



The Global Frontier

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Trade barriers are toppling like the Berlin wall. Trade agreements are sprouting up like wildflowers in the springtime. While debates may go on about the social implications of some of these agreements, the fact remains that globalization is here to stay. Thanks to technology, our world is getting smaller and lower tariffs, or no tariffs, mean that there is greater opportunity for worldwide business expansion. There is evidence of this all around us. Have you bought any electronics lately? The instruction manuals are frequently in three or four languages.

Multi-national corporations are increasing their interest in international markets for the simple reason that there are more potential customers outside national borders than inside. And as the more industrialized nations become mature markets, there is a need to expand into the developing countries.

In order to capitalize on all this globalization, marketers need to be able to address issues beyond their own national borders. They need to understand how other markets perceive their product or service, how those markets can best be served, and how much they need to adapt to local needs. What better way to get at this information than market research?

Conducting research in other countries can be a daunting task. Experience has taught us that the cookie-cutter approach just doesn't work. We need to be aware of and sensitive to local differences. We're all pretty well-versed in domestic techniques, but – to mangle a phrase – will it play in Pretoria? (If you're not sure where Pretoria is, then shame on you. Here's your homework assignment: Buy a map and study it. There will be a quiz.)

We need to be aware of different cultures, sampling issues and acceptable, workable methodologies. For example, let's say you have a large scale survey in the U.S. being conducted by mail. Want to do the same survey in the U.K.? Fuggeddaboudit! The U.K. postal system is incredibly slow. A different method is needed. And if you conduct research in Ireland by using "convenience samples" in cities, you've missed the boat. Much of the country is rural.

In emerging markets, "land-line" telephone density is very low. In Mexico, many people do not have telephones, but they are still a great consumer target. Door-to-door interviewing is still the most reliable way to reach people outside of the major cities. Telephone density varies from country to country and has nothing to do with region. In North America, the U.S. and Canada have high telephone density, but Mexico is low. In Asia, you can conduct telephone surveys in Japan and Singapore, but forget about Vietnam. Stay tuned, though. Vietnam is putting a substantial effort into modernizing their system and they are an aggressive market economy.

In any market research study, international or otherwise, a lot of care goes into questionnaire design. After all, this is the instrument that is going to get us the information needed to make major marketing decisions. It is really the only piece over which we have absolute control. When conducting international research, even greater care is needed, as we must consider the additional variables of language and cultural differences.

We always strive to design clear, unambiguous questions that are easy for respondents to understand and answer. For international questionnaires, clear questions are of even greater importance, as these will be translated into another language, and certain nuances simply don't translate well. You've heard the phrase, "lost in translation"? It's no joke and it could possibly change the whole intent of a question.

That is why it is absolutely imperative to allow sufficient time and budget for translating and checking the questionnaire in its local form. Generally, it is best to have the English questionnaire translated into the local language by the local researcher. They are native to their language and are usually familiar enough with English to understand the intended meaning of U.S. phraseology. But that's only one piece of the puzzle. The next piece (and it is a critical piece) is to have a translator in the U.S. check the translated questionnaire for accuracy. There are so many things that can go wrong with a translation that to skip this step would be foolhardy.

Here are just a couple of examples of translation disasters that I've seen narrowly averted through proper back-translation:

1. The translated questionnaire had the answer categories in the wrong order. The following is a simple illustration:

English Version		Translated Version	
I prefer coffee.....	1	I prefer coffee	1
I prefer tea	2	I prefer banana daiquiris	2
I prefer banana daiquiris	3	I prefer tea.....	3

While respondents in this country said that they prefer banana daiquiris, the data only said punch "2," which we think is "tea." The results were a total surprise to the client, who knows that banana daiquiris are the national beverage and tea is despised.



OK, so I made up the answer choices, but the danger is real.

2. One of the key attributes in the U.S. version of the questionnaire was "It's cool," as in "hip." The questionnaire came back with "cool" translated as "cold," clearly not what was intended. Had this seemingly small translation "error" not been caught by back-translating, a significant portion of the study's value would have been lost.

Within some countries several languages and local dialects are spoken. The questionnaire must be translated into each of these. Alternatively, some languages are shared by multiple countries, however, with slightly different dialects. I conducted the same study in Hong Kong, Beijing, Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia. All had Chinese translations, but there were some attributes that ended up with different translations in each of these countries, as requested by the local client offices. Each felt that the other translations did not convey the product's message in their market. You may be surprised to learn that even U.S. English questionnaires need to be "translated" before conducting the same research in the U.K.

If you will be using a paper questionnaire, let the local research supplier handle the production. In countries where more than one language is spoken, allow a lot more time and budget for production. And if you are doing door-to-door interviewing, please keep in mind that interviewers will have to haul around multiple copies of your 87-page, multi-language masterpiece, along with your hand cards, display boards and product card decks. Keep the "stuff" to a minimum.

Interpreting results takes experience as well. In some countries, if a product is rated an "8" on a scale of one to ten, that product is in real trouble, because the cultural trend is to use the extreme end of the scale. An "8" is their polite way of saying the product stinks. Specifically, Latin nations tend to be more positive in their ratings relative to the U.S. A second box rating ('probably will buy') in Mexico, for example, should be viewed as being more neutral than positive. Conversely, some European nations, such as France and Germany are tough raters – both top and second box ratings should be interpreted as positive.

Because none of us can be everywhere at once, strong local alliances are extremely important. Our local suppliers need to be true partners and teammates, participating early in the process, rather than just carrying out our plan. Leverage their experience and expertise!

These are just some thought starters and things to be considered when conducting global research. For more information, please contact me at 732-452-3815 or rjanasz-nagle@RTiResearch.com.

These are exciting times. So come on, get on board. This is gonna be a great trip.

