



# International marketing research: A global project management perspective

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**Abstract** As organizations continue to pursue more global strategies, the need to be able to understand consumers in far away places is increasing. Marketing research is the primary mechanism through which companies understand their current, as well as potential, customers. As companies contemplate the global marketplace, they must consider how domestic market research differs when conducted in international markets. In an effort to help internal client side marketing research managers design and implement improved international research studies, we briefly discuss the context for international market research and provide a framework for conducting international market research projects. Additionally, we present several factors that should be considered by marketers who engage in global market research studies. These factors represent the variety of challenges that must be addressed in order to conduct research across national borders. Particular attention is paid to the nuances related to primary data collection and questionnaire construction.

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## 1. Marketing research goes global

Changes in the global environment are presenting organizations with both new opportunities and challenges. Rapid advances in technology, increasing international trade and investment, growing wealth and affluence across the globe, and a convergence of consumer tastes and preferences are compelling businesses to expand their globalization strategies and tactics (Javalgi & White, 2002). In

essence, the global economy is forcing organizations to adapt to a new international order (Czinkota & Ronkainen, 2002; Rugman, 2001; Yaprak, 2002).

The process of international marketing research shares many commonalities with its domestic counterpart, namely the familiar steps of problem definition, methodology design, fieldwork, and final report and recommendations. The major differences between the two involve disparities that spring from political, legal, economic, social, and cultural differences across countries, and the problem of comparability of research results (Kumar, 2000).

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As organizations become more global in their operations, how will these companies continue to be able to carry on a meaningful dialog with their customers as they become ever more dispersed around the globe? Which countries represent the best opportunities for the organization's products and services? How will these firms design consumer-based strategies that are customized for distant international market segments? Market research is the functional link between marketing management and an organization's ultimate customer-base. Baker and Mouncey (2003) argue persuasively that continual change and uncertainty in the global market is causing seismic shifts in the role of marketing research. Clearly, as globalization increases, firms will need to know how to better utilize market research approaches that enable them to stay close to these worldwide and diverse customer segments.

After briefly discussing the context for international market research, we provide a framework for conducting international market research projects. Our framework is designed to help organizations with in-house market research departments that design and execute primary data collection projects in support of strategic marketing corporate initiatives. These corporate marketing research initiatives include projects requiring the development of target market and marketing mix strategies to support their products and services. Both corporate and tactical marketing decisions are further complicated by the numerous challenges involved with the cross-cultural context of global business. Our framework is especially well suited to aid on-staff (i.e., in-house) research project managers working for product or service marketers who are looking for comprehensive guidelines to help them design better global research projects in support of their internal executive management clients. Although we realize that our proposed framework is also applicable to external market research vendors, our objective is to provide internal research department managers with a useful tool to design effective international research projects. By highlighting the various challenges involved in conducting international market research, we hope to help in-house marketing research managers design and implement more impactful and effective international research studies. Finally, we also discuss several cross-cultural factors that should be considered by marketers who engage in global market research studies, as these represent challenges that must be addressed in order to conduct effective research across national borders.

Within the broader context of the international market research process, the focus of our paper addresses the nuances related to questionnaire construction and primary data collection issues. We believe these areas are especially critical (i.e., problematic) when designing research projects that cut across national borders. Furthermore, we think the vast majority of clients who utilize in-house market research departments are more often exposed to challenges related to questionnaire construction and data collection. Consequently, it is our position that this discussion will provide increased benefits for in-house market research project managers. We do not discuss other research methodologies including qualitative techniques, observational methods, and experimentation, nor do we address in detail the broader issues of scale development, measurement equivalence, sampling, and multivariate techniques. It is our hope that this narrow focus on the specific issues related to questionnaire construction and international data collection challenges will provide the reader with a more useful set of tools and guidelines for conducting effective global research projects.

