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Successfully conducting research projects across several Central or Eastern European countries

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Abstract

This article is aimed at end clients and research agencies who are considering conducting market research studies in more than one country in Central and Eastern Europe. We argue that co-operating with just one experienced research agency from the region and using it as the single point-of-contact is a better approach than liaising with individual providers who are based in each of the researched countries.

Liaising with individual providers in each country

Many end clients¹ who are interested in conducting an international research study currently tend to engage the services of a separate research agency in each of the relevant countries. This also often applies to Western European research agencies which are commissioned to carry out a research project in more than one Central and Eastern European (CEE) country simultaneously. Clients send their briefs and requests for cost quotes to several local research agencies in each country. The quotes and proposals are reviewed and finally one research agency is commissioned to work on the project in each country. There are a number of problems with such an approach, including:

- Significant time needed for the communication process
- Misunderstandings during the communication process
- Inadequate knowledge of the specific conditions in Central and Eastern Europe
- Uneven quality of results
- Different format of results
- Difficulties in time synchronisation during the project

¹ Please note that throughout this article the term "client" refers to either company commissioning market research projects (the so-called end client) or market research agency that subcontract fieldwork to other research agencies.

Significant time needed for the communication process

When working with several providers, a client must be in continuous contact with a number of people. When conducting international research projects in the CEE region, effective communication is crucial. Conveying all the necessary information to several persons at all stages of a project usually requires a dedicated person at the client's end who spends most of his/her time on this process.

At all stages of a research project, issues arise that need to be discussed with providers. Examples include: project specifications and requirements; sample design issues; design and/or translation of questionnaires and discussion guides; creation and consulting on codeframes; data/report quality and format issues. Unexpected problems often arise during the project which need to be discussed with providers and reacted to immediately.

Misunderstandings during the communication process

The more people involved in the communication process, the more likely that at some point problems will arise. During international research projects, feedback received from a provider in one of the countries often leads to changes in the methodological approach in all countries. For example, a provider in one country may report that a particular question in a questionnaire does not work correctly and needs to be changed, or that particular definitions specified by the client do not apply to local market conditions. This feedback should immediately be reviewed by providers in all other countries and they should react accordingly. A response that is too late, or a poor understanding of the problem may lead to a situation where the final results received from particular providers are incomparable or of low quality.

Inadequate knowledge of the specific conditions in Central and Eastern Europe

In theory, individual local research providers have an extensive knowledge of the specific local conditions in their countries. But when conducting research projects in the CEE region there is usually a need for a person/team to have sufficient knowledge of all of the researched countries in order to view the big picture and effectively co-ordinate the work of individual providers. Companies and research agencies that conduct research projects in regions where they do not normally operate often lack that knowledge. This may lead to low quality of results of such projects.

Uneven quality of results

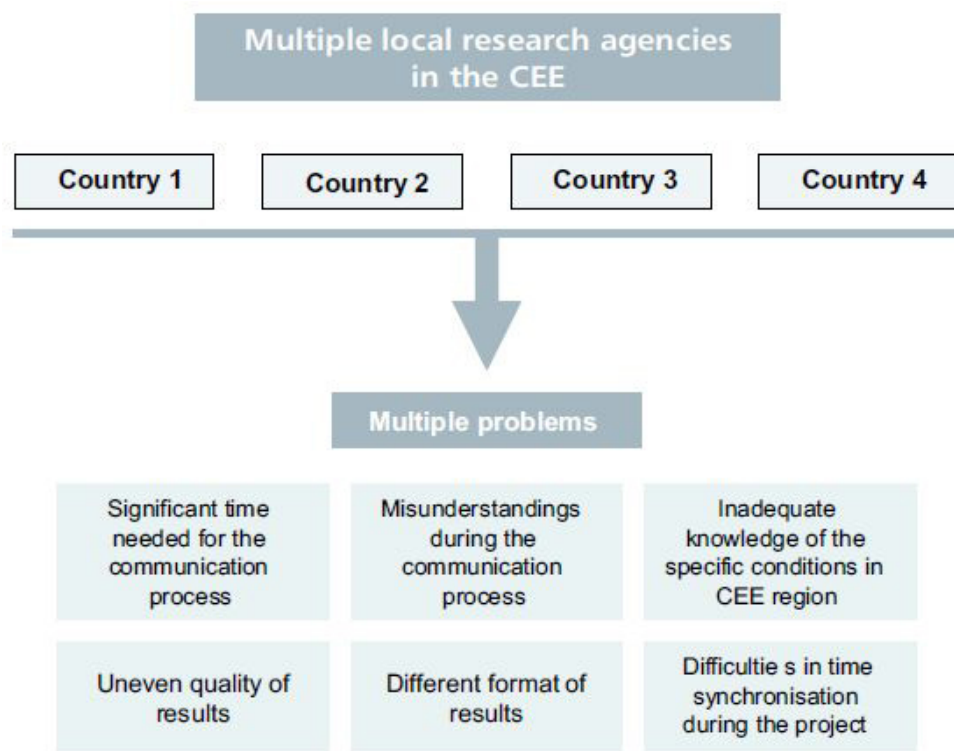
In most international research projects it is crucial to obtain from each country results that are comparable. Whether conducting a quantitative survey, qualitative project or desk research, it is important that all individual providers apply the same methodology or, if this is impossible, any bias caused by the differences should be described and taken into account when interpreting the results. Problems during the communication process and insufficient knowledge of local conditions in the CEE region may lead to ignorance of the issues inherent in different methodological approaches which, in turn, may result in low quality data received.

