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QUALITATIVE METHODS IN INTERNATIONAL SALES RESEARCH: CROSS-CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Rajshekhar (Raj) G. Javalgi, Elad Granot, and Thomas G. Brashear Alejandro

As the global marketplace continues to change owing to the proliferation of global brands, changing international trade policies, and the rise of consolidated buyer power, the need for cross-cultural sales research continues to increase. International sales research differs from its domestic counterparts because its application to a multitude of cultural environments where comparable, relevant data are oftentimes nonexistent. In a similar vein, the roles, activities, and approaches to sales may vary across markets, which injects bias and confounds the results. Because of this complexity, conducting international sales research requires flexibility and creativity on the part of the researcher. The complexity of the international marketplace, the extreme differences that exist in different countries, and the unfamiliarity of foreign markets demand better information prior to launching costly international marketing and sales strategies. The focus of this paper is to develop a framework and discuss the role of qualitative methods in international sales research. More specifically, the paper focuses on the following key topics: the value of qualitative research, measurement equivalence in cross-cultural sales research, theory testing and building, and cross-cultural issues in conducting international sales research.

Rising foreign direct investment, international trade, and the growing significance of emerging markets are creating more demand for foreign products and services than ever before. In order to gain a foothold in these and other growing economies, it is important to establish sound sales practices by better understanding the social and cultural environment of the market. The objective of sound international sales research is to interpret market behavior and translate the perspective of key customers and accounts into actionable marketing strategies. A marketing and sales strategy defines who the company sells to, what the customer product and service offering is, and how the selling is done (Zoltners, Sinha, and Lorimer 2008).

Hill and Birdseye (1989) note that the diversity of the international marketplace affects multinational corporations' (MNCs) efforts such as to recruit salespeople in non-U.S. markets. They investigate the extent to which traditional selection criteria such as education, references, appearance, and interviews are outweighed by environmentally oriented factors such as ethnic group, social class, or religious affiliations. An increasing number of MNCs have recognized that international sales research is becoming more and more complex to conduct primarily because of country or regional differences in culture, values, and attitudes (Carter, Dixon, and Moncrief 2008). As DeCarlo, Rody, and DeCarlo (1999) point out, the application of one culture's sales management practices to another market with even slight differences in cultural environments may lead to inefficient and ineffective performance for organizations in those countries (Hunt 1981; Kanungo and Jaeger 1990). DeCarlo, Rody, and DeCarlo (1999) add that it may be beneficial to sales managers of international companies to be able to foresee and manage sales force effort and job satisfaction with a clearer understanding of potential cultural differences.

Cross-cultural research in international marketing, particularly involving international sales research that requires research participants to respond to scale-type questions, is challenging as well as time and resource intensive. Although quantitative methodologies have been commonly employed in cross-cultural research, these methods do not adequately provide an in-depth understanding of underlying end-user actions or phenomena under investigation. Furthermore, these methods are not adequate especially when the researchers are interested in developing a new theory or new research constructs within a field of inquiry. Therefore, in these and other similar situations, it may be more appropriate to use qualitative studies.

This paper emphasizes the importance conducting and interpreting qualitative sales research methods that are more

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suitable for investigating cultural differences and developing effective international sales strategies and tactics. Organizational issues that lend themselves to qualitative sales research methods include: Why do our customers buy from us? What is the context of our business and competitive environment? How do our customers acquire, use, and discard our products and services? What can be learned by observing how our customers interact with our sales force, products, and services? Do our products and services hold a deeper meaning to our customers? And, if so, do we fully understand it? Organizations need an in-depth understanding of customers and their beliefs and value systems in order to answer these types of questions. Critical to successful international sales research is the greater understanding of cross-cultural issues as these issues significantly influence the research process that involves reaching out to a variety of market segments, and collecting and interpreting data.

This paper has three goals: (1) to develop an integrative framework and discuss the role of qualitative methods in international sales research, (2) to discusses cross-cultural issues in conducting international sales research, and (3) to provide guidelines for management.

CHANGING DYNAMICS OF THE CULTURE OF THE SELLING WORLD

The nature of the selling environment is experiencing fundamental change. These changes have been brought about by a global environment, including changing customer expectations and fierce competition (Deeter-Schmelz and Ramsey 2010). As businesses are increasingly becoming global and enter foreign markets ever faster, international marketing research becomes vital. To develop and deploy successful international marketing strategies, organizations need to take into account cultural, economic, technological, and geographic differences between domestic and foreign markets. Such differences may suggest that people may react differently to various marketing efforts. The world of selling must adapt to the constantly changing world of buying (Ingram 2004).

The sales organization is affected by cultural practices and decisions originating not only within the company but also from forces external to the company (Avlonitis and Panagopoulos 2010; Zoltners, Sinha, and Lorimer 2008). These forces shape international marketing and sales strategy, which in turn affect the sales force activities of the company. Sales force knowledge helps define customer value propositions and influences company performance (Hill and Still 1990). The assessment of customer value propositions using measures such as customer satisfaction and brand loyalty are affected by customer attitudes and belief systems. The attitudes, beliefs, customs, laws, values, and traditions embedded in the culture of the salespeople influence the negotiation stage of the sales process (Parnell and Kedia 1996) as well as communication styles (Simintiras and Thomas 1998). As a result, salespeople hold a better knowledge of each other's idiosyncrasies and relational procedures as well as tend to be more understanding and effective when faced with a counterpart of similar cultural characteristics (Parnell and Kedia 1996).