## 2. The importance of international marketing research

Market research is the vital link between the organization and its customers. The objective of sound market research is to interpret consumer behavior and translate the perspective of key customers into actionable marketing strategies. Without this open dialog with customers, companies are unable to keep in touch with vital consumer behavior trends and the many influences that affect the customers of an organization. In today's consumer environment of over-choice and over-communication, growth can only be realized by organizations that are very skilled at crafting well-targeted strategies directed at specific micro-niches of the larger macro market. Companies that go to market without first uncovering specific segment needs and perceptions risk facing the monumental cost of marketing failure. With new consumer product launches typically costing \$25 million or more, the risk of not incorporating consumer behavior into marketing strategy is considerable.

Since the mid-1990s, the international research business has grown tremendously. In 1995, the top 25 global market research organizations had aggregate revenues of only \$5.7 billion, and 45% of their revenues came from outside the companies' home countries. By 2004, revenues had grown 133%, to

\$13.3 billion, while out-of-home-country share grew to 67% (Marketing News, 2005). As illustrated by these figures, it is clear that spending on international market research projects is on the rise in the U.S. and other countries.

It has been estimated that it costs six times as much to attract a new customer as it does to keep a current customer (Reichheld, 1996). This fact demands that organizations increasingly must stay in touch with their best customers. The most actionable method employed by market-driven organizations to keep pulse with their valued customers is the effective use of market research. Only by having an open dialog with their customers can companies learn about the subtle shifts in buying preferences that, without proper management, ultimately lead to company and/or brand defection.

As more organizations pursue global business strategies, they will require and demand international sources of market information. In order to compete effectively in the 21st century, these businesses will need specialized, targeted information about buyers in dispersed international markets. Connell (2002) argues that, in the business-to-business market, there is ample justification for conducting international market research in support of the design, execution, and interpretation of a wide variety of global marketing strategies. As illustrated by the examples offered in this article, research tactics routinely used in the United States are much more problematic when deployed in developing foreign markets.

Companies that pursue multi-domestic and global marketing strategies face a wide variety of strategic questions relating to foreign market entry. According to Rydholm (1996), prior to pursuing international marketing strategies, managers should ask:

- Have international sales been increasing as a percentage of overall revenue?
- Are international markets growing faster than domestic markets?
- Does the organization have the same competitive position outside the U.S.?
- Are the fundamental needs of foreign customers known?
- What is the interaction of the four P's in foreign markets?
- Can the Internet help with research design?

The answers to these and other questions can help organizations prioritize their need for international marketing research. While it makes sense for increasing numbers of companies to go global, making the correct decisions regarding target

markets, brands, and other strategic marketing mix variables is both challenging and problematic. Furthermore, the Internet may not necessarily be the optimum medium for conducting international market research projects, despite its rapid growth and acceptance by certain consumers.

### 3. Think globally, learn locally

As stated by Craig and Douglas (2005), effective and timely market research is an essential tool for developing strategy in a rapidly changing global marketplace. The authors contend that international market research is increasingly needed to address a wide variety of global marketing challenges including correctly positioning new products, avoiding product formulation errors, accurately understanding cultural challenges, identifying appropriate promotion messages, being cognizant of geographical differences, and examining language and translation problems.

