

## Going Global: The Unique Demands of Global Qualitative Research

By: Lisa Bertelsen  
Global Director, Research Insights  
www.siegelgale.com

As brands expand into international markets, the need for global qualitative research has become more pronounced. But providing clients with fresh perspectives and consumer insights means taking into account a wide range of distinctive cultural sensitivities. Understanding the nuances of a country's norms, customs, culture and language is essential when interacting and trying to make a genuine connection with consumers to capture what is relevant and useful for our clients' brands and businesses. Below are a few of my "golden rules" that help us uncover what is important to consumers across the globe.

### Rule 1: Recognize the importance of pairing local and global teams

When conducting qualitative research, it is extremely beneficial if the lead researcher observes interviews in each country. While this adds considerable cost (professional hours of two moderators versus one, travel expenses and simultaneous translation), the benefits are three-fold:

- **Greater consistency**

Through close observation, the lead moderator can recognize and capture minutiae that can mean the difference between good and bad data. Subtle nuances can be overlooked, characterized or articulated differently when interviews are conducted in numerous languages, despite back-translations. If concepts or phrasing are not consistently and precisely articulated from country to country, the resulting data can be skewed or misinterpreted. For example, think about the difficulty any moderator would have explaining to a novice how cloud computing works. Now, consider how much more complicated that conversation gets when the details are translated from one language into another (and then subsequently back-translated into the original language). It is similar to the childhood game of "telephone," using string and paper cups. The nuance and particulars can get lost as ideas are translated from one person to another, from one tongue to another. A lead researcher's presence can minimize these errors—allowing for real-time adjustments on delivery, phrasing and responses to unanticipated reactions by participants.

- **Better analysis**

The lead researcher is responsible for aggregating research data, spotting themes across markets and conducting the final analysis. By observing research in all countries, isolated findings that may appear insignificant to in-country moderators can be identified and probed as the research unfolds. This ensures a more rigorous analysis and greater consistency in reporting. In virtually every project where I haven't observed research in person, I have caught details that were overlooked by the in-country research team. It's not the researchers' fault—it's just that they cannot focus on the larger picture that is unfolding across all markets.

- **Speed and efficiency**

An on-site lead researcher can execute research faster. While the in-country moderator is compiling notes and reporting, the lead researcher can debrief the client well in advance of the final report delivery. (Often I do this the day following the interviews or

+ “Apply these  
four rules to  
improve your  
results”

For more information  
contact us:

**New York**

T 212 453 0400

**Los Angeles**

T 310 312 2200

**San Francisco**

T 415 284 9715

**London**

T +44 (0) 207 611 3800

**Hamburg**

T +49 (0) 40 369 07-602

**Dubai**

T +971 4 425 8600

**Shanghai**

T +86 21 2501 2895

**Beijing**

T +86 10 5977 2126

observation.) This is particularly important given the extended timeline that many global projects require, and ensures that the project doesn't "go dark" while the global team is conducting research in the field.

## **Rule 2: Consider your research methodology carefully**

Not all methodologies are suitable for each country. As a result, you must ask yourself whether the data collection method is suitable for the population that is being targeted. For instance, what is the internet penetration of the country? Are communities typically gated? Are sexes socially segregated?

As an example, focus groups in Saudi Arabia are typically conducted in restaurants, coffee shops or hotels with CCTV—and mixing of sexes should be avoided for the sake of propriety. In China and Japan, in-depth B2B interviews with high-level managers are more successful if done in person. This is due to the cultural perception that high-level discussions merit the time, attention and civility afforded by a face-to-face meeting. Also, given that open office floorplans are typical in many Japanese companies, conducting B2B telephone interviews can be somewhat problematic. Open-ended and projective questioning—which I often use to reveal emotional needs—are not as successful with some Asian audiences as they are with Western audiences.

## **Rule 3: It's more than words and pictures**

The client team should translate, and then back-translate, all research materials, including screeners, moderator guides and stimuli. On that point, I always ensure that the back-translation is done by someone in-country (not by someone who speaks the language, but comes from office headquarters). This is a critical distinction, because individuals who don't live in-country lack a complete understanding of the local context (norms, culture, history, etc.).

