

AQRP Advertising Research Seminar

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Peter Dann looks at how the rise of international advertising campaigns has affected qualitative research

A few years ago, I guess it was an agenda item for the board meetings of most qual companies: how do we structure ourselves to take account of international research? And more to the point, do we do it under one brand name, or shall we set up a separate division? The latter is a tempting option: after all, introducing yourself at conferences as the MD of Tapeworm International Research and Consultancy is a damned sight more impressive than just plain Tapeworm and Partners.

However, regardless of how you brand it, I'm convinced that conducting, and especially co-ordinating, international research is a valuable part of the modern qualitative researcher's experience. Not only does it require a whole new set of skills to do it well, but it can teach and encourage many aspects of good practice to make international researchers better researchers all round, especially in the case of advertising and marketing research.

We in the UK are very lucky, as in spite of predictions of gloom a few years ago there are few signs of the UK's share of co-ordinated research within Europe diminishing (and Europe still accounts for the vast majority of multi-country projects): the latest estimates from ESOMAR suggest that the UK is responsible for around 43% of projects sub-contracted abroad within the EU.

Historically, this position of pre-eminence has come about through largely commercial factors, but there are many other more enduring reasons why British qualitative researchers are well placed for international co-ordination. Culturally, the English language remains the key strength: several of our

overseas colleagues have mentioned the difficulty of being briefed by someone speaking English as their second language; in the case of advertising research, it is often preferable to be briefed on a UK-sourced campaign by a British researcher than one of your own nationality, since they can explain subtleties of language and communication.

There are also sound professional reasons for the UK's leading position, again particularly in the field of advertising research. As one of our colleagues commented: *"UK research is more ideas-driven, whereas we in Germany are more process-driven. That means that we can learn a lot from you in the analysis of advertising"*. Several factors can account for this. First, a highly developed qualitative research industry means that there is more competition internally, more learning and sharing of skills through more industry bodies; and the greater competition means that there is more need to differentiate, innovate and sell, while a more service-orientated culture has made research itself more flexible and more actionable. Second, there is a far closer relationship between advertising and research: in the UK it is common for researchers to have worked in agencies, while in the rest of Europe researchers are more likely to have trained as psychologists, while those that have commercial experience generally gained it in marketing rather than advertising. This factor has to be related to the development of Account Planning in the UK, the influence of which is no longer restricted to agencies but to a whole commercial culture that is more marketing led.

So the UK model can actually be a very good one for qualitative advertising research, and there are many opportunities to exploit the quality of our research skills and apply them to international projects. However, in doing so, it is essential to be clear about the roles and responsibilities of the co-ordinating researcher and those of the local researchers being co-ordinated.

Maintaining a homogenous approach has to be the critical factor in the success of any international project, since if the findings aren't compatible, they aren't comparable. Again, this is especially important in advertising

research as people respond to advertising differently according to the tiniest changes in presentation; but the co-ordinator's role does not just involve the 'basics' of ensuring a similar, comparable methodology, knowing what can be modified to take account of local specifics and what can't. It also includes ensuring that everyone on the team shares a unity of purpose: are we developing or testing? What can and can't be changed? What is and isn't going to be useful to the client? In this context, best practice is more important than local context, and understanding the differences between communication and meaning is more important than knowing subtleties of language.

The co-ordinating researcher need not be ashamed of knowing little of the market in question, but should recognise that they bring complementary strengths of their own. For instance, for a co-ordinating researcher advertising experience is more relevant than local issues, and a key role is to make sure that everyone on the project shares their level of understanding of how the advertising works or is intended to work. Equally, they have a unique understanding of the big picture, and findings from one market can aid understanding in another.

But just as a good international researcher will recognise their own strengths, so they will view their overseas colleagues as having strengths according to their national characteristics rather than weaknesses, and will not attempt to make up for differences in approach by trying to supply the knowledge themselves. In every project, there are critical aspects within each market that only resident researchers can supply. Most important of these is 'cultural fluency' - when it comes to advertising, linguistic fluency is not enough, as advertising often depends on themes from popular culture, and is always viewed within that context, whether derived from local popular culture, needing local knowledge, or dependent on local interpretations of international culture. Local researchers are also required to supply the necessary depth of local knowledge, both in appreciation of local advertising codes - applying the global perspective on 'how the advertising works' locally,

and understanding how the symbols and themes of the ad create meaning - and in commercial and contextual awareness, since brand status is often the biggest influence on advertising response, and aspects such as usage, distribution and competition often shape the market context and determine reactions to advertising.

Appreciating strengths like these is what pits me fundamentally against the model that allows a co-ordinating researcher just to view groups and make their own analysis. The process of international research should take advantage of local researchers' skills and accommodate local strengths within their overall framework and understanding.

In fact, co-ordinating an international project should be a process very similar to co-ordinating a series of groups, with the local researchers as your respondents, and the same rules for getting the best out of them apply. Respect them as you would respect your respondents, value the different backgrounds and experiences of your moderators and respect their cultural contexts and experience the way you would a group of respondents who have a different background from yourself, and be aware that in most cases the local clients will have a good deal more respect for their local researchers than for you. Don't be afraid to learn from them - many of our accepted techniques are considered quite as bizarre by the rest of the world as we view them, and likewise, come as much from our cultural and commercial heritage. Help them tell you what's important and, just like real respondents, don't forget that to local researchers you're often talking complete gibberish. Give them your overall framework, take them through the hypotheses and then work together on fitting their ideas into it. Explore each local difference - just as you can't afford to ignore an apparently trivial comment from a respondent until you know exactly why they're saying it, so you can only apply your clever, thought-through spin on the global picture when you've really gone through each detail to make sure of its importance, or hopefully, lack of it.

This role brings a requirement for a degree of humility on the part of the co-ordinating researcher: being aware of and playing to your strengths on a project, but also taking account of the inherent weaknesses of the co-ordinating role, and of the inherent or individual strengths of the team of researchers you're co-ordinating.

But if humility is important in dealing with local researchers, it's absolutely vital in the way in which we deal with the most important people in the equation, the respondents themselves. There's been enough written over the last few years about the apparently fascinating differences between one nation of respondents and another. Whether or not these stereotypes are true or just funny is a subject for another article; but the fact that there are differences in response between one set of respondents and another is the whole reason of doing research in the first place, and international research highlights some of these differences because they occur across different markets.

Taking account of these differences is probably the most important way in which international research has changed the way we work, because this is where the international researcher has the power - and the responsibility - to avoid the trap of the Lowest Common Denominator. Making advertising work in a range of national markets does *not* entail making it so bland as to offend no-one; nor, in most cases, does it involve making separate copy for each market. It's harder than that, because international researchers have the responsibility to understand and accept the compromise, but to aim for a compromise that retains quality. This will involve looking beyond the responses from respondents and other researchers, interrogating them until you are clear about *why* they produced the reactions they produced and how they might be persuaded to the response the advertising is looking for. This represents a fundamental shift from one-country research: the researcher has the task of making the compromise work as best it can, and, to a degree, inevitably means that they take on some of the ownership of the advertising idea.

These factors have profound implications for all international researchers, but again especially those in advertising. Gone are the days when a researcher was a largely reactive and studiously impartial enquirer, when a lively advertising mind and a disarmingly charming interviewing manner were enough. Today's international researcher has to combine two very different strands of skill and characteristics, to be not just humble, open and inquisitive but also a team leader, a champion of the international cause and a visionary.

These are not qualities immediately associated with that many qualitative researchers. But I believe that, accommodated properly, these new demands on the researcher will make us all better researchers.