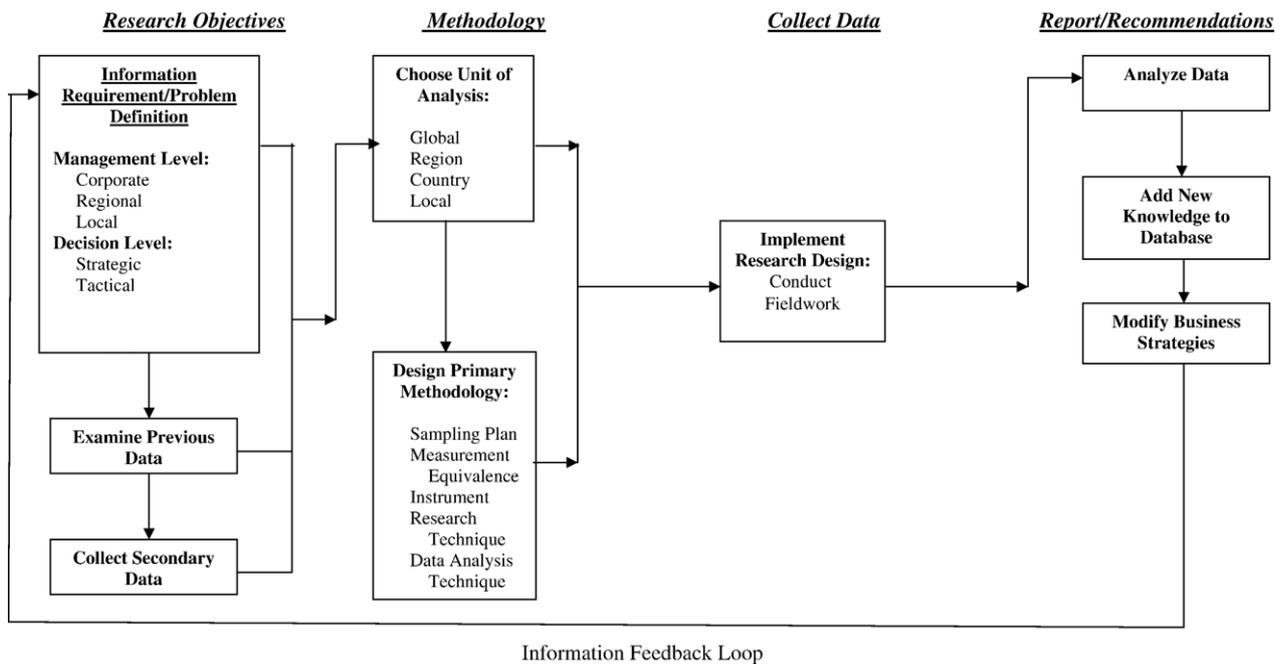
In order to make effective marketing strategy decisions, marketers who are increasingly drawn to the global marketplace because of the opportunity it represents need a reliable and valid source of information. Craig and Douglas (2005) discuss three major information needs relative to international market research. These represent:

- (1) Information needed for international market entry. This includes information concerning macro issues (e.g., the political, legal, and regulatory environment of each foreign country) and micro issues (e.g., product or service sales potential, market growth rate, and competitive intensity).
- (2) Information needed for local market planning. These issues primarily surround strategies and tactics related to developing the appropriate marketing mix.
- (3) Information related to global rationalization. This involves evaluating and integrating data previously collected in order to monitor changes in the international environment.

To accomplish these critical information objectives, marketers require an international market research framework.

### 4. The international market research framework

Through the use of marketing research practices, international product and service providers can develop the most effective international marketing strategies that will lead to sustainable competitive advantage. Fig. 1 illustrates the international



**Figure 1** The international market research framework. Source: Adapted and modified from Douglas and Craig (2000) and Kumar (2000).

market research process within the context of the four familiar stages of the domestic research process: setting objectives, designing methodology, collecting data, and reporting findings.

The four traditional stages of the market research process are shown providing the larger context for cross-cultural market research. Although these stages are not unique to the international setting, they provide the backdrop which highlights the potential challenges posed by international research designs. For example, information requirements at the corporate, regional, and local levels will likely vary widely between different countries. Tactical decisions that may help the product or service in one country may not fit within the broader strategic goals of the organization. Similarly, examining previous data and collecting secondary data may be much more difficult in some countries, depending on the state of the market research infrastructure present. Additionally, within the methodology step, the unit of analysis has four different levels ranging from local to global. Clearly, the unit of analysis varies between traditional studies and projects conducted across international boundaries. It is much easier to design a questionnaire focused on a single local market, as opposed to a study that represents a global unit of analysis. Further, conducting fieldwork across country lines poses many challenges. Analyzing data, incorporating new knowledge, and modifying business strategies are more difficult and time consuming when the unit of analysis includes a larger worldwide context. Each step of the traditional research process

when applied to the international setting holds a potential for significant challenges, which we hope to highlight.

