

If It's Wednesday It Must Be Singapore

Contributed by McCallum Layton
Monday, 27 September 2010

Some light-hearted but nonetheless practical tips for ensuring your international research runs smoothly.

Social and business cultures differ widely across the globe as do the methods that generate the best insights - getting the best from your international research needs careful planning and local knowledge.

You don't need to be a spy but check with the CIA.

When undertaking research in a new country I always start by checking with the CIA, yes that's right, the American Central Intelligence Agency.

Visit their 'The World Factbook' site and you can access information on the history of the country, its people politics and economy as well as numerous other interesting snippets. It's a great way to get a feel for where you are going.

Another helpful site is the British Foreign & Commonwealth Office at www.fco.gov.uk.

The website provides the latest travel advice, news, foreign policy and country profiles as well as advice for travelers and much more.

Mentally walk through the tasks ahead and what you'll need

Think of all the things you will need to do/take with you to undertake the work successfully then draw up a checklist. Include personal as well as business items.

I know of at least one international researcher who arrived at the airport without their passport! (No it wasn't me). Also, arriving at a hotel at one in the morning after a fifteen hour flight to discover you forgot to pack any shirts, and your first interview is at eight am, does not set you up well for the day (Yes, that one was me).

Make sure you have the contact details of all the people you need to see/meet whilst away; including details of the local embassy in case of an emergency is also not a bad idea.

Check on public holidays, sporting events and TV programmes

When planning fieldwork dates it's as well to chat with someone in the relevant country to ensure that you are not going to try and run your hall test when everyone is on a public holiday and has left town for the day, or your focus group with women of a certain age is planned for a night when a double bill of Sex And The City is being aired, or that you are going to try and convene the male groups on the evening of a World Series playoff.

Try to get consistency of input and check out any translations

When we undertake qualitative work in an English speaking country one of our consultants will moderate/interview. In non-English speaking countries we use local moderators but one of our consultants will be present to listen and carefully 'steer' the research through a simultaneous translator (simtran).

We have found that working in this way ensures that the research objectives are always kept in focus and, for multi-country studies, the report is written from a consistent perspective and in one voice.

If the work is on a technical subject, then before travelling, get technical terms translated by the person you are going to use for the simtran and check their interpretation with another native language speaker; in this way you can iron-out any ambiguities before the fieldwork starts.

Forward buy currency

It's surprising how payments to overseas suppliers can mount up and how much it costs just to live day to day on an overseas project; venue hire, recruitment, simultaneous translation, respondent incentives, hotels, taxis, sandwiches, coffee, parking, and so on, all have to be taken into consideration. Make a sensible estimate of these costs and forward buy your currency so you are not caught out by any violent currency fluctuations.

As an insight agency we do this on the date we submit our proposals to the client; our quote for the work is based on the exchange rates for a set date and we arrange an option with the bank to buy at this price.

If you are carrying samples or prototypes check it out in advance with customs

If you are using stimulus material take it with you in your hand carry, if you can, and if you can't then FedEx it to the destination before you leave the UK. In that way if it goes missing you can replace it - you don't want to be a victim of the 'breakfast at Heathrow, lunch in Germany and stimulus material in Fiji' syndrome.

Check that any samples or prototypes you might be using for the project don't require an export/import license. Once, on landing at Miami airport with a rather large prototype wind generator which I was going to research amongst the yachting market I was initially refused entry, the customs official was adamant that I needed an import licence; I was only permitted entry when I persuaded him that I would be taking it back home with me.

When leaving at the end of the project I was again stopped by a customs official who wanted to see my export licence!

Also, be careful if you are taking any unusual stimulus material. On one trip to the States to research the design and application of a wound dressing for the sacrum (the bit at the end of your spine) I had to take an accurate anatomical model with me; this consisted of a life size latex model of a human bottom neatly contained in a suitcase-sized box.

Naturally, customs wanted me to show them what was in the box and I had a very difficult time trying to explain why I had such a travelling companion. To make matters worse the model was made by an American company called Seymour Butts and if you don't believe me Google "Seymour Butts 900 anatomical model" but be warned it's quite gruesome!

Plan your schedule carefully

If you are travelling to several countries successively don't make your travel schedule too tight. Leave yourself plenty of time to get to the airport and leave plenty of time between flights.

It is not unusual for there to be traffic snarl-ups on the way to the airport and connecting flights do get delayed. The subsequent problem is not one of inconvenient travel but the knock-on effect having to cancel a group or trying to rearrange an appointment with a busy respondent.

Travel insurance

Ensure that you have adequate insurance suitable for the country to which you are travelling. If a serious accident happens in a first world country there will probably be local medical facilities capable of dealing with it but if it occurs in the back of beyond are you covered for an air ambulance to get you back to the UK?

Also, be aware that many domestic policies do not cover business travel and some stimulus material, especially prototypes, can be very expensive to replace.

Well those are some of the main points so sit on that suitcase to get it shut, good luck and bon voyage!

For more information please visit www.mccallum-layton.co.uk

9 September 2010