



SIL Group
International Marketing Research Consulting

Observations On Conducting International Qualitative Research



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What The Academics Say



So we're agreed? The research on research indicates the need for additional research?

Research to support international marketing decisions has evolved over the past four decades and must change even more to support firms in the twenty-first century. There are four key areas where progress must be made.

First, international marketing research efforts need to be more closely aligned with market growth opportunities outside the industrialized nations.

Second, researchers must develop the capability to conduct and coordinate research that spans diverse research environments.

Third, international marketing researchers need to develop new creative approaches to probe the cultural underpinnings of behavior.

Finally, technological advances need to be incorporated into the research process in order to facilitate and expedite research conducted across the globe.

From "[Conducting International Marketing Research In The Twenty-First Century](#)" by C. Samuel Craig and Susan P. Douglas, Stern School of Business, New York University, New York, USA

Conducting international qualitative research falls into three categories for US researchers:

1. Working within the US for foreign clients.
2. Working outside the US for US clients.
3. Working outside the US for foreign clients.

Working Within The US For Foreign Clients.



Maybe start with brand issues

If you are conducting research in the US on behalf of a foreign client it is likely that you will be working as a subcontractor for a foreign research agency that is coordinating a multi-country project. As such you are probably working with colleagues who have prior experience in international research (although they may or may not be that experienced in working in the US). However, their client may not have the same level of international experience, and thus you may have to explain things in more detail.

“What’s the difference between a centaur and a celestial horse?”



Did Alexander the Great make it to China?

The client was a European drinks brand that uses a centaur as their logo. Their biggest market in America are Chinese immigrants and second generation. Chinese mythology includes Tianma, a creature called the “celestial horse” (or the “heavenly horse”). Most Chinese never heard of the centaur in Greek mythology. They like the brand because they think it uses an image from Chinese mythology. Our recommendation to the client was to emphasize the centaur image more prominently in communicating with this segment, and don’t do anything to dispel the misperception that it is the “celestial horse”.

“Would you fly from London to Tel Aviv and back again in the same day?”



Which is longer?

Many foreign clients do not appreciate the size of the United States. I have had clients who wanted to conduct morning groups in New York and afternoon groups the same day in Los Angeles. This of course required a quick geography lesson when explaining that this was not possible.

“The US government does not pay for free, universal dental care.”



Not here you don't

Further, the foreign client may not have full knowledge of governmental and regulatory issues which can affect their business. We had a European client who made expensive dental equipment. They were puzzled why US dentists were so price conscious, and oriented towards the used equipment market. We had to point out that, unlike in Europe where national health services pay for dental care, private insurance coverage for dental care in the US was not common and not extensive. This required dentists to price their services for a largely self-pay patient base, which in turn made them cost conscious.

“All Americans want to do is fly Tea and Crumpets Airways.”



We too want to be amused

The foreign client may not always appreciate their brand’s position in the US market, especially if it’s incompatible with a desired global brand position. We had a European airline that flew globally, and wanted to position itself as a “diverse” and “multicultural” brand. Americans by contrast selected this airline precisely because it was not “diverse” and “multicultural”, but rather because they associated it with a more sentimental and stereotypical image of the home country.

“We’ll handle the moderating and report.”



If you are working with an overseas agency, they may want to control the research and/or save money by sending their people to the US to conduct the groups and write the report. This reduces you to the status of fieldwork coordinator. If this is not what you want to do, politely tell them that you are not a fieldwork company. If they prefer, you can direct them to a fieldwork directory. If they insist you manage the field, then charge them accordingly.

“We don’t need a translator for the LA Hispanic groups. We’re from Spain.”



¿Que?

If the US groups are being conducted in the client’s language, they may feel no need for a translator. However, you may wish to explain that what Catalans speak in Barcelona is different from what Chicanos speak in LA.

“You can arrange all our travel plans too, right?”



Just say no

Client service goes only so far. Foreign clients may be used to a different level of customer service from their consultants, and request that you provide services outside the scope of your professional responsibility. For example, I’ve had clients who requested that I arrange their travel for them. You can suggest travel arrangements, inform them of travel times, distances, time zones, hotels, etc. However, unless you want to be in the travel agency business, politely suggest that they hire a local travel consultant to make their arrangements.

“What’s a 100 page report in Japan? Twice as good as a 50 page report.”



Not necessarily

Expectations of deliverables vary across cultures. Where an American CEO might want a 2 page bullet point summary, other cultures value comprehensiveness. Make sure you know what their expectations are.

“9 clients have given input but the only one that matters is the one who hasn’t said a word.”

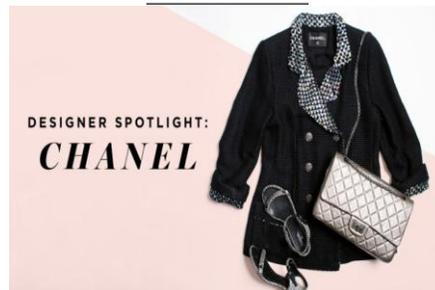


Who's the boss?