The changing culture is discussed as the increased interconnectedness of local cultures as well as the development of new values and norms without a clear anchorage in any one territory (Walker 1996). According to Douglas and Craig (1997), the changing patterns of interpersonal and sociocultural communication, access to a vast amount information through information and communication technologies (e.g., the Internet), easier and faster travel, satellite communication links, and changing demographics of the world population have generated increasingly complex behaviors of people in the global marketplace.

When marketing products and services internationally, MNCs face enormous challenges. Chonko, Tanner, and Smith (1991), for example, mention five main challenges a sales organization faces in planning international sales research: (1) understanding similarities across countries in order to define a target market; (2) a lack of accurate secondary information; (3) the high costs of conducting international research, particularly when primary data is desired; (4) coordinating marketing research across countries, which also involves losing control of not only the research process, but the translations as well; and (5) establishing comparability and equivalence in marketing research instruments (Jeannet and Hennessey 1988).

Shepherd and Rentz (1990) note that sales force researchers have focused on salespersons' overt behavior with little emphasis on the mental processes that underlie these outward manifestations. An understanding of these mental processes will surely enhance the understanding of the moderating role of culture in explaining differences in relationships between countries. Doing this by using global models is important for a number of reasons (Agarwal 1993; Hunt 1981). As DeCarlo, Rody, and DeCarlo (1999) point out, the application of one culture's management practices to another market with even slight differences in cultural environments may lead to inefficient and ineffective performance for organizations in those countries (Hunt 1981; Kanungo and Jaeger 1990). DeCarlo, Rody, and DeCarlo (1999) add that it may be beneficial to sales managers of international companies to be able to foresee and manage sales force effort and job satisfaction with a clearer understanding of potential cultural differences.

In regard to information gathering, researchers make the following assumptions inferred from various sources (e.g., Cavusgil 1985; Chonko, Tanner, and Smith 1991; Still 1981): (1) in a foreign country, accurate and timely market information is even more important than in domestic mar-

keting because organizations that are committed to growing their international markets require information about target customers, markets, and competitors in order to devise effective sales strategies, and (2) international marketing research is often more difficult to perform in foreign countries. As a result, companies try to find acceptable alternatives to this process. Beverland (2001) adds that because of its boundary role, the sales force of an MNC has conventionally been a fundamental link between the firm and its customers (Morris, Avila, and Teeple 1990). In addition, salespeople are a key value-adding link for customers (Luthy 2000), serving as a way to identify new opportunities (Gordon et al. 1997), influencing future purchase intentions (Boles et al. 2000; Macintosh and Lockshin 1997), and generating referrals (Boles, Barksdale, and Johnson 1997).

CROSS-CULTURAL SALES RESEARCH: A FRAMEWORK

Cross-Cultural Sales Research: The Relevance of Qualitative Methods

International sales research is the method by which organizations learn about foreign customers' relevant issues in order to guide organizational strategies and tactics. In conducting cross-cultural sales research, different methods can be used depending on the sales research objectives, goals, and the nature of the data needed from the marketplace. As shown in Figure 1, research methods can be classified into two categories: qualitative and quantitative methods. A better understanding of the qualitative and quantitative paradigms will help to identify their roles in conducting cross-cultural sales research. Quantitative methods are structured methods that seek to quantify the data using statistical techniques. These techniques cover the ways respondents are selected from the study population, the standardized research instrument they receive, and the statistical methods used to test predetermined hypotheses regarding the relationships between specific research variables of interest. Quantitative research methods are designed to ensure objectivity, generalizability, and reliability, and results are expected to be replicable no matter who conducts the research.

Qualitative methods, on the other hand, are unstructured methods that seek to provide insights and understanding of the problem at hand (Malhotra 2007). These methods are designed to help researchers better understand the meanings study participants assign to phenomena and situations and to explain the mental processes underlying behaviors. Hypotheses are generated during data collection and analysis, and measurement tends to be highly subjective. In the qualitative paradigm, the researcher is engaged in the data collection process, and results may vary greatly depending on who conducts the research. Qualitative research methods come with different purposes and structures. A brief discussion of methods such as ethnographic research, case study research, focus groups, in-depth interviews, and observational research is presented below as these methods are relevant to cross-cultural research (e.g., Beverland and Lindgreen 2010; Malhotra 2007; Piekkari, Plakoyiannaki, and Welch 2010).

Case study research is a very useful method as it allows expanding and generalizing theories by combining the existing theoretical knowledge with new empirical insights (Yin 2003). This is especially important in studying topics that have not attracted significant previous sales research attention. The application of this method can be useful for transcending the local boundaries of the investigated cases, capturing new market reality, and developing new, testable, and empirically valid theoretical and practical insights (Eisenhardt 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007; Ghauri 2004).

