Is Anybody Out There?

Contributed by Manfred Mareck
Tuesday, 02 January 2007
Last Updated Tuesday, 02 January 2007

Is Anybody Out There? By Manfred Mareck, Research Marketing Ltd, London

They used to be called â€˜Senior Managers and Executivesâ€™ but today we prefer to call them the â€˜C-Suiteâ€™ â€“ not onl Chief Executive or Chief Operating Officers, but Chief Finance, IT, Information, Marketing, Purchasing, pretty much â€˜Anythingâ€™ Officers. But, according to the latest European Business Readership Survey (EBRS) E-Suite for â€˜elusiveâ€™ be a more correct acronym.

For those not familiar with the world of international media, EBRS, first published in 1973 is the doyen of pan-regional surveys, so it deserves some respect. The survey contractor (IPSOS) still manages to get funding (including financial guarantees from the Financial Times) to publish new data every two years, despite the shrinking circulation and advertising market for international titles in Europe. In recent years major titles, such as the European, Forbes and BusinessWeek have raised the white flag and pulled out of the publishing rat race. The only bright spark currently is The Economist, which has successfully grown circulation (and readership), without relying too much on discounting and bulk copy â€˜salesâ€™.

Despite the rather harsh business climate for global publications international Business Readership Surveys have been constantly expanding in the past 20 years. The Asian Business Readership Survey was launched in 1985, followed by the Japanese BRS ten years later and the Central European BRS in 2000; Australia and the USA were added in 2005 and 2006 respectively. All these studies are modelled on the European original and IPSOS has plans for similar surveys covering the Middle East, India, the Ukraine and Russia. The objective is to offer advertisers and media owners an increasingly global (and harmonised) database of (currently) 1.5 million very senior, influential but also elusive business executives.

Elusive Individuals

Finding these individuals in the first place and subsequently getting them to respond is quite a task and EBRS 2006 highlights some serious issues. Based on a fairly complex set of eligibility rules commercial and financial establishments are drawn from various databases. Those companies selected are contacted by telephone to establish names of key executives, who subsequently receive a six-page postal questionnaire.

Telephone screening still works reasonably well, with an overall completion rate of 86%. Already at this stage there are interesting variations: Greek executives have now all been given telephones â€“ in 2002 they had the lowest screening response with 67%, in 2006 they topped all countries with 93%. Their Italian colleagues still donâ€™t answer the telephone and return a consistent low response rate of around 78% (my guess, based on observation is that Italians whatever their social rank are best reached via their mobile phone). Whereas telephone response has been holding up well over the years, response to the postal questionnaire has dropped dramatically. In the distant past it used to be well over 50% but in recent years the mantra was â€˜as long as the first digit is a four we are OKâ€™ â€“ itâ€™s called pragmatic adjustment of expectations to reality combined with a denial of any potential consequences. But is this still acceptable? EBRS 2006 managed a postal response of just 31 percent!! Not only that, the response rate from Europeâ€™s largest economy (Germany) was 26% and the Dutch, who already for years have held the wooden spoon surpassed themselves with a response rate of 15 percent. Could it be that times have moved on and that postal questionnaires are no longer appropriate when collecting data form busy executives who are constantly on the move?

Whatever the reason, numbers are dropping fast and the final sample of EBRS 2006 is 7,200, down 23% from 2004. The standard excuse that low response need not automatically lead to biased results is beginning to sound hollow without any hard evidence to support such claims. In reality, such a drop in sample size limits the range of target group definitions that buyers and vendors of advertising space can confidently evaluate before they run out of bodies to count. In some markets that is exactly what happened: in Denmark and Sweden not a single executive claimed to have read the Wall Street Journal Europe and consequently the paperâ€™s net reach against any target group in these markets is zero â€“ which is nonsense and simply cannot be right. That not a single senior manager in the multi-lingual Netherlands has read the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung is equally unbelievable.Â Â Â Â

Does It Matter

How important is robust audience data anyway and do media planners actually care? One should hope so, given the efforts made to produce reliable estimates. But I recently came across a three-page â€˜score sheetâ€™ used by a global media agency that media owners are asked to complete. This form sheds some interesting light on the relative importance of various evaluation factors. Highlighted on Page One is a box headed â€˜RATESâ€™ with the helpful hint for media owners: â€œefficiency is extremely important â€“ please keep this in mind and submit your best ratesâ€•. The box has plenty of space fo

column headed â€œdiscount off the open rateâ€•. There are other questions on editorial, circulation, positioning, merchandising value, online presence as well as integrated opportunities (whatever that is).
There is also a small sector labelled â€˜Readership Informationâ€™, about half the size of the box for advertising rates. All of which tells me that a little extra discount probably beats a strong readership profile hands down and elusive readers no longer matter.

Research Marketing Ltd
Manfred Mareck
12 Alexandra Road
London W4 1AX

T: +44 (0)20 8995 7057
E: mmareck@research-marketing.co.uk