

## **Photo-Elicitation as a Tool to Alleviate International Marketing Mistakes**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

*In today's global marketplace, firms regularly extend their products and services into foreign markets. When doing so, often unanticipated cross-cultural challenges involving consumer behavior emerge. These challenges can be mitigated through the use of a qualitative research technique known as photo-elicitation. This article synthesizes emerging sociological research on photo-elicitation and explicates implications for international marketing managers.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

When launching new products or services internationally, firms often encounter unanticipated culturally-driven obstacles. Consider the following examples:

Coca Cola:

- In India, the company had to change its marketing message when it was discovered that water was drunk at most meals and soft drinks were typically reserved for guests and special occasions (Malhotra, Agarwal, and Peterson, 1996).
- In Japan, 'Diet Coke' was renamed 'Coke Light' after the firm learned that the term 'diet' carried an embarrassing connotation (Cateora and Graham, 2005).

Office Depot:

- In Japan, the company had to revamp its stores when they learned that Japanese shoppers were made to feel uncomfortable by the large warehouse-style format (Cateora and Graham, 2005).

UPS:

- In Spain, the brown trucks had to be repainted because they resembled the country's hearses (Cateora and Graham, 2005).
- In Germany, the drivers' uniforms were changed because no one in that country had been required to wear a brown shirt since 1945 (Cateora and Graham, 2005).

One research technique that could have been used to gain advanced insight into these unexpected cross-cultural issues is photo-elicitation. Photo-elicitation is a research method that uses pictures to guide interviews and to stimulate discussion during those interviews (Klitzing, 2004). Although the photographs employed in the interviews may depict something quite specific or material, they can spawn dialogue that embodies philosophies, ideas, and cultural beliefs (Becker, 2002). Nevertheless, the photo-elicitation technique is an underutilized methodology (Harper, 1998; Prosser 1998) and has yet to be applied on a wide-scale basis to international marketing research. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to address this deficiency by providing international marketers with important guidance in the use of photo-elicitation interviewing. To achieve this objective, this paper first discusses the need to establish *conceptual equivalence* and *functional equivalence* when conducting cross-cultural research. Second, the history of, and current applications of, the photo-elicitation methodology are detailed. Third, this article shows how the methodology can be applied to cross-cultural marketing research and explains the benefits of doing so. Lastly, limitations and managerial implications are provided.

## THE COMPLEXITIES OF INTERNATIONAL MARKETING

International marketers understandably need help in their decisions pertaining to their foreign extensions. Cross-cultural research can prove to be quite complex and the results can easily be misleading. Before survey data can be collected and analyzed, the researcher must establish *conceptual equivalence* for the problem at hand. "*Conceptual equivalence* implies that the meaning of the research concepts, stimuli, and materials should be equivalent across cultures (Malhotra, Agarwal, and Peterson, 1996, p. 39)." Such as in the case of Coca Cola in Japan, the word "diet" is conceptually different in Japan and the United States. Likewise, the brown UPS truck is conceptually different in Spain than in most other countries. Also, before quantitative research can begin, the researcher must establish *functional equivalence* (Malhotra, Agarwal, and Peterson, 1996). *Functional equivalence* involves the product or service (or their features) serving the same function in two cultures. For example, as explained in the opening vignette, soft drinks serve different functions in India and the United States.

Qualitative methodologies are regularly utilized by marketing researchers in an attempt to establish *conceptual equivalence* and *functional equivalence*. Focus group sessions and in-depth interviews are the techniques that are most commonly used. Nevertheless, these techniques have several drawbacks that become particularly troublesome in a cross-cultural venue. First, the responses in traditional focus groups and interviews are mediated by the researcher's questioning style and question sequencing (Buchanan, 2001). Second, in focus groups and interviews the participants are influenced by their assessment of what the researcher thinks is an appropriate response to a question (Buchanan, 2001). Third, in traditional focus groups and interviews the researchers must often specify the salient attributes of the product or service that need to be discussed. However, pre-specifying the attributes imposes cultural bias on the results (Malhotra and Bartels, 2002). That said, allowing photographs to guide interview discussions could mitigate each of these limitations.

### **BACKGROUND OF PHOTO-ELICITATION AS A RESEARCH TECHNIQUE**

The notion of utilizing photographs to trigger insight and dialogue in an interview is not novel. Much of the seminal work employing this technique was brought forth by John Collier. For example, Collier (1957) used the methodology to examine mental health in Canada. More specifically, he was probing how Canadian families adapted to ethnic diversity. In another seminal piece, a decade later, Collier (1967) described the method of photo-elicitation in a book covering visual anthropology.