#### 4.1. Setting research objectives

Like its domestic counterpart, the international market research process begins with a clear understanding of the specific research objectives. Determining what information is required, and at what level, is the necessary first step. As in domestic research, information may be required for decision making at different levels in the organization, from the corporate level relating to strategic issues, down to local operating units where concerns are often more tactical (Craig & Douglas, 2005). Projects at the management level cover broad issues such as brand awareness and tracking, while those at the decision making level may involve more tactical issues like local pricing, packaging, and other marketing mix decisions. If the research problem is not clearly articulated, the research collected will not adequately answer the specific problem. Unfocused research studies rarely, and only then by accident, relate to the management problem under consideration. Another flaw of studies conducted without critical thinking concerning objectives is that the resulting research design may well elicit unusable information. For example, a project with the objective of obtaining customer impressions on a corporate merger will not elicit information on why customers are defecting to competitive brands.

International marketers should also consider any previous data that the organization may have. New data should always be considered within the context of existing information. Moreover, secondary data is often used as a supplement to primary data, so its usefulness should be considered early during the research objectives stage. The international environment, however, makes these activities more difficult to conduct. In given countries, previously collected data may not exist; further, secondary sources may not be as prevalent in developing parts of the world as compared to more Westernized markets.

#### 4.2. Designing research methodology

The second major step in the international market research process involves designing the methodology. Whether domestic or international in focus, this is the critical step of any research project. In order to construct the most effective methodology, researchers must have a broad perspective of the many methodological options available. Variations range from primary to secondary research, qualitative and quantitative, experiments, test markets, observations, and surveys, just to name a few. In the international context, the specific unit of analysis is critical and relates to the research design stage. For example, corporate decisions would require more of a global or regional approach; in contrast, tactical marketing mix decisions would require more of a local unit of analysis.

Designing the primary methodology is specifically related to how the data will be collected from respondents and analyzed. In this paper, we employ a narrow definition of methodology as it relates to the specific data collection method that will be utilized (e.g., in-person, telephone, mail, Internet survey). The sampling plan and measurement equivalence concepts are also much more complicated in an international market research environment. This critical stage in the process requires adequate time and attention to address the many details that are involved with international projects. Instrument translation, primary research method (e.g., in-person, telephone, mail, or Internet survey), and data analysis technique issues pose many challenges for international market researchers due to their varying levels of presence, acceptance, and utilization across worldwide markets.

#### 4.3. Collecting data and reporting findings

Once the appropriate data collection methodology is selected, fieldwork must be conducted. Essentially, this executes the research design developed during stage 2. The next step involves analyzing the findings and providing a management report, along

with a summary of the strategic recommendations. The new knowledge should be incorporated into the organization's database and business strategies should be appropriately modified. This process repeats itself as needed through the information feedback loop to address future information requirements.

The method described is a very straightforward and common procedure in the United States, Western Europe, and other developed countries. The market research industry, which was conceived and matured in the U.S., today generates \$16.1 billion annually, with \$6 billion coming from the United States, \$7.6 billion from the European Union, and \$2.5 billion from the Asia Pacific region (Marketing News, 2005). With total market research expenditures of \$20.15 billion globally, it is easy to see that the three major developed regions account for the vast majority of international market research expenditures (Marketing News, 2005).

The presence of an adequate market research infrastructure offers a distinct advantage to developed countries and rapidly growing markets. Characteristics comprising market research infrastructure consist of a variety of tools, data sources, methodology options, and the like, all of which help in executing market research projects. The availability of individual geographic market data and the widespread use of huge databases, however, are primarily Western phenomena. Moreover, the widespread prevalence of secondary data in North America and Europe is vastly superior to that which is available in many developing foreign countries. The resource of more than 4000 full service market research suppliers provides another North American advantage. When companies consider conducting market research outside North America, the availability of many of these tools, techniques, and secondary information sources comprising the market research infrastructure may be severely restricted.

