Common Mistakes With Global Online Qualitative (and How to Avoid Them)

By Isaac Rogers

A few short years ago, the term "global market researcher" would conjure up images of well-worn passports and envious airline mile balances. Traipsing around the world conducting focus groups and ethnographies was the domain of a few researchers whose firms had the resources (and well heeled clients) that could afford to conduct costly and time-intensive research on a global scale.

With today's digital tools, online qualitative platforms have "flattened" our research world, allowing research agencies large and small to design, coordinate, and execute multi-market research with relative ease. As researchers transition from thinking of themselves as solely U.S.-based agencies into firms capable of executing research worldwide, many are experiencing the challenges of conducting research in a global arena. At 20|20, our team partners with hundreds of research agencies across the globe as they conduct online qualitative research; from these experiences we have gained insight into some common mistakes researchers make when plunging into the world of multi-country studies. While this by no means presents an exhaustive list, here are some of the more common (and often, avoidable) issues that researchers encounter.

Mistake #1: Fieldwork is fieldwork is fieldwork.

It has been said that U.S. researchers suffer the fate of being very "U.S.-centric" in their thinking about how the world works. The workflows, timelines, and common expectations that have been developed after years of fielding U.S. qualitative projects should translate perfectly to the global stage. Following this line of reasoning, it is assumed that recruiters in France and in-country moderators in South Africa pretty much work in the same manner. While it may seem absurd to suggest that an experienced researcher would fail to consider cultural factors, in practice we find that not enough attention and planning happens in relation to global fieldwork decisions. While they may be conscious of the differences, researchers often neglect to spend enough time planning for them.

The most commonly overlooked areas are recruiting costs and timelines. In many European countries, the recruiting costs for online qualitative are roughly the same as those in the U.S.; however, participant incentives are typically lower in European settings. In some Asian countries, the reverse is often true, with lower recruiting costs and higher participant incentives. Researchers must exercise caution when applying a U.S. standardized expectation of incentive and recruiting prices to global clients.

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When possible, researchers should make sure that their fieldwork partners can be paid in the home currency of the researcher. Whether by wire transfer or PayPal, paying the final invoice in U.S. dollars versus the local currency can avoid foreign exchange risk. We have seen projects bid in foreign currency three months prior to going to field, only to find the exchange rates have risen 20 percent by the time the invoice is due.

A common oversight when planning a global project is failure to include critical details (i.e. that the research will be online) in the recruiting criteria. In cases where the researcher fields a project only to find that the recruiters were not expecting an online project, it is not uncommon for a recruiting firm to turn down a project at the last minute – citing a lack of experience recruiting to online platforms and leaving the researcher scrambling to get the project in field.

Additionally, participants in the U.S. freely share demographic and background info that is more protected in other cultures. In many regions, it is not possible to collect the same background and demographic data, so researchers should attempt to clear this up with the recruiting team ahead of time. Many smaller in-country fieldwork firms work from smaller databases as well and leverage very little technology other than the telephone interview. This can lead to longer in-field times; sometimes twice the amount of time required in North America.

How to avoid this mistake: Line up recruiters and fieldwork well ahead of time, and have them submit an official bid in your currency. Share the full fieldwork calendar along with expectations for total project turnaround. Get a bid that includes incentives and find out whether they need to be paid before the study begins. Ask about past participation and how the recruiters plan to screen for the online study.

Mistake #2: It's a small world after all…right?

While recruiting in various markets around the world can be fraught with unique issues, the distinct cultures of the participants can also create hurdles that will need to be overcome. Most researchers are sensitive to cultural differences and have some experience dealing with people from other regions of the world, but engaging participants worldwide in online research can create entirely new challenges.

Experience tells us that participants express themselves differently in different parts of the world. In some Asian cultures, there can be a strong sense of fear that someone in the group will be offended based on cultural norms surrounding age, status, and gender issues. While anonymity is usually a benefit to helping people open up online; in places like Japan, it may be helpful to actually reiterate that all respondents are peers, from similar age ranges and backgrounds. This will clear the air and let them express freely.