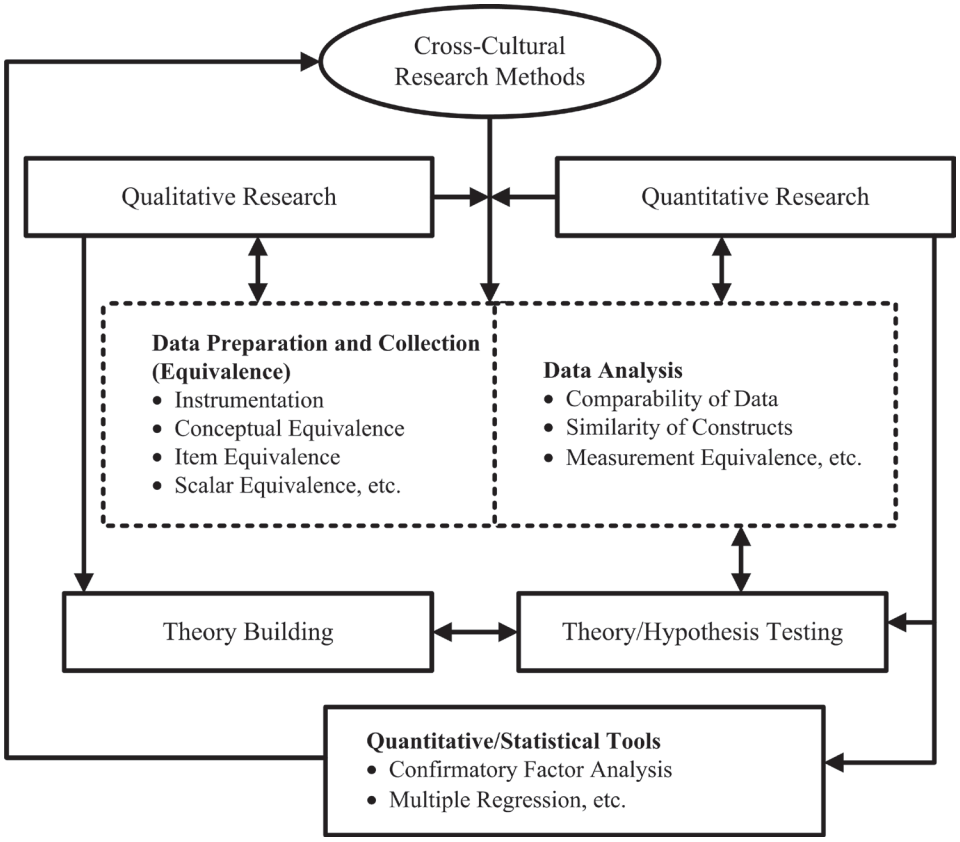
Among the qualitative research methods, focus groups are commonly employed in international business. In a typical focus group, a moderator interviews several people at a time, usually in groups of 6 to 12. A skilled moderator leads the discussion, follows up with more questions, and keeps the group discussion focused. In this format, group discussions stimulate dynamic conversations about topics of interests, which lead to new discoveries and new directions. Depending on the respondent's cultural background in a given country and research topic, focus group sessions last one to two hours. The data collected are often culturally rich, insightful, and meaningful.

In-depth interviews differ from focus groups in that a moderator interviews one person at a time and explores the topic of interest in-depth. In this method, a researcher can interview customers, product users, experts, and company executives. Depending on sales objectives and goals, the number of in-depth interviews varies.

Another important qualitative research technique that is gaining attention among international sales researchers and practitioners is ethnographic research (Swan, McInnis-Bowers, and Trawick 1996). It is an inductive method of inquiry, where sales researchers try to understand how culture shapes perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and opinions about products and services. Ethnography has deepened the understanding of customer purchase behavior and has great potential for sales force research. In this method, a researcher gains a deep familiarity with the topic of interest by personal participation or interacting with customers. The researcher records what happens while being actively engaged in the setting (Swan, McInnis-Bowers, and Trawick 1996). Because it is very time consuming, this method is expensive and requires ethnographers to be trained and experienced in foreign cultures.

Observational techniques also share similarities with the ethnographic approach that anthropologists use in studying a culture, although they typically spend extended periods

Figure 1
A Framework for Cross-Cultural Research



of time in the field. A major strength of using observational techniques, especially those based on grounded theory, is that they can capture unexpected insights, which other methods can miss. The researcher does not define categories of data before going out into the field but is intentionally open to "what's there." The theory emerges from existing data "on the ground" rather than allowing predefined theory to influence the data collection.

Finally, another qualitative research method used in international business is phenomenology. Essentially, it seeks to probe complex issues and the "lived experiences" of the individuals who are being investigated (Sanders 1982). This technique may be useful in terms of theory building based on customer experiences, whether these may be product usage or purchase decision making (Goulding 2005).

A brief summary and potential application of the methods are presented in Table 1.

In summary, through qualitative research methods, international sales researchers can produce data, rich in detail, about observed phenomena, and gain in-depth knowledge about the context and history of the phenomena in question. The important purposes of qualitative marketing research are discussed in the marketing and international business literature (e.g., Polit and Hungler 1995, Sinkovics, Penz, and Ghauri 2005a, 2005b; Zimmerman and Szenberg 2000), and include hypothesis generation, theory development, incomplete information, data abundance, seeking answers, and emergence of new global market segments.

Hypothesis Generation

A researcher using qualitative techniques often has no explicit a priori hypotheses. The collection of in-depth information about some phenomenon may indeed lead to the formulation of a set of hypotheses that could be subsequently tested using quantitative techniques.

Theory Development

International sales managers often collect data from multiple countries and analyze the data with the goal of understanding new insights into the phenomena and theory development. Using field research for data collection, for example, researchers build theory by observing and analyzing information from field interviews rather than investigating preconceived hypotheses about particular phenomena.