### 5. Challenges of conducting international marketing research

Due to the complexities of conducting and managing market research projects across national boundaries, many factors exist that, if not adequately addressed, can negatively impact project management and, consequently, project deliverables. These factors can impact any and, for that matter, all of the traditional market research steps discussed previously. For example, varying cultural norms across different countries or continents may impact research objectives, as well as pose significant challenges in the data collection phase of

the project. Similarly, language barriers have a considerable impact on data collection and, ultimately, incorporating the new learning into the organization for maximum benefit.

Next, we discuss several important considerations related to questionnaire construction and data collection methods that internal research managers must consider as they design and implement global research studies for their organizations. Failing to adequately understand and address these issues puts internal researchers at odds with their top management constituencies and risks conducting costly research projects that do not add value and improve the firm's competitive advantage.

### 5.1. Cultural challenges

Conducting market research in an international market requires a great deal of new learning. From a managerial perspective, this includes a more comprehensive understanding of native culture. Cultural elements such as social institutions, gender roles, language, religion, aesthetics, education, and time orientation are closely intertwined with national culture (Javalgi & White, 2002), and have a major impact on the acceptability and adoption of new products and services. The effect of culture is multifaceted in the sense that cultural values that are important to one group of people may mean little to another. Cultural differences deeply affect adoption of products and services and other forms of market behavior. Clearly, cultural forces have taken on strategic importance that cannot be ignored when marketing new and/or existing products and services. Social factors embody a culture's fundamental organization, including its groups and institutions, its system of social infrastructure, and the process by which resources are distributed. Naturally, social structure affects market research decisions including the cost of conducting the research, reaching the target markets, collecting the data, etc.

The target market's knowledge of and familiarity with product service offerings also plays a critical role in conducting research. Market research specialists demand certain levels of educational and technological skills. Although a country may have a huge population, only a small segment of that population may be equipped with the knowledge necessary to employ research tools either at work or at home. In a technologically sophisticated domestic market, businesses have more opportunities to modify existing products/services to include new technological designs and features, and develop entirely new products/services and technologies. Research companies operating in a sophisticated

market, where the customer group is large and profitable, have the advantage over companies operating in markets that lack such sophistication.

#### 5.1.1. Language

Now that market research is being conducted around the globe, researchers must take language and cultural factors into account when designing questionnaires. Language represents the most obvious factor that makes international market research so challenging. While many middle and upper management executives worldwide have some command of the English language, that does not mean that English must be employed in conducting all research. To make matters even more complicated, variations within the same language may exist. For example, English speakers in the U.K. and America have long complained that they are separated by a common language. Consider a scenario which occurred after London-based ICI purchased Cleveland, Ohio-based Glidden Paint Company in the late 1980s. Upon inquiring about a business request that he had submitted to his new bosses in the U.K., John S. Dumble, President of Glidden, was told that his request had been "tabled." Alarmed, Dumble said: "Look, this is something I need. It's important, or I wouldn't have asked for it. You really should reconsider." It was at this point that Dumble learned that, in England, "tabled" means put through for approval, not consigned to oblivion, as in the American vernacular (Susan Corbett, personal communication, September 9th, 1999).

#### 5.1.2. Translation

The most common problem in questionnaire design involves translation into other languages. A questionnaire developed in one country may be difficult to translate because equivalent language concepts do not exist, or because of differences in idiom, vernacular, and phrasing (i.e., syntax). For example, the concepts of uncles and aunts are not the same in the U.S. as in India; there, the words for aunt and uncle are different for the maternal and paternal sides of the family. And while Spanish is spoken in both Mexico and Venezuela, researchers have found that the translation of the English term "retail outlet" works in the former country, but not in the latter. Apparently, Venezuelans interpret the translation to refer to an electrical outlet, an outlet of a river into an ocean, and the passageway into a patio (Iyer, 1997; Rydholm, 1996).

In order to ensure that information is conveyed as intended, international marketing researchers often have questionnaires back translated. Back translation (Zikmund, 2000) is the process of translating questionnaires from one language to another and then translating them back again by a

second, independent translator. The back translator is often a person whose native tongue is the language that will be used for the final questionnaire. This can reveal inconsistencies between the English version of the questionnaire and the translation, for correction if necessary. For example, in one international advertising research project, the advertising slogan “out of sight, out of mind” was back translated as “invisible things are insane” (Nash & Zullo, 1988).