Consensus and collaboration are often a smokescreen for conflict avoidance. Some cultures may appear to value all managers’ input, when in fact there is only one decision maker whose opinion is of any importance.

“If we are the most exclusive brand in the world, why are we on a discount web site?”

LGS
LUXURY GARAGE SALE



Mon dieu! Haute couture, prêt a porter!

Overseas clients may not appreciate the US market dynamics. Unless the manufacturer buys back unsold merchandise, it gets jobbed out to a discounter. That’s how your ultra-exclusive brand, sold only in the finest shops in the world’s most elegant districts winds up at 80% off in a cheap store in a dodgy section of town. Thus when the client says they want the groups done with their “recent customers”, make sure the type of customer they have in mind.

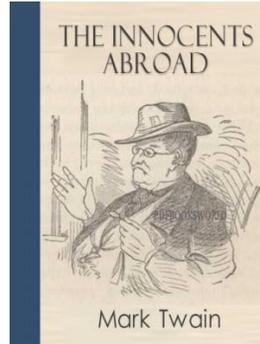
“If you hire a translator, make sure they have equal status to the clients.”



And at \$200 an hour no less

Many clients come from highly social-status conscious societies. If you hire one of their nationals in the US to provide translations, make sure they are not perceived as being beneath the client's social class.

Working Outside The US For US Clients



How did Hannibal wind up in Missouri?

“I thought people in England spoke English?”



Youse guys got that?

As George Bernard Shaw said, “England and America are two countries separated by the same language.” As any moderator from Brooklyn who has done groups in Mississippi (or any moderator from Mississippi who has done groups in Brooklyn) will tell you, nothing will say “outsider” more than not being understood despite the fact that they you are speaking their language. So don’t do those groups in Glasgow yourself. Get a Glaswegian moderator.

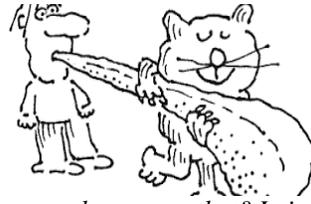
“A Pound for a Kilo?”



Actually it's only 9.5 grams

Be aware that the US is the outlier in the world of weights and measures. If you're doing work in the UK, for example and a consumer says *“I wouldna give you a pound for a kilo of that”*, be aware they that are saying the price per unit of weight is too expensive.

“Let’s save a buck by using a machine translator for the report.”



Donner sa langue au chat? I give up!

Automated translations are no substitute for having a native speaking, bi-lingual translator help prepare your report. While Google Translate is good enough for emails and texts, language is local, idiomatic and ever changing, and machine learning may not have kept up.

“Do we really need separate groups for men and women?”



Not a joke everywhere

Even if the subject matter is not gender related, not every society wants boys and girls to play nicely together. Relay on your local partner to navigate the cultural minefield.

“Château Lafite Rothschild? Is that like a big cab or a zin?”



It doesn't sound French.

Finally, don't succumb to American provincialism. If you are going to work overseas, try to be as world wise as you can. If you don't speak French, at least learn to say, «Je suis désolé, mon français n'est pas très bon.»

Working Outside The US For Foreign Clients

“A faithful translation may be unreadable.”



Bonjour, Newman! It's not the same.

Brand names don't always work in all languages (the famous example being the Chevrolet Nova which failed in Brazil since “nova” in the vernacular meant “does not go”). Further, one only need read a technical manual written by a Chinese manufacturer to appreciate the value of local translation. More fundamental however is that a product may be so culturally specific that it defies crossing borders. For example, we worked with an Asian business newspaper that wanted to publish an English language version. The problem was that a translation that tried to stay true to the intent of the original was unreadable. A more readable English version was in fact not a translation, but an entirely different product.

“Go bottom fishing”



What's the market for Nile perch?

If you are working for a foreign client in a market outside the US, it's likely that you both may have certain pre-conceptions. Thus not only must you be open to learning something new, but you must also be able to enlighten your client in the same way. For example, I worked for a European mobile phone company that wanted to enter a South American market. Their expectation was that they would sell high end products and services to a well-to-do elite. Unfortunately, that segment was both small and well-established with the market leader. However, the vast majority in the lower socio-economic classes presented a better entry opportunity. While unit sales revenues would be smaller, the size of the market would more than compensate. The client was reluctant to target this less prestigious segment with 'bargain' priced products and services. We had to point out that, like a vessel that's come late to the fishing grounds, all the high-value, easy to catch fish were taken. However, if they were willing to go after the less-valuable but more numerous bottom fish, they could still be successful.



Advantage: Team USA

In conclusion, each situation presents its own unique challenges when you are managing a multinational study. Aside from the usual constraints relative to language, time, distance, and currency exchange, the effect of culture and local conditions can impact your ability to conduct and manage a successful project.

Luckily for US researchers, we live in a multicultural society ourselves, and so probably have more experience working with culturally and linguistically diverse populations within the US. This may give the US researcher an advantage when dealing with foreign clients, colleagues, suppliers and respondents.

About the Author



Timm Sweeney is President of the SIL Group, an international research firm founded in 1983. He is a past editor of *VIEWS*.