Table 1
Role of Qualitative Methods in International Sales Research

Method	Description/Purpose	Applications
Case Study	An intensive study of a specific unit, individual, or context. Investigates a contemporary phenomenon in real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.	Using an e-collaborative network to evaluate communications between sales force members (Hollenbeck et al. 2009). Dominance of case research in qualitative industrial marketing research (Piekkari, Plakoyiannaki, and Welch 2010). "Best practice" procedures of sales units across multiple markets. Bridge relevance gap between research and practice (Visconti 2009). Building theory (Woodside and Wilson 2003).
In-Depth Interviewing	Direct interaction between the researcher and a single participant. Collecting data on individuals' personal histories, perspectives, and experiences, particularly when sensitive topics are being explored.	Explore the impact of culture on salespeople's negotiating styles (Chaisrakeo and Speece 2004). Insight into senior sales management and policy-making participants. Understanding universal motives underlying specific interactions (Wagner, Lukassen, and Mahlendorf 2010).
Focus Groups	Direct interaction between the researcher and multiple participants regarding a specific issue. Eliciting data on the cultural norms of a group and generating broad overviews of issues of concern to the cultural groups or subgroups represented.	Examined groups of sales managers and executives to determine the success factors in building a sales organization (Marshall, Goebel, and Moncrief 2003). Understanding sales force cultural and social dynamics. Useful in cross-cultural situations requiring exploration and definition of complex ideas and constructs, where a sales researcher is needed to determine themes and concerns important to particular target markets (Lawrence and Berger 1999). Information generated from focus groups is a basis for developing an international sales research instrument.
Observation	The researcher is watching (usually unobserved) rather than taking part. Collecting data on naturally occurring behaviors in their usual contexts.	Immersion into successful sales associates environments, followed by extensive observations of activities and behavior, followed by extensive interviews with sales staff and customers (Beatty et al. 1996). Revealing behavior patterns that participants are not aware of. Develop a deeper understanding of product and service issues, sales practice and problems, and customers in different cultures. Examine previously held assumptions in natural settings and contexts. Gain access to information that respondents may not feel comfortable to talk about in interviews or other research situations.
Ethnography	Seeks to place phenomena studied in the social and cultural context. Investigates cultures by collecting and describing data intended to help in the development of theory.	Studying previously overlooked topics, exploring new concepts and selling processes, and gaining a deeper understanding of other's views (Swan, McInnis-Bowers, and Trawick 1996). Understanding change in sales organizations and building theory in sales management (Hurley 1998). Theory-building exploratory studies and understanding change in sales organizations (Hurley 1998). Helps to understand how culture shapes the respondent's perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs about products and services. Broaden the theoretical thrust of sales research beyond the psychological and individualistic view of human behavior that currently guides such research.
Phenomenology	The study of phenomena. Describes the "subjective reality" of an event, as perceived by the study population.	Phenomenology provides an empirically based and methodologically rigorous understanding of phenomena (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). Understanding specific phenomena in single or multiple sales organizations.

Incomplete Information

When information is incomplete regarding target markets and products and services, in-depth interviewing or participant observation are good ways to learn more about them. Questioning that elicits insight that is more fundamental and allows a free flow of communication often provides organizations with the ability to enhance or customize international sales strategies.

Data Abundance

Researchers and practitioners alike are witnessing an explosive growth of information ranging from published data to electronic data on most countries and markets. In spite of technological advancements in areas such as data mining, neural networks, database management techniques, and other computer-aided analysis, the challenges to make sense of the data in a meaningful way is mind-boggling. One way to deal with such challenges is to use qualitative research methods to learn what is behind all the trends and to find innovative ways to deal with the huge quantity of information (e.g., Sinkovics, Penz, and Ghauri 2005a, 2005b).

Seeking Answers

In conducting cross-cultural research, highly structured quantitative methods do not always yield the rich and insightful findings needed to develop sound sales strategies. Increasingly, researchers are turning to qualitative methods after they experience quantitative techniques that cannot adequately provide answers to their problems (e.g., Sinkovics, Penz, and Ghauri 2005a, 2005b).

Emergence of New Global Market Segments

New market segments are emerging because of globalization and the rising affluence in developing countries such as India and China. In these and other emerging markets, customers' buying habits, preferences, and openness to foreign products are creating a need to continually improve and update databases. When new customer segments emerge, opportunities for new technologies open up, creating new selling possibilities. Firsthand, qualitative methods provide us with the tools to learn more about these new segments and thereby target these segments with the right mix of products and services.

Despite the potential benefits of qualitative research, the applications of the qualitative methods to the international marketing/sales research have been neglected topics (e.g., Taylor and Bogdan 1998; Welch et al. 2002). International sales research harbors numerous intricacies such as appreciating a market's cultural norms, the various determinants of marketing policies, the target audiences' purchasing behaviors, and the reliability of data collection methods.

When conducting qualitative sales research, it is important to consider two closely related concepts: measurement equivalence and bias (Sinkovics, Penz, and Ghauri 2005a). Next, we focus on the comparability of data and equivalence. A better understanding of data collection, the comparability of data, and equivalence in cross-cultural sales research is important as this lays the foundation for theory building and testing (see Figure 1).

Data Equivalence, Bias, and Comparability: Significance to Cross-Cultural, Qualitative Research

Measurements are considered equivalent when they are unbiased. A bias occurs by the presence of factors that challenge the validity of cross-cultural comparisons. Biases can be introduced by translating stimulus questions incorrectly and through the improper use of contextual explanations that might create fundamentally different statements by respondents (Sinkovics, Penz, and Ghauri 2005a). When bias is absent and equivalent measures are present, cross-cultural comparisons are meaningful (Sinkovics, Penz, and Ghauri 2005a). Data equivalence refers to the degree to which the key components of a research design have the same meaning, and can be employed in the same way, in different cultural situations (Hult et al. 2008). Respondents from different countries are ingrained in different cultural values, attitudes, and traits. Consequently, their response patterns to inquiries, opinions, expressions, and attitudes toward specific concepts and constructs vary dramatically. Therefore, the equivalence and comparability of data collected across countries is viewed as a critical issue (Craig and Douglas 2000; Singh 1995).

