

Cultural norms and language differences have a direct impact on the outcome of global research

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND RESEARCH

Before conducting research beyond your own country's borders, it's important to consider a number of cultural differences that have significant implications for the success of the research. Angela Sinickas outlines some potential issues to consider.

Developing survey questions

Pretesting survey questions is always a good idea, but checking for interpretation of questions is mandatory for surveys administered in multiple countries. Common terminology in one country (such as "the grapevine" or "rumor mill" used in American English) should be avoided in favor of terminology that is more literally descriptive, such as "other employees."

Surveys developed in one country might need to have additional questions or response options in order to be more complete in other countries. For example, a survey might ask to what extent unions are an information source. In most of Europe, the question should also ask about the role of works councils, which don't exist in the US. On the other hand, terms such as "equal opportunity" and "diversity" – common terms in the US, might not be meaningful in other countries surveyed.

Translation of surveys should be done in two steps. First have one person translate the survey, then have a second person translate it back into the first language. This way you can see which terminology could be interpreted differently. In a recent survey I worked on with a client, several instructions needed to be rewritten because the initial translation didn't make sense, or

because of punctuation issues. For example, parenthetical brackets used in the instructions would be interpreted as quotation marks in Japanese.

Then there are questions that would be meaningless in some cultures, but are critical gauges of organizational health in others. For instance, there are two concepts about the working environment in Japan that would be nearly meaningless in many other countries:

- "To what extent does the nail that sticks out get hit on the head?"
- "To what extent do we pretend things are true that we know are not true?"

Survey administration

Cultural differences can also affect how we administer surveys. For example, several languages are written from right to left. This may require changing the sequence of questions and responses.

Languages like Chinese, Japanese, Hindi and Arabic use characters that may not be easily handled by some survey software programs. It's critical to pretest how the surveys will appear online and how well any write-in comments will be captured before the survey goes live.

If literacy is an issue in some countries, you may need to bring survey participants into meetings where you can use hand-held voting technology (like the equipment used on TV game shows where the audience votes on a winner or provides guidance to a contestant). Then have someone read each question aloud, and ask respondents to push one of five buttons showing to what extent they agree or disagree with each statement they hear.

Focus group considerations

Here are several issues to consider when planning focus group research across cultural boundaries:

- *Whether to mix people from different cultural backgrounds in the same sessions.* People from some cultures are more comfortable talking in groups than others – especially on certain topics. You could end up with a session dominated by a more talkative group, leaving the other groups feeling left out.
- *Whether focus groups will generate the information needed.* For example, meetings in Japan are often used to confirm agreement on issues discussed individually before the meeting. A useful technique to capture the actual differences of opinion is to provide a written copy of the focus group questions to individuals for them to write in their thoughts, then to combine the responses in a report.
- *Which questions to ask.* Local labor laws might affect the topics that are appropriate for discussion in employee focus groups.

Whom to include in research

When deciding whether to survey everyone in a population, or whether to use a random sample, you might also need to consider whether certain subgroups should be excluded from the research.

For example, our local HR contacts at one client explained that inviting manufacturing employees in some Southeast Asian countries to participate in a survey would be inappropriate. Apparently, the lower-level employees would lose respect for a management team that seemed to be seeking guidance from employees on the running of the company.

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