Also, holidays and weekends are not always treated in a similar manner. Some Middle-Eastern countries have Thursday-Friday or Friday-Saturday weekends. Select industries in Asia often work a six-day workweek. If an online project has been

- Lo que te gusta hacer
- Pensá en los rituales de tu vida que implican bebidas. Describilos.

S1Q2

Responder

Marina M. (En línea)   6/10/13 :16 PM

Mi nombre es Marina. Yo vivo en Colombia con mi esposo y dos hijos. Bebemos mucha agua en nuestro hogar. Mi marido le gusta beber tequila bebidas mezcladas con las comidas. Disfruto de vino con la cena en su lugar. Pasamos mucho tiempo al aire libre. Nos encanta la playa.

Responder

- Think about rituals in your life that involve drinking. Describe them.

Reply

Marina M. (Online)   User Profile – 6/10/13, 1:46 PM ☆

My name is Marina. I live in Colombia with my husband and two children. We drink a lot of water in our home. My husband likes to drink tequila drinks mixed with meals. I enjoy wine with dinner instead. We spend much time outdoors. We love the beach.

Reply   0 Content Tags   0 Backroom Notes   Edit

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designed that expects participation during the "workweek," it is a good idea to ask your in-country moderator what that means for their region.

Access to technology and Internet infrastructure varies around the world and can have an impact on online research outcomes. In India, for instance; participants' lack of at-home broadband might mean that they have to access the discussion or participate in the webcam interview while at a public terminal in an Internet cafe. We have also seen half a dozen people in the room with interviewees over webcam because often; the whole family has crammed into a small living room around the main computer so they can experience the research taking place.

Another consideration of cultural challenges applies to members of the research teams, as they might not adhere to the same course of action that you are accustomed to. In a recent project conducted in a predominantly Muslim nation in the Middle East, the local project

team refused to correspond via telephone with a U.S.-based project contact because of her gender. These are the kinds of issues that can be avoided with effective coordination and collaboration during the project specification phase.

How to avoid this mistake: Rely on the global team of fieldwork and in-country moderators. Provide the discussion guide or research plan well ahead of time. Reiterate the expectations, including a quick overview of tasks, during recruiting. Don't just *allow* for feedback; *demand it*. Many times, research partners view themselves as third-party contractors and feel that voicing concerns might cost them the project.

Mistake #3: Privacy is a commonly shared notion

In today's world, there are various rules and regulations we must adhere to as market researchers. While the U.S. is rather freewheeling with privacy on the Web; Europe and other nations are often more stringent with their restrictions on how

consumer data is generated and shared. The EU's data protective agreement is a fairly strict set of guidelines that dictate how personal data can be shared. Some countries in Europe have even stricter regulations, such as Germany's Federal Data Protection Act. Keeping up with the unique local regulations is not a one-person duty; researchers must rely on their in-country partners and global technology providers to ensure compliance.

Governmental mandates on privacy are only half the issue, as participants also play a role in defining acceptable privacy measures and expectations. In some countries, people simply will not share what they consider to be private data and this varies from country to country. We've seen projects in some Asian countries where participants are "open books" and will share pretty much every personal detail imaginable, while the same project executed in Japan or France might see participants less likely to share their version of personal data. This not only extends to what is said

in a webcam interview or online discussion, but also the type of content shared. Some regions might be more hesitant to be seen on camera, while other cultures openly document through pictures and video every detail of their private lives.

How to avoid this mistake: Work with a technology or fieldwork firm that has navigated these waters; EU Safe Harbor certification or experience with global projects is key.

Mistake #4: Global collaboration with partners will happen naturally.

Whether you are working with a large global market research agency with regional offices scattered around the globe, or as an independent researcher tapping into a network of third party fieldwork firms and moderators; you are responsible for the deliverable to your clients. Sub-contractors or partners do not have as much at stake as you do.

"Over the shoulder" observation provides an excellent way to promote global team collaboration during a project. Allowing in-country moderators to log in and view the "master" discussion can let them copy research approaches, probing techniques and tone of discussion. Recently, we developed a technology we've called QualTranslate™ to allow for in-line translation of research content in near-real-time. This and other translation aides can provide global teams with real-time observations and cross-team learning about what's happening in other geographic regions. This type of technology also allows clients to observe the global research as it occurs, regardless of the language barriers that might exist.