Since Collier's initial work, photo-elicitation has been used as a qualitative research device in a number of disciplines. Such areas include sociology, psychology, anthropology, ethnography, education, and community health (Carlsson, 2001; Collier and Collier, 1986; Harper, 1994; and Wang, 2003). For example, in the field of sociology, Gold (1986) employed photo-driven interviews to explore ethnic identification. Likewise, in the field of education, Diamond (1996), Weiniger (1998) and Salmon (2001) utilized photo-elicitation to study pre-school and elementary education. Specifically in the area of health, a number of researchers have used the photo-elicitation technique to research nursing, medicine, and gerontology (Hagedorn, 1996; Higgins and Highley, 1986; and Magilvy et al., 1992). In addition, the photo-elicitation methodology has been employed by researchers to assess tourist perceptions of particular travel destinations (Botterill, 1989; Botterill and Crompton, 1987; 1996).

Since photo-elicitation is being utilized in increased frequency in a number of disciplines, there are several recent articles and books that outline the process (see Banks, 2001; Harper, 2002; Pink, 2001; Rose, 2001; van Leeuwen & Jewitt,

2001). Essentially, there are three ways in which photo-elicitation can be carried out: auto driving, reflexive photography, and photo novella (A.K.A. photo voice). Auto driving entails the interviewees “driving” the discussion regarding photographs that were typically provided by the researcher (e.g. Collier, 1967; Suchar and Rotenberg, 1994). This is the most common form of photo-elicitation (Harper, 1994) and also the one that provides the most promising applications for international marketing research because it allows the researcher to gain new insight on the matter being researched. The second type of photo-elicitation is reflexive photography that involves the interviewees taking photographs and then reflecting upon the deeper meaning of their photographs. Lastly, photo novella entails asking interviewees to take pictures that they best feel depict their daily routines and common events, and then asking them to describe their meaning (Hurworth, 2003; Warren, 2005; Wang and Burris, 1994).

### **APPLYING PHOTO-ELICITATION TO CROSS-CULTURAL MARKETING RESEARCH**

While both reflexive photography and photo novella hold some potential, the type of photo-elicitation that can be most readily applied to cross-cultural marketing research is auto-driving. For instance, within the context of the examples at the beginning of this article, Coca Cola could have employed the qualitative methodology to probe into the consumption rituals of Indians, or into the cultural facets of the Japanese. Likewise, photo-driven interviews may have brought-forth the fact that large, warehouse-style Office Depot stores would not be embraced by the Japanese shopper.

Auto-driving interviews can either be conducted on an individual basis or with a group of subjects (Clark-Ibanez, 2004). There are advantages and drawbacks to both. Sometimes in a group interview comments made by one interviewee may trigger the insights of another informant. On the other hand, the opposite could occur as well. That is, an informant may become shy around others, or become reluctant to disagree with the comments made by other interviewees.

Whether photo-elicitation is conducted on an individual basis or in groups, the conversations should be recorded and transcribed. Once transcribed, a content analysis can be performed on the text to identify significant or recurring themes. If available, text smart software, such as N6 (formerly called Nud\*ist), can be utilized to help locate commonalities and patterns in the transcriptions. These themes generated from the photo-elicitation sessions can then be used as the inputs into quantitative analysis. More specifically, the insights gained can be used to generate survey questions. The survey data can then serve to validate the thoughts and insights of the photo-elicitation interviewees.

## THE BENEFITS OF UTILIZING PHOTO-ELICITATION IN CROSS-CULTURAL MARKETING RESEARCH

The photo-elicitation technique not only provides more information than word-only interviews, but different information (Samuels, 2004). For instance, in the context of marketing research, asking potential consumers to blindly remember their attitudes or beliefs about the use of a product is distinctly different than showing them a picture of a scenario with the product in use. This is because there is a salient difference between “memory” and “seeing.” On the relationship between memory and seeing, John Berger (1992, p. 192) wrote: “the thrill found in a photograph comes in the onrush of memory...Memory is a strange faculty. The sharper and more isolated the stimulus memory receives, the more it remembers.”

Since images induce deeper facets of human experiences than words alone (Harper, 2002), photo-elicitation can be useful in comprehending everyday events that might be challenging for some people to articulate (Klitzing, 2004). Similarly, photo-driven interviews may evoke taken-for-granted nuances of the informants’ community or life that trigger discussion (Clark-Ibanez, 2004). Harper (2002 p. 23) states that the photo-elicitation methodology can “mine deeper shafts into a different part of human consciousness than do word-alone interviews.” This added depth is due to the fact that the technique induces informants to take the lead role in the interview and to make full use of their expertise (Loeffler, 2004). As previously stated, this added insight is also spurred because photographs “sharpen the memory and give the interview an immediate character of realistic reconstruction (Collier and Collier, 1986, pp. 106).”