Craig and Douglas define equivalence as "data that have, as far as possible, the same meaning or interpretation, and the same level of accuracy, precision of measurement, or reliability in all countries and cultures" (2000, p. 141). Because the methodological complexities of conducting research across cultures appear challenging, attention needs to be paid to ensure comparability and equivalence in international qualitative research. Measurement equivalence, or invariance, refers to "whether or not, under different conditions of observing and studying phenomena, measurement operations yield measures of the same attribute" (Horn and McArdle 1992, p. 117). As noted by Sharma and Weathers (2003), if a scale's items vary across countries, the use of such scales for cross-national research is problematic. Consequently, without evidence supporting measurement invariance, "conclusions based on that scale are at best ambiguous and at worst erroneous" (Steenkamp and Baumgartner 1998, p. 78).

Procedures for gathering, preparing, analyzing, and interpreting qualitative data are important in international sales research, especially involving the cultural comparability of multiple countries. Researchers suggest that cross-cultural comparability can be achieved by establishing comparability across cultures on six key categories of equivalence (Craig and Douglas 2000; Hui and Triandis 1985; Singh 1995). The six categories of equivalence are as follows: (1) *instrument equivalence,* which emphasizes that the instrument used measures the same phenomenon uniformly across different cultures/countries (Choudhry 1986; Dadzie et al. 2002; Smith and Reynolds 2001); (2) *conceptual or functional equivalence,* which is concerned with whether the concepts or behaviors investigated have the same role or function in all cultures under investigation; (3) *item equivalence,* which implies that each item of an instrument should mean the same thing across cultures (Hui and Triandis 1985; Malhotra 2007); (4) *scalar equivalence,* which requires that the response (e.g., rating or scores) to a given scale is equivalent or has the same meaning and interpretation across countries and cultures; (5) *construct equivalence,* which refers to the dimensions or constructs being studied having the same meaning across national cultures and contexts; and (6) *measurement unit equivalence,* also referred to as *metric equivalence* (Vandenberg and Lance 2000), which refers to the situation where the unit of measurement is equal across cultures under investigation, but where the origin of measurement scales may be different.

Building on Churchill's (1995) work on the stages of the empirical research process, Salzberger, Sinkovics, and Schlegelmilch (1999) looked specifically into the equivalence aspect and discussed the following four stages: problem definition, data collection, data preparation, and data analysis. It is suggested that within each of these stages, equivalence issues are important and need to be addressed accordingly in order to ensure comparability, reliable, and validity of the results (Sinkovics, Penz, and Ghauri 2005a). Researchers employing quantitative methods to test the theory and hypotheses devote much of their attention to issues such as reliability and validity. However, researchers argue that the traditional concepts of reliability and validity are grounded on a different paradigmatic view and therefore not directly applicable to qualitative research (Sinkovics, Penz, and Ghauri 2005a). Researchers have proposed using criteria such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability to the practice of undertaking qualitative research (see Ghauri 2004; Sinkovics, Penz, and Ghauri 2005a). Some researchers argue that the dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative research is not exhaustive, whereas others, recognizing the merits of both methods, suggest the combination of both methods for collecting and analyzing data (Yeganeh, Su, and Chrysostome 2004).

Cross-Cultural Sales Research: Theory Building Versus Theory Testing

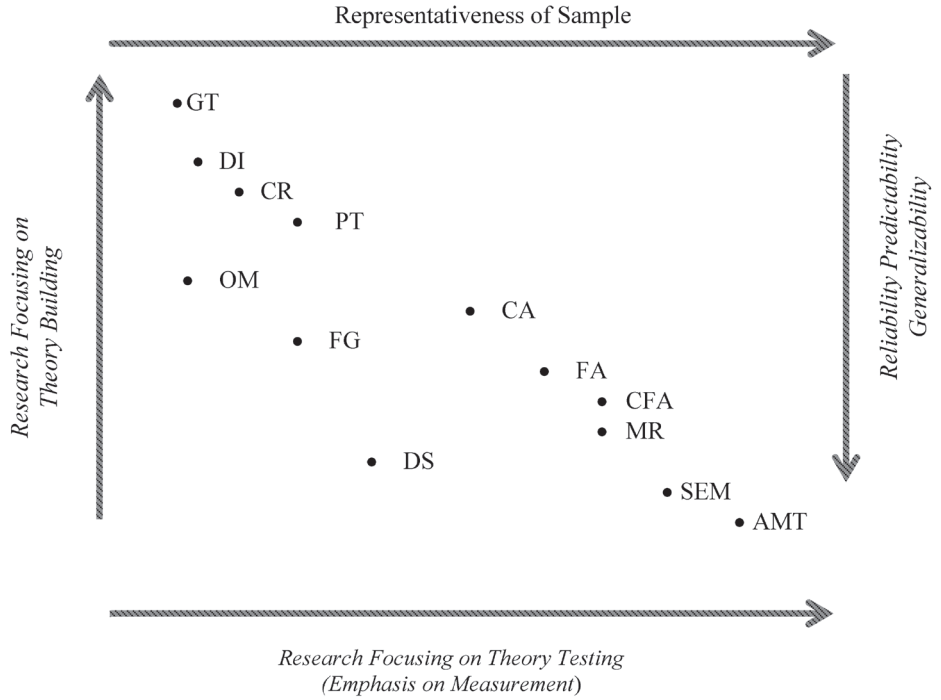
MNCs are constantly introducing new products and services in the global marketplace. Global customers are becoming increasingly sophisticated and are demanding better quality and better prices. It is a continually growing challenge for international companies to develop a model that explains market share and performance. In a constantly changing global environment, existing international marketing/business models do not adequately explain the reality of the marketplace. Therefore, in the early stage of the research process, qualitative research methodologies are very helpful in learning more about customer's attitudes and behavior in different cultures.

