Conducting Consumer Research in Emerging Markets: Challenges, Issues and New Directions

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A roundtable was held at the 2007 ACR conference to discuss issues and challenges with conducting consumer research in India and China. At the end of the conference, participants agreed upon the need to expand the discussion to all emerging markets and to continuing the discussion by organizing future roundtable sessions at the next few ACR conferences. This proposal is the result of that discussion. We will use the online forum created at last ACR consisting of 35 ACR members and researchers to structure our pre-conference discussions and to continue the discussions at the conference.

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A roundtable was held at the 2007 ACR conference to discuss the issues and challenges with conducting consumer research in India and China. In our pre-conference discussions via an online group forum, and at the 2007 conference we identified and discussed some key issues and challenges and agreed upon the need to expand the discussion of the topic from India and China to include all transitional economies/emerging markets. This roundtable is thus a continuation and an expansion of the discussion started at the 2007 conference.

In order to facilitate pre-conference discussion, participants as well as forty researchers working on emerging markets that are a part of an online forum were asked to send in questions on topics relating to methodology, research and geographic area issues with conducting research in emerging markets. Since this roundtable is a part of an ongoing discussion started at ACR 2007 and to be continued at ACR – Asia Pacific, 2009, the discussion topics and questions identified were ones that could continue the discussion started last year. The discussion at this roundtable therefore centered on several key areas:

1. Capturing Cultural Nuances: Several respondents talked about the difficulty of capturing cultural and contextual nuances when conducting research in emerging markets. From practical issues such as finding good translators to finding a comfort level and understanding before starting research in these markets, participants discussed several complexities in emerging markets that require good research partners in these settings as well as a willingness on the part of the researcher to immerse themselves in the culture and understand the local context before collecting data. A participant from China talked about the diversity of the Chinese market and how consumer behavior changes from city to city based on the level of development in each city. This was echoed by researchers working in some other emerging markets such as India about tier I versus tier II or III cities and the urban-rural divide in most markets that makes generalization very difficult. A need and a platform to share these experiences among researchers working in these markets were felt to be useful.

2. Data Collection Issues: Several participants last year expressed a view that it is important for researchers to share our experiences with using various methodological tools in these markets. This year’s discussion centered on using the right kind of research partners. Participants mentioned partnering with local universities as a way to get access to students and student assistants to help with data collection. Several participants shared issues with research partners and assistants not understanding exact research procedures and thus possibly affecting the quality of the data being collected. Again a need for a database to share experiences with other researchers who have worked in these markets before was agreed upon as being a very useful tool.

3. Theoretical Issues: Last year we had discussed briefly the applicability of theories from developed markets being used in emerging ones. This year we extended this discussion by talking about the importance of recognizing context and its influence before
deciding on applying a particular theory in a new market. The idea that some theories are more amenable to cross-cultural application than others was discussed with the conclusion that researchers need to be very sensitive to the issue of context with theory translatability across cultures. Further, some participants discussed the need to clarify what their unit of analysis is when studying these markets. Is it the individual consumer or is it the market itself? Also, a researcher pointed out that the idea of multi-sited research with interpretive research which is typically not done by anthropologists is ideal for our field since there are topics within consumer research that lend themselves well to this type of work.

4. Geographic Area Uniqueness & Challenges: An important element of expanding the discussion from 2007 was to include work in geographical areas that do not have as much representation. For instance, what are some challenges with working in Latin America and Africa? A participant from Tunisia talked about the difficulty of connecting with researchers from other parts of the world. Since a majority of consumer research work is published in the United States and Europe, he talked about better accessibility to publishing outlets when working with these researchers. He talked about the need for more dialogue between researchers in other parts of the world and those based in the United States. Again, the usefulness of a database that would connect researchers working in various countries with each other was thought to be very useful.

5. Miscellaneous issues (Publishing Outlets, IRB issues, research contacts for local firms): Last year we talked about the difficulty sometimes of getting IRB approval due to various local level research collection methods not being agreeable to human subjects committees in several US universities. This time the discussion centered on finding solutions to these human subjects issues by talking to other researchers who had managed to clear this issue with their boards. Again the need for a dialogue among researchers was felt to be essential to find out about human subjects approval requirements in the countries where the research is being conducted as well as with getting approvals quickly in home countries. The other issue that researchers were interested in is was on how researchers might be able to contact local companies and managers in particular countries. Another issue discussed was the need to document and list some key publishing outlets for research on emerging markets. Given the changing nature of these markets, some topics may get outdated if these are under review for longer periods hence information on which outlets may be ideal was felt to be good information to share with other researchers.

6. Database: this year the main thread running through the discussions on the various topics listed above was the need to build a database and a community so that researchers could share their experiences on various aspects of conducting research in emerging markets. The database ideally would contain a list of research centers that fund research in emerging markets; a list of key contacts with firms/respondents in emerging markets; a list of potential journals to publish in and very key would be a list of researchers working in various emerging markets. Researchers’ ability to post questions and receive responses from other researchers would add value given the need expressed by most researchers at the roundtable for a forum to discuss various issues. We currently have more than 50 ACR members that are a part of an existing online forum that was created last year. Ideas on where to site this database and how to structure it were discussed and these discussions will continue with participants to get consensus on the best way to structure this database/forum.

The next roundtable to continue this discussion will be held at ACR-Asia Pacific in India in January 2009. That discussion will involve a dialogue between researchers based in India working on consumer behavior issues and those based elsewhere that are interested in these issues.

In summary, the 2008 ACR-SF roundtable reinforced the idea that conducting consumer research in emerging markets is gaining tremendous interest among researchers as these markets expand rapidly. There are also various challenges to conducting research in these markets as discussed at this roundtable. Researchers working in these markets therefore strongly need a forum and a community to share their experiences on methodological tools and other issues to be able to be more efficient with conducting research in emerging markets.