Different format of results

At the end of an international research project, when results from each country are supplied by individual providers, the client may receive data files or reports that are in a number of different formats. Even if at the beginning of the project the format of deliverables is exactly specified to each provider, it is common to find that data files or reports are not prepared in strict accordance with these guidelines. Again it takes up the client's time to communicate these discrepancies to providers and request a change in the format of deliverables accordingly. This, in turn, may lead to problems, especially when the deadlines of a project are short.

Difficulties in time synchronisation during the project

When conducting a research project in several countries it is usually important for the client to obtain all the results at the same time. Deadlines are usually tight and the delay of one provider often means that the entire project falls behind. Making sure that all individual country providers will supply results on time requires frequent updates on the progress of fieldwork and immediate reaction to issues which may delay the whole process.



Source: PMR Research, 2010

Liaising with one experienced research agency in the CEE region

Compared to liaising with a variety of local agencies, choosing one agency in the CEE region and treating it as the single point-of-contact for an international research project has many advantages. This approach helps to resolve many of the problems described above.

Less time needed for communication process

The client only communicates with one agency instead of multiple research service providers and therefore saves time on communication during the research project.

Efficient communication process

Liaising with one agency that is experienced in co-ordinating international research projects in the CEE region minimises the risk of misunderstandings arising during the communication process. The agency ensures that feedback on problematic issues experienced in one country is immediately reacted to and solutions, if necessary, are applied in other countries.

Good knowledge of the local conditions in CEE region

An agency experienced in co-ordinating international projects conducted in Central and Eastern Europe often has a sufficient knowledge of the local conditions in each of its countries. The agency sees the big picture and can effectively co-ordinate the work of individual providers.

Consistent quality of results

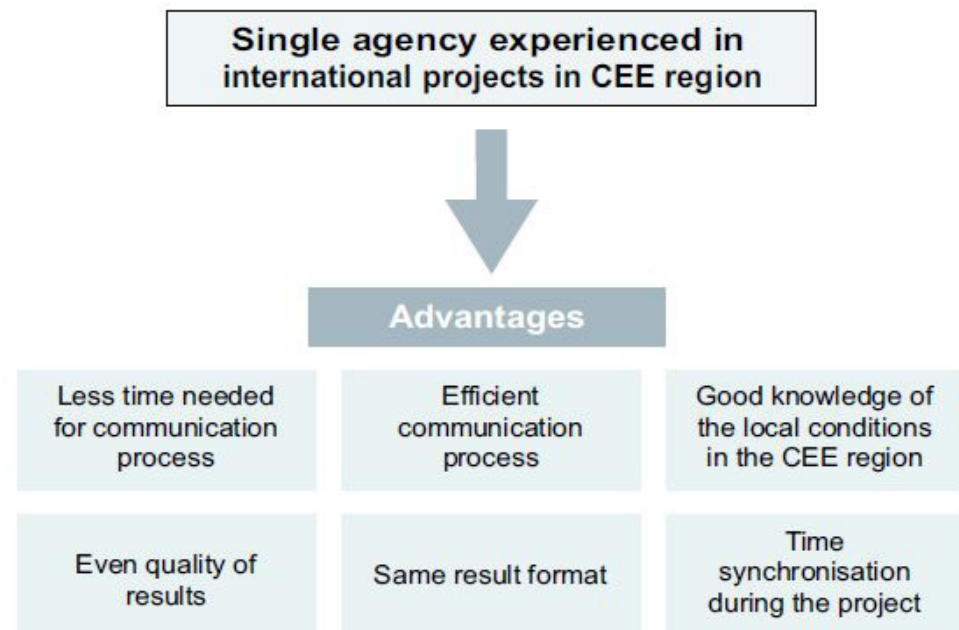
One of the most important roles of an agency working as a single point-of-contact on international projects is making sure that the client receives results of sufficient and consistent quality from all the relevant countries. It is the agency's responsibility to compare, evaluate and improve (if necessary) the quality of results received from each of the countries.