### 5.1.3. Syntax

As previously mentioned, syntax is closely related to language. In fact, syntax specifically refers to word phrasing and sentence construction. For example, simply translating English questionnaires into German is very problematic. While the resulting product may look German, it's not really very German. The same is true of the reverse process (from German to English): it looks English, but isn't. The syntax is what makes the difference.

### 5.1.4. Cultural norms

Following language, the most significant variable in successful foreign market research is cultural norms. These norms are very influential forces, and can represent the difference between successful product introduction and failure. Unfortunately, cultural norms are usually very subtle rather than blatant and obvious, which makes them hard to discern and detect. Consider the case of a U.S. ketchup company that, after learning ketchup was not available in Japan, attempted to market their product there. Rather than take the time to question why ketchup wasn't already available in the country and investigate the situation through international market research, the large, well-known U.S. manufacturer hurriedly shipped a large quantity of its popular, name-brand ketchup to Japan, fearing any delay would permit its competition to spot the opportunity and capture the market. Had market research been conducted by the U.S. company prior to product introduction, it would have revealed that soy sauce is the preferred condiment in Japan (Zikmund, 2000).

Ignoring important cultural norms has caused other problems for international marketers. For example, Chase and Sanborn met resistance when it tried to introduce its instant coffee into the French market. In the typical French home, the consumption of coffee plays a very significant role. Since the preparation of real coffee is a ritual in the life of the French consumer, they will generally reject instant coffee because of its impromptu characteristics. Additional stumbling blocks may be numerous and varied. For instance, in many Middle-Eastern countries, women would never consent to being inter-

viewed by a man; furthermore, the idea of discussing grooming behavior and personal care products with a stranger (i.e., moderator) would be highly offensive (Zikmund, 2000).

### 5.1.5. Time zones

Time zones present difficulties in conducting any type of business in foreign markets, and market research is no exception. During fieldwork, market researchers frequently find it necessary to communicate with the facilities that have been hired to conduct the actual interviews. Differing time zones in other countries impact project communication and, ultimately, project timing. More days are required to field a given research project to allow for communications that may need to occur half-way around the world. Even the time of day matters in places like Japan, where business-to-business interviewing is very difficult to conduct during business hours. Because Japanese employees are so loyal to their employers, they hesitate to devote time to anything other than their immediate work efforts while in the office. As well, employers believe they owe absolute commitment to their employees while on the job.

### 5.1.6. Foreign holidays

The United States has a list of approximately 12 standard holidays per year. Other countries have different lists, which can be much longer and certainly differ from the American calendar. Holidays are yet another factor that can add to the total time frame required to complete an international research project. According to Rydholm (1996), prior to starting research, clients should always check the holiday schedule of the country in which they are working. Nearly every Monday is a holiday somewhere in the world.

## 5.2. Sampling issues/sampling frame

Consider the process of conducting marketing research in China. China has a total population of 1.2 billion, 350 million of which live in urban areas of 622 cities and scores of smaller towns. Of the cities, only 32 have populations of at least one million, while 42 have populations between 500,000 and one million, and the remaining 548 have populations of less than 500,000 (Lee & Wong, 1996). Since almost no small towns or rural areas are included in market research projects, what constitutes a nationally representative sample of the Chinese market? Considering the framework in Fig. 1, the unit of analysis in a complex single county like China varies widely between national, regional, and/or local. Adding additional countries only makes the project more challenging for internal market research managers to administer.

A logical means of reaching the largest sample possible, including individuals who don't live in major population centers, involves interview by telephone or computer. Unfortunately, technological capabilities are not equal across countries or regions. For example, in Germany, telephone penetration did not reach the 80% level until the mid-1980s, long after that milestone had been reached in the United States. Today, less than 10% of all households in India have telephones, and telephone penetration in Brazil is less than 50% in large cities (Malhotra, 2004). Considering the low computer usage in these nations, the sample representation problem is even more dramatically exacerbated when using Internet-based samples. Unless and until these nations increase their overall computer and Internet capacity, using the Internet to conduct international market research is not going to result in sound customer-based business strategies.