Many researchers don't realize the effort required by in-country moderators to translate English-based discussion guides into the specific country's language. In-country moderators must go to great lengths to ensure the tone and intended message is consistent across cultures. With some simple tips, you can ensure the guide is easier to read, understand, and converts well to the local culture:

- Avoid colloquialisms. Sometimes these won't translate at all, or when they are translated, the meaning gets lost in the process.
- Remove abbreviations and contractions. Even shortening simple words like the day of week (Monday becomes "Mon" or words like "approx") can cause real headaches.
- Proper nouns, especially brand names, might need to be bold and in all caps; this ensures the translator (or integrated

translation tool) doesn't try to translate brand names into common words, e.g. Coke® Tide® Apple®, all of which have common-noun substitutes.
- Allow in-country resources flexibility on editing the guide, but have them point out where they've made alterations.
- Highlight KEY questions or themes. If translation issues arise, the global moderators will seek clarification if they know certain phrases are critical.

It is imperative to set up a clear schedule of events to ensure deadlines are met. Working backwards from the due date, outlining deliverables and responsibilities for everyone on the global team can be a huge advantage. If you require translations, prepare for both sticker shock and calendar trauma. Unless you're using integrated technology, you can sometimes wait 3-10 business days for a fully translated transcript, and this can cost hundreds or thousands of dollars. Make sure to build that time into the schedule accordingly.

Also, schedule in group collaboration time. While this has the potential to slightly increase your costs, the alternative is a poorly coordinated team. Regular, timed conference calls can be helpful to keep everyone on track. Often times the in-country moderators or fieldwork teams don't want to share bad news, and unless provided a venue to discuss concerns, they might tend to keep silent rather than deliver unexpected information.

How to avoid this mistake: Be upfront and insist on feedback from global partners. Define a deliverables calendar with clearly defined responsibilities and include due dates for all milestones.

Mistake #5: Hope for success, but allow time for risk tolerance

Many researchers will approach a study being conducted in five countries as if the countries are all cookie-cutter clones of one another – except for the obvious language differences. Consider "right sizing" research to fit each market. Not only will this allow for more flexibility to meet the needs of the unique markets; it will ensure that changes are seen as customized approaches based on the region, instead of compromises to the research design.

Others have trouble accepting a research design that is not perfectly symmetrical and applicable to all markets. Likely, there is something wrong if the design is too perfectly aligned. Because of cultural differences, cookie-cutter designs across multiple countries should be a red flag. Allow in-country partners to provide feedback that adapts the design for the local market. While a 2-hour webcam interview might work in the U.S., a Swiss team may

believe that 60-minutes is a more realistic time frame for their market. Be flexible and work together to redesign and adapt to specific regional needs.

At my firm, we've often talked about "stretch markets," or countries where the client might want to expand the research scope. Sometimes researchers will drop these markets from the global design based on their perception that adding in a certain region will add to the complexity of the project. Instead, I would encourage trying to approach the challenge with a slightly different formula; perhaps a researcher that lives in another country but speaks the language, a more "junior" moderator than you'd normally use, or a simpler/shorter discussion guide or set of objectives might make a "stretch" market seem more approachable. With integrated translation tools, you can now keep better tabs of those markets than ever before.

Building a little breathing room into the project deliverables has saved more than one researcher. I recommend planning for at least an extra week, but not sharing that information with global partners. This way, if one region falls behind schedule due to fieldwork issues, there's time to collect the results before your client expects a full report.

How to avoid this mistake: Assume from the start that research from country to country will be slightly different. Trying to force the exact same fieldwork plan can create more issues than it solves. Plan buffer time into your project before the final report is due in case things slip behind schedule.

Summary

These typical mistakes are not insurmountably complex problems. In my judgment, all of them can be overcome with greater preparation and coordination.

Global projects take significantly more preparation time and in today's fast-paced, competitive research market; time is a rare commodity. The issues identified in this article usually arise when projects have been given inadequate time from planning and strategy, or researchers haven't taken the time to collaborate with in-country teams or technology providers. Taking the time to apply a little common sense, asking the right questions and allowing your partners to collaborate *with you* on execution will avoid most of these mistakes. ◣

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