

Pitfalls when Conducting International Fieldwork

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As for national fieldwork, for international fieldwork applies the well-known wisdom that inaccuracies in questionnaires, first and foremost within the screening process and in conducting the interview are only corrigible with a considerable amount of effort, if they are correctable at all. Within the context of international market research projects there are additional rules to adhere, beyond the familiar strategies of questionnaire conception.

The purchasing and the coordination processes are rife with pitfalls, too. So, for the successful execution of international projects professional expertise and knowledge of these traps is essential, regarding every country involved and every phase of the project.

1. Pitfall: The Lady at the reception

All surveys start with the screening process of the target persons. Especially with respect to b2b projects screenings are often very demanding. The smallest mistakes at this stage may result in the failure of the whole fieldwork. This already applies to the first contact with the company, i.e. to the *Lady at the reception*.

The access to a company and its decision makers (by phone) is internationally very differently organized. Apart from other qualities - in particular the language skills - it is the detailed acquaintance of these structures and how to bring forward a convincing argumentation peculiar to the local circumstances, which allow the interviewer to prevail against the massive amount of undesired phone calls and to gain access to the target person. Not until this point the actual screening and routing process, documented in the questionnaire, begins.

2. Pitfall: Harmony is not all that counts

How different the reality of life is for people on the global scale becomes obvious through socio demographic variables as education or household net income. These (regional) distinctions do not only relate to the eligible given answers, (school types and income class) but the willingness to respond to the questions honestly, if at all. Whilst asking for the household net income in some countries, e.g. in Norway, turns out entirely unproblematic and even suits as entry criteria for participating in the survey, it is a complete no-go in Italy. Regarding b2b studies, this may be the case asking for the individual involvement in decision making processes.

The inevitable standardization of questionnaires, especially the scales, may go too far resulting in a counterproductive egalitarianism. Instead of the latter it is extremely recommendable to develop questionnaires adapted to the cultural conditions on location. This should be done, on the basis of existing findings from previous research and experience. Discussing harmonization of international research projects, the first that comes to mind is a homogeneous method of data collection. The recommendation of a certain method of this kind depends on necessary, inevitable design features of the questionnaire and on the accessibility of the target person through the chosen access medium. However, the availability of target groups via telephone or online turns out very differently depending on the country, as well as internet access, which is not granted everywhere. Furthermore, preferences for the way to respond to some types of questions, face to face, by phone or rather on someone's own in written form, depends also on local customs.

3. Pitfall: Lost in Translation

The translation of questionnaires is anything but fiddling. It can be rather difficult to obtain adequate translations because the items wording is not prose



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but a market research specific language, which is characterized by precise, standardized definitions and explicit concepts. Furthermore, the translation of image-items can be very difficult since these might not exist, are more or less displaced or understood differently, within other cultural contexts.

Back-checks as well as the reviewing of the content, especially regarding the comprehension and changes in meaning of concepts and items, are essential for the subsequent quality of the data-analysis and interpretation.

4. Pitfall: Time is money

Apart from the precise and faultless conceptional design and phrasing of the questionnaire, it is the interviewer, who is the first and the last making contact to the target person, explicates the intention of a question and replies to further inquiries. The quality of the interview significantly depends on the interviewers' comprehension of the study and the questionnaire in detail.

Due to this, dedicating time to the briefing of the interviewer is well invested time. Ideally, pre-test and extensive interviewer briefing are combined. Such an investment stands for an enormous boost to the good quality of the local fieldwork and beyond that, it gives the valuable opportunity to really listen to the target group.

The wisdom *time is money* surely is appropriate with respect to the length of the questionnaire, but it is not, if time was saved on briefings of and communication to the people participating in the research process.



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