### 5.2.1. Native interviewers

To facilitate the already complicated communication process, using native interviewers for international research projects allows multi-national clients to exert a form of quality control. Moreover, it is a matter of courtesy that the local respondents should be able to speak with interviewers in their own language. Many nationalities, such as the French, are often offended by non-native researchers. While advisable overall, recruiting native interviewers can be problematic in countries and regions where the literacy rate is low, like rural China and India.

### 5.2.2. Questionnaire length

As consumers worldwide become increasingly sensitive to being interviewed, participation refusal rates keep trending upward. Of China's major cities, refusal rates are estimated at 32% in Guangzhou, 22% in Beijing, and 10% in Shanghai. A key driver of refusal rates is questionnaire length. After approximately 20 minutes, most respondents become fatigued with the process and terminate the interview. This factor is exacerbated in international studies, as different languages can shorten or lengthen the amount of time it takes to get through a questionnaire. For example, translated into Italian, a 20 minute American questionnaire will last only approximately 18 minutes. Translated into French, the same questionnaire will take 22 minutes. The difference in duration is attributable to the subtle nuances of both languages (Lee & Wong, 1996).

### 5.2.3. Incentives

The use of incentives in market research has been debated for as long as research has been executed. The common criticism of the practice contends that

by paying respondents for their opinions, an inherent bias is introduced. This is more complicated in the international setting, where in some cultures incentives are required to procure participant cooperation. For example, drinking and socializing are expected as part of the research experience in Brazil. In other cultures, however, incentives of any kind are regarded as insulting to the respondents.

## 5.3. Measurement issues

In international market research, it is critical to establish the equivalence of scales and measures used to obtain data from different countries (Han, Lee, & Ro, 1994). One of the significant issues that must be dealt with early in the international market research process is the equivalence of data (Kumar, 2000). This involves three considerations. First, it has to be ascertained whether the constructs being studied are equivalent. In other words, are the same phenomena being studied in both countries? Second, the equivalence of the measures of the concepts under study has to be determined. This means that the phenomena are being measured consistently in each country. Finally, the equivalence of the sample being studied in each country or culture must be considered. The issue here is that the samples used in each country are equivalent to each other (Kumar, 2000). These considerations involve substantial measurement issues that are increasingly critical in an international environment. The concepts of reliability, defined as consistency over time, and validity, which is concerned with what the instrument is actually measuring, are important to any market research effort, especially those that cross national boundaries.

## 5.4. Market research infrastructure

Media availability, Internet penetration, quality control, and the overall market research infrastructure significantly impact the success of international research projects. Where little or no media exists, these options are no longer open to international researchers. Widespread print and broadcast media options and extensive databases are generally a Western advantage. Further, Internet penetration remains skewed to males under age 40 with above average education and household income (Dodd, 1998). Until its usage rate increases to a point that approximates a broader cross section of customers, the Internet cannot be considered a viable primary market research instrument. This is especially true in the international setting.

### 5.4.1. Currency fluctuations

Doing business around the world always involves the risk of changes in a particular country's currency.

Market research firms are also impacted by these fluctuations because of the numerous field services that are usually hired to complete a research assignment. To finish a given project, several countries might be involved. For example, each spring and fall, IBM conducts a brand tracking study in 14 languages in 27 countries. At any time, one or more of these countries will experience unstable currency conditions, affecting the lead research supplier (Iyer, 1997).

### 5.5. Data collection challenges

The process of managing vendors in the international, rather than in the domestic, context is much more difficult, time consuming, and expensive. While taken for granted that mail intercept methodology, scanner data, and reliable postal delivery are all available in the U.S., this assumption is not true for many other parts of the world. Unreliable mail service in developing countries makes conducting international mail surveys problematic (Malhotra, 2004). Access issues in terms of locating the appropriate person and gaining their cooperation to participate in a market research study are also heightened in the international context (Craig & Douglas, 2005). Additionally, respondent and vendor confidentiality and trust are important considerations in the global context (Kumar, 2000). For example, a research study examining the functioning of a sovereign nation or inter-company conflicts must have an assurance of confidentiality. These issues are more challenging in the global environment, where other barriers like language and culture play a larger role.