Most qualitative research operates within three paradigms: ontology, epistemology, and methodology (Healy and Perry 2000; Yeganeh, Su, and Chrysostome 2004). Ontology is the reality that the researcher investigates, epistemology is the relationship between that reality and the researcher, and methodology is the technique employed by the researcher to investigate that reality (Healy and Perry 2000). Most cross-cultural research is based on a realistic perspective of ontological and epistemological levels. Ontological realism assumes there is an external reality, which is independent of the cognitive structures of human investigators. Epistemological realism, on the other hand, implies that the external reality is cognitively accessible to researchers (Johnson and Duberley 2000). The epistemological concepts influence the research process in that they allow researchers to develop questions, design the study, and adopt appropriate research designs (Yeganeh, Su, and Chrysostome 2004). Epistemological orientations provide researchers with the guiding procedures upon which the researchers may base their methodologies, which can be used for theory building and theory testing.

Theory plays a different role in qualitative and quantitative research. In quantitative research, theory is taken into consideration early in the research design phase to develop research hypotheses and to select appropriate measurements and a sampling frame. However, the role of theory in qualitative studies comes at a much later stage, if at all. In qualitative research, the data are collected and interpreted with little, if any, consideration of the existing theory and measurement issues. In cross-cultural research, insights into theory development and testing of measurement instruments emerge from qualitative studies (Borrego, Douglas, and Amelink 2009).

Theory is defined as an "explained set of conceptual relationships; 'good' theory is conceptually defined as a fully explained set of conceptual relationships that can be used for empirical tests" (Wacker 2003, p. 631). Good theory comes with additional features that include generalizability and internal consistency (Wacker 2003). The grounded theory

Figure 2
A Map of Qualitative Research Methods Based on Theory Testing and Theory Building



Notes: AMT = advanced multivariate techniques; CA = conjoint analyses; CFA = confirmatory factor analysis; CR = case study research; DI = depth interviews; DS = descriptive statistics; FA = factor analyses; FG = focus groups; GT = grounded theory; MR = multiple regression; OM = observational methods; PT = projective techniques; SEM = structural equation modeling.

approach, developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), is able to generate theory but to ground that theory in data that empirically and meaningfully explains the data. Therefore, the grounded theory appears to be a particularly suitable approach for building theory when the topic at hand is little researched and no theoretical bases has been fully developed (Goulding 2002, 2005). In the cross-cultural context, international sales warrants more research attention as more and more MNCs enter new markets and seek to increase their global market share for their products and services.

Sinkovics, Penz, and Ghauri note the following research purpose for which qualitative studies are very useful: "identifying unanticipated phenomena and influences and generating new 'grounded' theories about the latter" (2005a, p. 11). Figure 2 presents methodologies ranging from theory building to theory testing. In the top left corner of Figure 2 is the grounded theory methodology, where the researcher is interested in building theory using qualitative methods such as field research and case study research (Piekkari, Plakoyiannaki, and Welch 2010). For example, one of the key benefits of field research is the comprehensiveness of perspective it gives to the field researcher. Field research provides rich information on the topics for which attitudes and behaviors can be best understood within a natural setting (Gummesson 2000). When the researcher is interested in gaining insights into the problems to be studied in cultural settings, he or she employs qualitative research methodologies that are context dependent and permit an interactive protocol. Cross-cultural researchers view the findings generated by qualitative research methodologies as very meaningful, valuable, and insightful, although the methods lack sample representativeness and generalizability of the findings.

When researchers place emphasis on testing relationships among the theoretical constructs, advanced quantitative techniques (e.g., regression, structural equation modeling) are used. Healy and Perry (2000) note that even quantitative methodologies such as multiple regression and structural equation modeling are also within the realism paradigm. This is because these and other techniques noted in Figure 2 offer several attractive features, including modeling theoretical constructs/dimensions with complex relationships and explicitly allowing multi-item scales and some measurement error in its "unobservable" constructs (Healy and Perry 2000). In testing theory, measurement invariance can be assessed using methods such as confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) (e.g., Singh 1995; Steenkamp and Baumgartner 1998), item response theory

(IRT) (see Singh 1995), and generalizability theory (e.g., Sharma and Weathers 2003). CFA methods are designed to incorporate multiple latent constructs in an examination of measurement equivalence, whereas IRT methods generally are meant for single-factor examination. Generalizability theory, as discussed by Sharma and Weathers (2003), can be used to determine the number of items and subjects required to generalize the scale across countries.

CROSS-CULTURAL ISSUES IN INTERNATIONAL SALES RESEARCH

Emic Versus Etic Issues

International marketers are very aware that culture shapes people's behavior and dictates the types of products that are appropriate for foreign markets. However, despite this widespread belief, relatively little research concerning customer behavior and marketing has examined the interaction of customer behavior and culture (Luna and Gupta 2001). Researchers (e.g., Maheswaran and Shavitt 2000) discuss several issues related to conducting cross-cultural research, including emic versus etic approaches to research. Researchers who employ an etic approach to their research are generally interested in comparing two or more cultures. However, emic approaches to culture do not intend to directly compare two or more cultures (Luna and Gupta 2001). The choice of emic versus etic approaches to cross-cultural sales research depends on several important research questions, including purpose of the research study and measurement equivalence.

