



Multinational Research Projects

In today's global marketplace, multinational research projects are becoming more and more common. Conducting a research project in multiple countries is always a challenge, with many logistical considerations, translations and cultural differences. The Research Spectrum has managed many multinational research efforts including telephone surveys, online and even disk-by-mail surveys. The purpose of this article is to provide a few tips for completing successful multinational research efforts.

Selecting a Supplier

For telephone projects, or projects that require personal interviews, e.g., central location tests, executive interviewing, etc., there are several options to consider when selecting a supplier for a multinational research assignment. For example, there are U.S. firms that offer international research services, foreign suppliers who offer services only in their home countries, and foreign firms capable of delivering multinational research services. For telephone interviews, there are even firms which offer worldwide dialing from their U.S. WATS center, or have facilities in strategic locations around the world.

- **U.S. Firms:** There are a number of U.S. firms which coordinate multinational interviewing with their affiliates around the globe. The principal advantage of using this one-stop approach is the convenience of dealing with a single source. The downside to this approach is a loss of feeling for the individual countries and control over the interviewing being done. This option also costs significantly more than going directly to local suppliers in each of the countries involved.
- **Local Suppliers:** Going directly to local agencies in each of the countries yields the greatest control and, usually, the lowest costs. Further, the input received from the local suppliers on issues such as translation and cultural etiquette is invaluable. However, it is more time consuming and sometimes frustrating to manage a number of suppliers from different cultures in different time zones. Inconsistent data collection and data output is another problem inherent with this approach.
- **International Firms:** One approach we have utilized with much success is using an international firm to manage their continent, e.g., a European firm to handle the interviewing in Europe, an Asian firm to supply the Asian interviewing, etc. These international firms have a number of advantages. They are closer to the countries and, therefore, more familiar with the cultures and customs. They are also geographically closer, so logistics and time zone differences are minimized. The cost also tends to be somewhat less than using a U.S. firm.

- **Interviewing from the U.S.:** Another option is conducting the interviews from the U.S. with a single firm that has access to interviewers with all of the required languages. This allows us to maximize control over the interviewing and the project schedule, while keeping costs down.
- **Online Studies:** For online projects the problem is greatly simplified. For the past several years, we have been conducting multinational studies on the Internet. Utilizing CfMC's WebSurvent, we are able to program the survey instrument in English, and then provide the logic files to the translators as word processing files; once the translations are complete they can be posted directly to the URL. The data can then be collected in one central data file or separately by country.

Cultural Differences

It is vital to the success of any multinational research project that local customs are observed. Local customs can affect everything from the wording of questions to how interviewing is conducted. Whenever possible, research should be conducted in the native language of the respondent. However, many business-to-business projects are conducted in English because it expedites both fieldwork and analysis. Although it is possible to conduct valid and reliable research in English, some nuances may get lost during the translations.

It is also important to understand local customs and lifestyles when deciding on the method of interviewing. For example, telephone interviewing is less accepted in Japan, where most surveys are conducted face-to-face. In many European countries, there are no shopping malls so interviewing is done in a pre-recruited basis. In some countries phone interviewing is accepted, but phone interviews are unreliable and in-home penetration of phones is low. Other considerations include the business hours, including the length of midday breaks, and seasonal holidays. The quality and reliability of postal and telephone services are also issues which must be dealt with. In some countries, incentives are required, while in other countries they are perceived as insulting.

Timing

Multinational research projects take longer to conduct than domestic projects. Questionnaire translations, taking more time at the outset of the project, account for a large portion of the increase in project length. Additionally, translating and coding of open-ended questions at the back-end also takes considerably longer than for a domestic project. International shipping also requires more time. It is always important to consider the time it will take for the necessary paper work to satisfy customs requirements. Whenever possible, identify electronic means of transferring data and documents in order to circumvent the need to ship documents altogether.

Communication problems, and time zone differences can add to the time necessary to finalize questionnaire and resolve difficulties in the field.

Cost

Multinational research projects cost significantly more than domestic projects. In Europe, the costs run about 50% higher than in the U.S., while in Japan and other Pacific Rim countries, costs can be up to 300% higher than in the U.S. Reasons contributing to the higher cost include:

- Questionnaires and open-ended questions must be translated.
- Shipping and long distance telephone charges are significantly higher.
- Interviewers in other countries tend to be more highly educated and are generally paid more than their U.S. counterparts.
- Most foreign firms are full-service with higher margins than the U.S. field services.

If you would like more information on the multinational research capabilities of The Research Spectrum, please contact us.