

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When you expand your business offerings to countries outside the U.S., first ask, “Will I apply my cookie-cutter approach to other countries, or am I willing to adapt and learn?” If you are willing to learn and adapt to operate successfully, then you are on your way to meeting clients’ needs and to attaining profitability.



Impactful Details

Time Zone Differences

By the time Americans wake up, Europe is well into the workday, and Asia has completed the workday. Isabelle Bonnet, managing director of BSP of Paris, explains, "...we (in Paris) are at least six hours early. So, when you want to give 'last-minute modifications' for the questionnaire that will be used in the field the next day, do not wait until the afternoon. In France, this would be a disaster. At the best, we (in Paris) will still be in our office (and we will have to work all night), and at the very worst, we will be happily at home, and the next morning will be too late."

Communicating Dates

Emailing the deadline on September 28 as being 10/11 (to American eyes, due on October 11), the reaction (in France) is "... the deadline is perfect — more than a month for this study (up to November 10)!" But you are waiting for your results, at the latest, by October 11! Consistent use of the written month (in this case, October rather than identifying the month as 10) easily removes confusion.

Emails

Email communication is deceptively easy and as fast as hitting the "Send" button. As a rule of thumb, if three emails have crisscrossed each other without closure, dial the telephone for a real-time conversation. Participate in a conversation, and then follow up with an email summary of the conversation. Also, remember to be conscious of the time zone difference (go to www.worldtime.com for time/date resource information).

Vocabulary

I write and speak in English with our international partners. For me, that luxury is very much appreciated. The gift of our research partners' skill and competence in speaking English is just that — a gift. English is not generally the first language of our partners. Our responsibility in communicating is to communicate effectively. This is not "dumbing down" the vocabulary but actively working towards understanding.

Choose your words with care — the same word can have different meanings in different English-speaking cultures. I experienced a memorable gaffe when conducting a face-to-face briefing of interviewers in London with a cell phone product. Yes, this was London, an English-speaking city, and Americans and the British speak the same language. The interviewers giggled and snickered (discreetly), however, on several occasions while

I conducted the briefing. The giggles were not at my clever wit. Instead, my use of the words "trouser" and "pants" had a risqué interpretation. This risqué comment was unintended, and it distracted from the real intent of the conversation.

Other vocabulary items to be aware of include:

- Write out acronyms. "SEC," for example, does not always mean the Securities Exchange Commission. Abbreviations do not successfully travel across borders.
- Slang and jargon do not translate.

Holidays and Festivals

Americans have the fewest holidays of any developed country. My colleague reminds us to specifically ask what holidays or festivals may impact the project schedule. Holidays in other countries have the same effect as July 4 in the U.S. — your in-country contacts are out of the office, celebrating the holiday. People (including your respondents) are generally not amenable to completing a marketing research study during a holiday.

Consider this when wondering why an email has gone unanswered or when the "ideal" schedule is labeled unworkable. Do you know when these holidays are celebrated and businesses will be closed: Dawali/Festival of Lights in India or Golden Week in Japan?

Pace and Tone

Participating in a conversation with a researcher from another country or culture requires conscious effort on our part as Americans. A productive and efficient conversation across cultures requires total focus. Put down that Blackberry. Shut down your email screen. Pull over to the side of the road. Listen to what is said and how it is said in the conversation. Focusing on the actual information being conveyed versus emotionally "expressing yourself" vastly improves our ability to truly understand the purpose of the conversation.

Slow down the pace of the conversation if you are conducting it in English, providing the opportunity for non-English-speaking persons to translate from their native language to English. Think carefully about what you want to say. Sort, edit and select the appropriate words and terminology so that your meaning is crystal clear. Our nominal effort is overshadowed by the effort they are exerting to communicate in our language.

Humor does not travel well. Avoid generalities about a culture or country, as "kidding" about these may not be understood, nor come across as funny, nor be appreciated. For example, some Americans might think jokes about English teeth

are hilarious, while the English are far less likely to be amused.

Schedule and Budget Oversights

Doing business as usual, such as unthinkingly applying a familiar template, can result in missed deadlines and missed budgets. Here are items not to overlook.

Translation

Translations are the most frequently missed step in the schedule. Translation of study materials requires additional time in the schedule and will affect the budget, as will back translation. If transcripts are requested, keep in mind that the cost will be higher than U.S. transcripts because of the additional costs of translation. Also, do not forget to ask if on-site simultaneous translation will be required.