In cross-cultural sales research, searching for variables and constructs that are common across two or more cultures is typical. This knowledge is important to international sales researchers in devising international marketing strategies. While the etic approach enables better comparisons across cultures using statistical tools (e.g., CFA) allowing generalizability by assuming that there are some shared frames or values across national cultures, it may sacrifice conceptual equivalence and research accuracy. If an emic approach, on the other hand, is employed, a more thorough description of the construct within one culture is obtained. However, the ability to make cross-cultural comparisons is hindered because the constructs are developed with one specific culture or context in mind (Yeganeh, Su, and Chrysostome 2004). Consistent with this view, others also discuss the difficult challenge between theoretical frameworks that can be generalized across cultures versus the need to capture unique cultural insights from cross-cultural studies (e.g., Craig and Douglas 2000; Maheswaran and Shavitt 2000). From an international sales managers perspective, the two definitions of culture, emic and etic, can be viewed as two sides of the same coin, and by utilizing both methods, international marketers can gain a more complete understanding of the cultures interest (Luna and Gupta 2001).

Interpretation of Qualitative Research Data

In conducting cross-cultural sales research, interpretation of qualitative research methods is not always straightforward. The use of focus groups, for example, in multicountry research poses a number of problems. These include comparability of data, multilingual moderator availability, and the interpretation of respondent data. The interpretation and analysis of focus group data are quite subjective in character and require considerable skill and experience. Moderators and analysts are required to understand verbal as well as nonverbal cues such as voice intonation, gestures, and expressions used in other countries and cultures. Incorrect assumptions made at the critical analysis level will result in erroneous findings and lead to off-target strategic recommendations.

Trained moderators who are familiar with both the appropriate language as well as the patterns of social interaction in various countries and cultures are relatively rare. This can pose serious problems in developing countries in Eastern Europe or Asia, particularly China, where there is no established research tradition or infrastructure. These problems may require the research organization to train local interviewers to conduct a given project (Craig and Douglas 2000).

The extent to which interpretation and reporting is centralized varies according to the research organization. Some international research organizations centralize transcripts, audiotapes, and videotapes of groups and conduct interpretation and analysis centrally. This typically requires the availability of bilingual research executives at the head office of the research firm. Other firms rely on local interpretation and analysis by moderators, and then integrate these findings into a common report. The major consideration in interpretation is to reduce the extent to which findings reflect variations in research techniques and traditions rather than true behavior differences that will be meaningful from a strategic marketing and management perspective.

Additional challenges include cultural, language, time zones, and holidays. Language and nonverbal communication play a critical role in interpreting qualitative research results. Because languages vary drastically from country to country, international sales managers must be aware of the role language has on thought and behavior patterns of customers. North American cultures with strong oral traditions make focus groups or in-depth interview approaches more feasible. But other cultures, notably those in Asia, are well known for their long tradition of discouraging public disagreement or differences of opinion. Time zones and cultural holidays make it more problematic to conduct any type of business in foreign markets, and international sales research is no exception.

Dimensionalization of Culture

Many cross-cultural researchers have developed several dimensions to study and compare different cultures. Although dimensionalization is a convenient way to study cultures across borders, it simplifies a complex, intricate concept and diminishes the research accuracy (Tayeb 2001). The danger here is that by focusing on a few dimensions, cross-cultural studies neglect the contexts of the cultures within which research studies have been conducted. Further, a few dimensions used to examine the cultural differences of multiple countries do not fully explain all the dynamics of the culture (Tayeb 2001). One of the most well known discussions of culture is Hofstede's (1997, 2001) five-dimensional structure, which includes individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, and long-term orientation. Hofstede's impressive work on the dimensions of culture can be considered as an etic approach to the study of cultural values (Luna and Gupta 2001).

No doubt, Hofstede's (2001) structure provides the basis for a wide array of considerations in conducting qualitative marketing research in the international setting. Given the nature of personal communication in qualitative research techniques, interviewers must be acutely aware of these cultural differences. For example, high-context, collectivist, relationship-oriented cultures such as Japan will require interviewers with different sensitivities compared with interviewers operating in low-context, individualistic, achievement-oriented Western cultures. In the Korean culture, it is considered disrespectful to exchange eye contact with strangers, whereas among North Americans, it is typical for speakers to provide lengthy intervals in order to allow respondents to answer questions (Nevid and Sta. Maria 1999). International market researchers clearly need to consider these differences to assure project success.

Interestingly, among the five dimensions developed by Hofstede, the constructs of individualism and collectivism represent the most broadly applied dimensions of cultural variability for cross-cultural research (Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey 1998; Maheswaran and Shavitt 2000). In addition to individualism versus collectivism, other cultural dimensions warrant attention and empirical investigation. Attention to a broader set of cultural dimensions and new dimensions that explain various market segments' decision processes will not only enrich cross-cultural studies, but also offer deeper insights into our understanding of cultural differences and their implications for business practices.

