Ethnography proves fruitful in emerging economies

By MICHAEL FIELDING
Staff Writer

Consumers familiar with Western lifestyles and armed with the latest technology have shifted the emphasis in marketing from “push” to “pull” in even the most nascent of emerging economies. That, in turn, is changing the way consumer research, including qualitative research, is conducted in those young markets.

Even the poorest consumers in those regions have rapidly adopted technology and have accepted new research methods. Researchers say that the widespread use of cell phones among consumers, increased Internet access even in the remotest places and acceptance of ethnography as a research tool now allow for an advanced level of research similar to that conducted in more advanced economies. That, in turn, is changing the way consumer research, including qualitative research, is conducted in those young markets.

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“Because of the changing political and social climates, they’re really becoming fruitful ground for (researchers’) products and services,” says Masia Commons, vice president of qualitative research at Chicago-based Research International.

Asia

“There’s a desire to move away from total reliance on the focus group as the only answer,” says Sue Phillips, director of qualitative research for Asia Pacific for Chicago-based Synovate Inc. “There’s a feeling that clients are not getting as much out of qualitative research (in emerging economies) as they could be, so now there’s a focus on ethnographic approaches.”

In markets such as Indonesia and Thailand, the use of ethnography helps combat inherent cultural obstacles that Western researchers don’t often encounter elsewhere. “People don’t say what they mean, and they don’t mean what they say (in group interview situations), so researchers are now actually watching people shop, watching them in their homes,” she explains.

Focus groups still are used, though with some challenges. In Asia, for example, Phillips notes that the more intimate the setting, the better the understanding of the consumer—particularly in younger markets where clients know little about consumers going in. “Clients are realizing that smaller groups of six or less (in focus groups) are more manageable,” Phillips says, adding that the norm is eight to 10 in the United States and seven in Europe. “In Asia, it’s difficult to open up in public situations. Asians don’t want to lose face. It’s also more difficult to hide in a smaller group, so culturally it’s a positive move.”

Ethnographic studies are generally more affordable than focus groups since ethnographic studies use a small number of participants in a small environment. Focus groups—particularly in rural areas—can be costly.

Proper message, design in global markets require tests

By DEBORAH L. VENCE

Marketing News

‘There’s a desire to move away from total reliance on the focus group as the only answer.’

Consumers, such as these shoppers in a traditional Indonesian market area, are often more receptive to ethnographic research methods than focus groups.

By DEBORAH L. VENCE

Staff Writer

Employees often spend countless hours creating marketing strategies to introduce products in the United States and introduce it in another country, (we can’t) expect it to do just as well,” says Mary Beth Lake, head of global product design and development for Chicago-based Synovate Inc., the market research arm of Aegis Group plc, based in London.

Lake suggests that companies take several steps back before introducing products to international markets. “Companies have to) embrace the different cultures, different regions. (Companies need to ask), what are (those consumers) looking for that they don’t now have? How do you position those products in that way? There are a lot of different aspects to introducing products into (different cultures),” she notes.

Companies getting ready to launch a product in a foreign market should keep in mind a few valuable research methods to help identify and break through cultural barriers.

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Economic hubs allow researchers easy access

because of the transportation between rural and urban areas. What may emerge is a unique sort of blend in which, in rural areas, researchers identify key leaders and their families to be interviewed and gather informally with them in a community center at a time convenient for the locals.

“It’s a much less rigid, fixed, formal approach. People may pop in throughout the day,” Phillips says about the open invitation to extended family members to participate in the research at their convenience. Because of the informality, too, this approach may be empowering the poor.

Dina Mehta is familiar with such an approach. A qualitative researcher based in Mumbai, India, Mehta spent 10 years with IMRB, India’s largest market research agency, before forming her own consultancy firm, Explore Research & Consultancy, in 1998. Her research in rural India has focused on extended family members to participate in the research at their convenience. Because of the transportation between rural and urban areas.

Cell phones are used to convene focus groups in rural areas and to interact via text messages with respondents in urban areas.

“Now the trend is that marketing is much more global, more mature,” Kamba explains, adding that laundry detergent and soap brands have felt the most impact. “It became costly to manage several small brands, and this allows companies to concentrate manufacturing and distribution in one site. The trend now is that you go to a hub of economic activity to conduct research.”

In Africa, those hubs are South Africa, Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria and Egypt. Similar to some Asian markets, focus groups are conducted in the communities themselves, rather than at official research facilities in an urban setting. “In some cases, the facilities are so upscale that the respondents are overwhelmed. They’re not at ease,” he says.

Also, increasingly, researchers are trying to reduce bias in the results by creating an environment in which respondents can discuss their opinions freely. That hasn’t always been the case. In the past, respondents often had to travel several uncomfortable hours by bus to research facilities, and finding enough respondents could be difficult. The new concept of economic hubs enables researchers to draw from a more geographically friendly modernized area with better transportation.

“ HttpContext (Africa is becoming more organized as a consumer market.”

**The whole point of qualitative research is to enter into a dialogue with (consumers).”**