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Food (if on-site)

If you are traveling in-country and you have special food needs, communicate them in advance. Remember that what is easily and ordinarily available in Atlanta is not “ordinary” outside the U.S. (with the exception of hotels catering to Americans, such as the Hilton in Shanghai). The Raj in Mumbai can produce bagels and cream cheese, if requested in advance, but this is an out-of-the-ordinary request. Instead, why not live a little? Order a local food item instead!

Commercial Terms/Budgets

Ask for credit terms at the time of project authorization (or earlier). It is best to find out in advance what level of payment is required and at what points in the project schedule. Payments most likely will be by international wire. Remember, sending international wire payments will require advance setup with your bank.

Clearly understand in what currency the cost and payment are expressed. You may think you are getting a deal if the cost is 1,000 £. However, 1£ and \$1 U.S. are quite different (at the time of writing this 1,000 GBP = \$2,071 US).

Target-respondent definition is an absolute necessity at the RFQ stage. As Isabelle Bonnet explains, “The more the request is honest, the more cost effective the quotation will be.” Of course, it is tempting, especially for a study with

a difficult target, not to mention too specifically the screener difficulties. This general request reduces the cost of the project at the RFQ stage. But, if you win this time, with following requests, the “higher costs” will be applied systematically to avoid “the bad surprises of the previous study.”

Privacy

Privacy and data protection require different thought processes in different countries. In general, many countries have enacted legislation (not “suggested guidelines”) surrounding privacy. Pay particular attention to respondent privacy surrounding names and phone numbers when acquiring samples. Consult with your own qualified legal counsel for further advice. As the author, I am not a legal expert in the arena of privacy and data protection.

Sizzle or Steak? (Substance or Style)

“I would say that Americans are kind of self-centered, which leads to a tendency to try to reproduce successful models in other countries without attention to cultural differences” is straight talk from one of our contributors. Conducting research in other countries — even English-speaking countries — is not the same as in the U.S. Learning is a shared experience. Think outside forcing a country-specific model to another country. Be the student as well as the teacher, learning from your local partners.

About including discussion of intimate issues in qualitative surveys with expectations derived from U.S. research, Luis Pilli of LARC says, “...Another issue derived from this characteristic is that, in Brazil, we are much more reluctant to talk about private issues. All in all, it is really possible to get deep when deploying qualitative techniques, but we have to be more *patient with* participants. This creates *stress*, since it does not match with American style.”

Tara Lyons of Independent Field comments, “...It is surprising to me how many Americans are unwilling to conduct group discussions in a recruiter’s home or a hotel. In the U.K., viewing studios are only now becoming the norm. Previously, the vast majority of groups had taken place in the front room or conservatory of the recruiter. A group in a viewing studio was considered very special! But for Americans, viewing studios are the norm.”

Build on What You Know

Doing business with Americans does have its advantages. For one, with the necessary factual arguments, Americans are quick to modify respondent-selection criteria, if justified. And they put their money where their mouths are.

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Tara Lyons says, “The great thing about working with Americans is that they say what they want, and they deliver when they say they will. ...Communication is direct and to the point. There is not much time, and there are lots of goals to accomplish.”

Take-Away Notes

- ✓ Write out the full date (i.e., November 2, 2007), avoiding the 11/2 or 2/11 confusion.
- ✓ Use dictionary English, avoiding slang and jargon, and use full terms rather than relying on acronyms.
- ✓ Identify the objective and goals of the project supporting the original study design, and ask for comments on the transferability of the design to each individual culture/country.
- ✓ Budget for extra tasks, translation of study materials, stimuli, etc., and budget the added time needed for these tasks. Budget for an on-site translator, if required.
- ✓ Factor in the time zone differences and holidays at the planning and implementation stages.

- ✓ Do not rely solely on email correspondences.
- ✓ Slow down the pace and tone, and focus on the conversation with clients and vendors.
- ✓ Become familiar with respondent privacy laws in the countries you are conducting the research.

Sources

The insights shared in this article are derived from multiple sources, including:

- Direct Resource Inc.’s own missteps and successes in conducting research in varied countries and cultures, beginning in 1992
- The patient tutoring of our cross-border research team:
 - Isabelle Bonnet, managing director of BSP of Paris
 - Tara Lyons, managing director of Independent Field of London
 - Luis Pilli, CEO of LARC of Sao Paulo
 - Raj Sharma, co-founder (and president) of Majestic MMRS of Mumbai 