The same format of results

The quality of results is crucial but their format is also important to the client. A single point-of-contact agency makes sure that the data of particular countries is provided to the client in the same format, which is most suitable for further analysis.

Time synchronisation during the project

Choosing one agency to co-ordinate an international research project makes the agency responsible for timely and simultaneous delivery of results from all countries.



Source: PMR Research, 2010

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Risks and disadvantages of single point-of-contact approach?

The single point-of-contact approach does not eliminate all the difficulties inherent in conducting international research projects, but it does create a situation where an experienced agency, not the client, is responsible for solving all the problems that may arise.

What are disadvantages of the single point-of-contact approach? It may be said that an agency based in one CEE country will not have a sufficient degree of knowledge of the particular local conditions of other countries in the region. This is possible but an agency experienced in conducting international projects is adept at communicating with local subcontractors to ensure that local differences are accommodated both at the stage of project specification and during its progress.

The other possible drawback of the single point-of-contact approach is the fact that it may be more expensive for the client than co-operation with multiple foreign agencies itself. However, this is true only to a certain extent. The price itself may indeed be higher but the client does benefit from overall savings in project co-ordination and communication, which also translate into lower financial costs. All in all, the single point-of-contact approach is a cost efficient solution.

Desirable characteristics of a single point-of-contact research agency

From the client's point of view, the research agency that is to be commissioned to conduct international research projects and serve as the single point-of-contact for the client should have a number of specific features.

The agency must have excellent communication standards. It should continuously report on the progress of the project to the client. Project updates and any additional feedback should be sent to the client regularly. Any problems issues should be reported immediately and questions or requests from the client should be reacted to promptly. The initiative of communication should lie on the agency side. Its role is to predict potential threats to the project and communicate them to the client sufficiently early so they can be accommodated for within a prompt timeframe.

Another important characteristic is experience in conducting international research projects. Regardless of the subject of the study, the possible problems which can be confronted during research projects operated in several countries simultaneously are similar. An experienced research agency can take the necessary precautions and prevent problems before they appear.

If a research agency fulfils the above requirements, the international project should run smoothly, and it is highly likely that the final results of the co-operation will be satisfactory for the client.

About PMR Research

PMR Research is a full service market research agency based in Krakow, Poland and part of PMR Ltd, a publishing, consulting and research firm. We frequently co-ordinate international projects conducted in Central and Eastern European countries.

Services provided by PMR Research include:

- customer satisfaction studies (consumer and B2B)
- brand awareness and brand image studies
- segmentation, distribution and competition studies
- in-depth sector analyses prepared using PMR Research's proprietary methodology.

PMR conducts approximately 250 customised research and consulting projects each year. We specialise in a full array of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. We conduct complete market research projects or specific research stages (e.g. fieldwork, data analysis and designing survey instruments). PMR Research is a member of the European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research, ESOMAR.

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PMR Research specialises in serving clients from the FMCG, IT, telecommunications, pharmaceutical, retail and construction sectors as well as clients from the research and consulting sector.



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Kasia Soroczyńska graduated from the Jagiellonian University (UJ) in Cracow. She studied sociology and specialised in market research and data analysis. Kasia has worked as a project manager in market research agencies in Poland and the UK where she specialised in international business-to-business research. Kasia is experienced in CATI methodology. Her experience includes research into healthcare, the construction market, FMCG, utilities, IT and retail sectors. At PMR Research one of Kasia's responsibilities are contacts with other research agencies.

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