Several years ago when I was testing advertisements in Johannesburg, racial sensitivities surfaced. This was only obvious to the in-country moderator I was working with, who later informed me that recent events surrounding BEE (Black Economic Empowerment) had ignited public opinion. This was subsequently expressed—albeit very subtly—in my respondent's comments.

The involvement of local translators is critical. Otherwise, seemingly simple words or concepts can take on a whole new meaning. On another occasion, my client and I discovered that the German word for "buy," *kaufen*, triggered a very negative reaction with our Frankfurt audience. Although technically correct, the word *kaufen* was featured in a TV ad while we were in-country. Obviously, we would have had no way of knowing this, absent a debrief with our local moderator. The ad showed a man yelling and gesticulating into the camera, like a used car salesman: "*Kaufen! Kaufen! Kaufen!*" Needless to say, when our German moderator saw the translation from our client team in the United States, he was immediately turned off. But because we had reviewed the materials in advance, we were able to course correct before the research began.

While consumers value consistency, when it comes to translations not all words can or should be translated into the target language. For instance, when conducting research with Japanese IT managers, you would never translate “downloads” or “hard drive”—both are commonly used words in Japanese, although they will be written phonetically in Japanese. Connotation is more important than direct translation—so having an expert translator is critical. When I’m conducting research on very technical or jargon-laden subjects—such as high-tech or pharmaceuticals—it is important that my translator also be familiar with that particular domain. Subject-matter experts (SMEs) are also sometimes involved in the materials review.

The same caution and diligence should be applied to the use of imagery. Audiences can interpret color, hand gestures, facial expressions and symbols in wildly different ways. Several years ago, I was conducting research for a multinational computing company. We were testing the “hero image” on the corporate web page. One photo showed a businessman at a desk. While our New York audience thought he looked “competent,” “successful” and “intelligent,” the same expression and posture was interpreted by our Tokyo audience as “arrogant,” “disdainful” and “not Japanese.” A seasoned research team can help you avoid potential gaffs that could damage the brand and what it communicates to people—implicitly as well as explicitly.

#### **Rule 4: Project management has never been so important**

Project management for global research reaches an entirely new level of complexity. The rigor required is a step above any domestic initiative and each additional market can add additional challenges.

Global project management entails the choreography of several moving parts:

- Each country has its own legal constraints when it comes to disclosure of information (e.g., HIPAA regulations in the United States; non-disclosure of any personal information in Japan). You are required to have releases when taping a respondent (video or audio), but in some countries this is not permitted under certain circumstances.
- Introduction letters may be required. This is especially critical for B2B and is commonplace in countries like Japan, where protocol is important.
- Because it’s essential that the research team is aligned, clear communication of research objectives is crucial. All research materials—screener, moderator guide, surveys, stimuli—must be reviewed in detail. Typically, I’ll conduct a telephone debrief with each moderator so that we can discuss research objectives in detail.
- Since I always conduct research in my own market first, I will discuss preliminary findings with the in-country teams prior to their interviews. This is not intended to influence their delivery or analysis, but is meant to lend some insight into early themes, patterns in the data and unanticipated responses that may or may not surface within other markets.

- I will also conduct a debrief with in-country moderators following the first day of research. This ensures that we can course correct as needed and that we are collaborating and sharing ideas throughout the process—regardless of whether I’m present to observe or not.

## Summary

There isn’t a day that goes by when human beings don’t surprise me. Their attitudes, opinions and perceptions converge and diverge in fascinating ways. Multicultural research takes that diversity to a whole new level.

To deliver global solutions, we must not only think globally, but we must have the skills, infrastructure and hands-on experience to back it up. While it is exciting, global research can be challenging in equal measure. That said, the combination of clear communication, sound processes and a seasoned global research team can go a long way toward revealing the nuance and mystery that makes global research so fascinating.