### 5.6. Legal issues

Legal and privacy restrictions pose unique challenges in the international research arena. European countries with strict privacy regulations can potentially shut down marketing activities that profile or collect personal information. Gaining access to specific respondents can also be problematic in certain countries. Furthermore, the Chinese are monitoring questionnaire construction and even the approval of the final data. This is in direct conflict with the American approach of non-disclosure of proprietary client results (Meijer, 1999).

## 6. Guidelines for managers

Companies that already are, as well as those that plan to become, global marketers must look closely at the world marketplace to identify global opportunities (Jeannet & Hennessey, 2001). Consequently, in order for organizations to evaluate their numerous international opportunities, they must develop an expertise in conducting global marketing

research studies. This expertise can be effectively translated into a competitive advantage. As companies continue to seek competitive advantages across national boundaries, being cognizant of the variety of cross-cultural marketing research challenges as discussed in this paper provides an essential ingredient to the firm's ultimate success. Clearly, international marketing research provides information about foreign consumers and critical information regarding the global marketplace.

The purpose of our paper has been twofold. First, we provided a framework for international market research; second, we discussed several critical challenges to illustrate the issues involved when companies conduct international marketing research projects in support of their brand initiatives. The framework was provided within the context of the traditional four steps of the research process. Within this broader context, we highlighted the subtle differences between domestic and global marketing research design. While the steps of the market research process are familiar to many managers, overlaying the international perspective creates a variety of important and unique data collection challenges, as we have indicated. To help internal research managers design and implement more impactful and effective global research studies, we reviewed several factors that must be considered prior to conducting research across foreign markets. Client side market research managers designing projects to support upper management initiatives will encounter significant difficulty unless these data collection issues are addressed. As relevant and timely information about customers increasingly becomes the foundation of competitive advantage, managers will need to critically review their international research programs.

In order to take full advantage of international growth opportunities over the long term, companies looking to the global marketplace need research that identifies customer behaviors and potential positioning strategies. To assure that their projects are contributing to the overall competitive advantage of the firm, research managers must be aware of the nuances involved in data collection across cultures. As we suggested, research managers must think globally and act locally by developing research projects that rationalize global expansion, identify international market entry options, and provide a basis for implementing a foreign marketing mix strategy. The positive result of this mindset will be improved information about global customer segments, leading to improved performance and increased competitive advantage for the firm.

Due to the complexities involved when conducting market research across national borders, in

addition to paying close attention to the data collection and questionnaire design problems we have outlined, research managers may also want to keep the following in mind:

- Consider utilizing foreign stakeholders to help with potential cultural, legal, and/or government restrictions on market research studies. There is no substitute for trusted, on-the-ground contact sources to provide context on a wide variety of country-specific factors that could have a negative effect on international research studies.
- Consider using a single research vendor familiar with the international marketplace. Multi-country projects are inherently difficult to manage, so look to a single consistent and experienced vendor for guidance.
- Allow more time to plan and execute an international study. Projects crossing country boundaries require extended design, implementation, and follow-up efforts.
- Conduct research studies in markets similar to the home country prior to conducting research in new and unfamiliar parts of the developing world. Newcomers to the international market research arena should take small steps in familiar markets to provide a solid foundation prior to expanding into new, unfamiliar markets.
- Supplement custom market research insights with as much secondary information about foreign markets as available. Because the data collection issues in global market research are so challenging, utilize any and all relevant secondary information sources to improve insights gained from custom studies conducted in foreign markets.

Internal market research managers who are aware of the unique context of international market research will be better suited to design and implement projects that contribute to their firm's competitive advantage in the marketplace. Additionally, paying close attention to the challenges we have discussed will result in market research studies that are both more impactful and

more often utilized by their senior management clients.

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