Where **Machine** meets **Mensch**

Is International Qual Research all about Skype?

Offers such as Skype and Co. tempt you to do research from your office. After all, it is cost-efficient and fast. Which disadvantages and problems are caused by such an approach? **Edward Appleton** explains.

International research is being transformed – why visit say Taiwan when you can Skype with a native speaker doing their best to speak your language? Throw in some mobile ethnographies, Google Translate, a few crowd-sourced trend snippets, social media analysis – and stir. All from the comfort of your own office. The advantages are obvious – less horribly cramped airplane travel, delays, expense, jet-lag, and a notable cost-reduction. Which means you can do more research. So all good?

I'd say no. This approach is going to miss stuff – it just isn't granular or culturally rich enough to deliver anything really powerful that's going to spark a new idea, range, message. The forces behind the race to lower cost, centralise, consolidate at regional or global HQ levels are diametrically opposed to where consumers are at in many countries – which is radically local. The ideal product in food is "local" – buy local = support local businesses, savour local cultural richness, explore maybe historically re-juvenated varieties, tap into history...

Cultural Understanding is the Key

Provenance is a powerful seller – where it's from matters. Who made it, how. All tied up with emotions, people... and yes, culture. Cultural understanding is core to understanding motivation and behaviours. Referring to and precising what strategy consultant Christian Madsbjerg has to say in his book Sensemaking, Harvard Business Review (HBR/Liberal Arts in the Data Age) summarises as follows: "...deep cultural knowledge businesses need comes not from numbers-driven market research but from a humanities-driven study of texts, languages, and people." Does Skype give us that? A bit – but it scratches the surface.

To what extent can Skype help you surface a cultural insight? Can mobile ethnography fully explain to HQ marketing folk why a local brand A is underperforming in a high growth market? Brand identities are increasingly about "experience" – and that means contextual understanding, emotions, situations, societal factors.

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HBR/ref. Christian Madsbjerg

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No – to get "there", you have to be immersed in locality in all its complexity, doing face-to-face research. Being there. Researching in Asian markets – to quote Skim's Robin de Rooij (MRMW/ Implicit Mobile Research) – means attuning locally: "Many Asian cultures are characterised by high context effects. In other words, in social settings, much is unsaid". So Skype (or its like) might not get you that far, or even far enough – companies and brands lose touch with their consumers, or from the same HBR article: "...unless companies take pains to understand the human beings represented in their data sets, they risk losing touch with the markets they're serving".

Digital Disruption and Agility

It is of course true that we live in a world shaped by digital disruption and yes, agility. And there's no doubt that international face-to-face qual research can appear onerous, expensive. Take in-homes for example: in Brazil and/or India. Invariably very powerful stuff, galvanising, authentic, to see and feel up-close how people actually relate to a brand or category. The value of client side stakeholder involvement is significant, budget owners really seeing their product through a different lens, re-thinking their marketing challenge.

That being said, the cost-per-completes can appear scary – there's the need for a central researcher to be there herself, costs of interpreters, flight and hotel costs.... Logistics can also be tricky if participants pull out at the last moment. It's tempting to shy away from all this – budgets are invariably tight, so if cheaper/simpler is possible, and online solutions claim to be able to deliver, why not?

A digital option certainly seems enticing – legacy solutions can appear old-fashioned. Take this excerpt from digital qual specialist discuss.io founder Zach Simmons in the Greenbook Research Industry Trends Report for Q1/2 2017: "Leveraging ubiquitous technologies, like Internet browsers, webcams, insight communities, audio/video streaming, VoIP, and natural language processing, brands can still form human connections and gather rich insights, but with less friction in the research process."

Beware of Generalisation

Sounds tempting – but overly sweeping? Suggesting that digital qual can do exactly the same job as face-to-face multi-national qual needs careful scrutinising.

Firstly, the outputs from digital qual are almost always different to face-to-face, often inferior – less culturally rich, content output can easily be thin depending on the target group and subject matter. Contextual understanding is invariably lower.

Secondly, digital doesn't work equally well across the globe. In plenty of emerging markets existing technology infrastructure is a limiting factor – availability of affordable broadband access, for example, or unstable connections. MROCs in India? Currently not advisable.

Which leads to the third point: total project cost. What appears to be a significant cost-saving at first sight turns out to be misleading once all the non-anticipated costs involved in work-arounds and the related manpower hours are added-in.

All that having been said: of course online qual has a role – often complementary. It definitely makes sense when knowledge needs are more straightforward, tactical – simple feedback on a claim, for example, or top-line reactions on a concept board. And yes, if budgets are stretched, doing online in lower priority markets is preferable to doing nothing at all.

All Business is Local

When a project is more strategic, however, or there's a lot at stake, for example, with a new international brand approach, using face to face qual is highly advisable, whatever the challenges and cost constraints. To wrap up: all business is local – and maybe increasingly so. We need digital to help us capture that – but we have to have humans on the ground, culturally filtering and explaining the potentially complex-cum-chaotic mix of locally significant signs and the emotions attached to them. So – here's to Machine-meets-Mensch. Maybe even a tech company might get behind that message. ▪

Edward Appleton
is Director Global Marketing & Sales with Happy Thinking People. He has worked for over 20 years in Market Research on both the agency and client side. He blogs regularly at www.researchundreflect.blogspot.de and for Esomar. Edward is bi-cultural English/German, speaks fluent French, is a member of the MRS UK and a founding Board Member of Mobile Research in the Mobile World (MRMW).
www.happythinkingpeople.com