In addition, the use of auto-driven photo interviews are particularly suitable for cross-cultural research because: 1) the photos present images of situations that the subjects are generally accustomed to, but the interview can potentially uncover hidden and complex issues; 2) the likelihood of an international marketer misinterpreting a cultural idiosyncrasy is reduced because the methodology provides nuances, spawns memories, and illuminates non-obvious perspectives and explanations (Hurworth, 2003); and 3) the process of photo-interpretation captures both social and cultural facets that the interviewee wishes to highlight, as well as insights that the interviewee may perceive as being pertinent and useful to the researcher (Banks, 1995). For example, in the case of UPS, a Spanish interviewee could have provided a warning about the use of brown trucks; or a German interviewee could have made known the history of brown uniform shirts in the country.

These benefits realized through photo-elicitation are due, in part, to the fact that the use of photographs in an interview leads to the fostering of informal and cooperative relationships between the informants and the researcher (Klitzing, 2004). Stated differently, photographs have been known to ease the rapport

between the individuals (Clark-Ibanez, 2004). Photos reduce the awkwardness of the interviews because they provide something to focus on (Clark-Ibanez, 2004). Having photographs present in the interview reduces the asymmetry in power between the researcher and the participant because the focus of the interview shifts from the participant to the photos (Carlsson, 2001; Collier and Collier, 1986; Harper, 2002). Also, often the use of photographs engenders a positive, nurturing feeling similar to when a family is looking over its photo albums (Klitzing, 2004).

### **LIMITATIONS**

Evidently, the use of photo-elicitation interviews in cross-cultural marketing research is not a panacea for success. Consistent with the views of methodological pluralism, any qualitative research technique (e.g. photo-elicitation) should be followed by quantitative analysis (e.g. surveys). That is, while photo-elicitation can likely probe deeper into consumer insights than traditional interviewing, it is recommended that any results should be validated through the use of quantitative research iteration.

Ideally, both qualitative and quantitative research is desirable, but not always practical given the time constraints that firms often face when launching products and services. Therefore, another limitation of the photo-elicitation methodology is the time that it takes to conduct and decipher the interviews. In a similar vein, another potential drawback of photo-interviews is that in certain countries (e.g. in many parts of Latin America and Asia) people are sometimes reluctant to participate in marketing research. Consequently, soliciting willing participants may pose a challenge.

Another limitation to using photo-elicitation for the purpose of cross-cultural research is that the dialogue generated in the interviews could suffer from cultural bias when digested by the researcher. In other words, perhaps the participants are providing accurate insights, but the insights are misconstrued by the researcher's interpretations. However, involving researchers who are local-nationals in the photo-elicitation process should minimize this pitfall.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS**

This article contains important implications for corporations that wish to extend their products and/or services internationally. Specifically, it tells global marketing managers that photo-elicitation can be a beneficial qualitative research tool to elicit latent cultural facets from prospective consumers. Social scientists in non-business disciplines extol the merits of photo-elicitation as a means of

drawing out non-obvious insights into an issue. This article is advancing the contention that the use of photo-elicitation should be cross-pollinated into use in cross-cultural marketing research. After all, the academic literature and the popular press alike are replete with examples of multi-million dollar losses incurred by corporations because they did not fully understand the consumer behavior in a given foreign market. Perhaps photo-elicitation interviewing could serve as a research technique to better probe a given culture before a new product or service is extended into an overseas market. In other social science fields, its performance has been impressive.

Furthermore, this article has implications beyond those for marketers. Photo-driven interviewing has potential applications in the areas of management and organizational behavior as well. For example, work processes can be photographed and used to guide the interviews of employees. When extending operations to a foreign market, for instance, it would be unwise to assume that the domestic company's organizational flow and dynamics can be duplicated efficiently at the foreign subsidiary.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Since the photo-elicitation research methodology has yet to be applied to cross-cultural marketing research, it would be informative to further investigate this application. For instance, would certain cultures lend themselves better to the methodology than others? Also, would matching a researcher and an informant of the same country-of-origin elicit better information than a culturally heterogeneous pairing? Due to modern globalization, questions such as these are ripe for exploration.

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Recognize and avoid these 9 common social media marketing mistakes made by companies to achieve substantial results from your social media strategy. Let me share with you 9 common social media marketing mistakes you need to avoid at all costs to avoid falling into the same traps. 9 most common social media marketing mistakes to avoid: Our newly-launched 60-minutes Webinar on the topic - 9 Social Media Marketing Mistakes To Avoid And What To Do Instead, is available on YouTube now! This blog is focused on highlighting the points that we discussed during the webinar. Read on to find out. Here are 6 international marketing mistakes companies make and how to fix them. It becomes harder to know what your customer wants and how they buy. As a marketer, it's your job to figure out how people communicate in different countries. For example, in China, people use WeChat to do everything: messaging, online shopping, transferring money, booking taxis, making reservations, and more. In Mexico, you send voice notes and PDFs to your real estate agent via WhatsApp. You want to have a good understanding of how different (and similar) these channels are, so you can better connect with the people who use them every day. 6. Targeting the same keywords. For marketers, the international