Borrowed Scales for Conducting International Sales Research

Construct bias is likely to occur if the construct being studied varies across cultures or if the operationalization does not fit within the cultural perspective (Herk, Poortinga, and Verhallen 2005). Cross-cultural differences in the meaning of concepts or constructs being examined can lead to erroneous interpretations and conclusions. Therefore, particular attention needs to be paid to construct equivalence to make sure that the dimensions or constructs being examined are equivalent across cultures, especially where theoretical constructs and related measurement instruments have been developed in a specific county and under a specific cultural setting (Craig and Douglas 2000).

It is recognized that many commonly used scales in marketing and sales have been developed in the United States. An example of this is the international application of Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry's (1988) SERVQUAL scale—a multi-item scale for measuring service quality dimensions of customers. To test the service quality dimensions in Taiwan, Imrie, Cadogan, and McNaughton (2002) conducted a field study. Their conclusion was that the SERVQUAL model did not capture the breadth of criteria utilized by Taiwanese respondents. Imrie, Cadogan, and McNaughton caution marketing managers from globally applying the SERVQUAL measurement instrument. Therefore, a scale developed and validated in one country or context may not be directly used in another country or context that differs with regard to certain characteristics that may influence the construct under study (Douglas and Nijssen 2003).

Reaching Senior Sales Executives as Informants

Many cross-cultural researchers select university students as the proxies of their respective national cultures because students can be conveniently located and reached. In reality, cross-cultural studies—especially in sales research—usually require senior executives to respond to the research instrument, but researchers tend to use university students because of the difficulty in reaching such executives. According to Welch et al. (2002), corporate elites, defined as senior or middle management executives within an industry and with international experience, high status, and visibility, and possessing a broad network of relationships within and outside their organizations, tend to affect the interview situation and the quality of the data.

Evidence suggests that the process for interviewing elites is much different from interacting with nonelites. Also, in a collectivistic culture, elites, who are generally difficult to reach (Harzing 1997), exercise great power and influence in making important international sales decisions. Welch et al. (2002) argue that the challenge of reaching corporate elites as informants in qualitative international market and sales research has received little scholarly attention, although most researchers are likely to interact with elite interviewees at some stage of their research projects. An understanding of senior sales executives as informants in qualitative studies is

important when seeking to improve the data-gathering tasks in international business settings.

The dialogue between an international sales researcher and an elite interviewee has profound implications not only for theory building and testing of the reliability and validity of research findings but also for managerial implications. Such issues are generally not found in most handbooks on qualitative research. Generally speaking, answers to international sales issues, concerns, and clarifications require answers from a senior person representing, for instance, international sales management or headquarters. There is a prevailing view that the higher the status of the company informant being interviewed, the greater the reliability and validity of the data. It has been pointed out that data collection and analysis may be distorted, misleading, and incomplete if researchers find themselves selective and obtain only partial access to a company (e.g., Welch et al. 2002, p. 626).

SUMMARY AND MANAGEMENT GUIDELINES

Without doubt, the globalization of businesses and economic interdependence of nations has meant that international marketing and sales research is becoming more important and challenging. As the demand for global products and services increases, the need for cross-cultural sales research will continue to increase. International sales research differs from its domestic counterpart because its application to a multitude of cross-cultural environments where comparable, relevant data are often nonexistent. Because of this complexity, conducting international sales research requires flexibility and creativity on the part of the researcher. The complexity of the international marketplace, the extreme differences that exist in different countries, and the unfamiliarity of foreign markets demand better information prior to launching costly international marketing and sales strategies.

Customer expectations differ significantly by geographic, economic, and social milieu. Therefore, international sales managers need to hire and train their salespeople based on customers' cultural values and norms rather than the salespeople's own expectations. Failure to do so can be expensive and time consuming for firms that constantly replace sales personnel and attempt to repair damaged relationships. As organizations continue to pursue more global customers for their products and services, the need for conducting international sales-oriented market research is becomes increasingly important. In the context of cross-cultural research, qualitative market research plays an important role as its offers an in-depth understanding of the market dynamics and unique applications and implications for cross-cultural sales research.

Quantitative methods have been popularly used for scientific research, where research hypotheses are developed based on existing theory and existing research constructs, and the results are generalized to a larger population. However, not all cross-cultural sales studies fit this approach. Therefore, as discussed in this paper, qualitative research methods offer several benefits for international sales researchers, including generating greater insights into research problems that are generally unstructured in nature. This allows international sales researchers to learn more about how end users in different countries make buying decisions, and how their beliefs and value systems affect their consumption of products and services. By directly interacting with foreign markets by employing research methods such as field studies, observational methods, and focus groups, salespeople can learn more about their target markets. Using qualitative research approaches to sales research, international sales researchers can get a better understanding of phenomena, theoretical constructs, and ideas. After completing a cross-cultural qualitative research study, international sales researchers can then take the next step, which may be empirical research.

Yammarino (1997) proposed a multilevel approach that is useful in analyzing models of sales management. DeCarlo, Rody, and DeCarlo's (1999) study utilizes Yammarino's (1997) group approach to investigate differences between (1) salesperson perceptions of typical manager behaviors and the effects of those perceptions on job satisfaction and effort, and (2) countries with different cultures. DeCarlo, Rody, and DeCarlo concluded that "incorporating culture as a moderating factor into global models of management practices allows easier prediction of expected behaviors in other cultures than examining many idiosyncratic models" (1999, p. 2).

Knowing how to conduct business in foreign markets and understanding the needs of global segments are essential to succeed in the borderless world. Prior to entering foreign markets, global organizations need accurate information concerning potential market segments, marketing mix options, and potential positioning strategies. Information regarding competitors is also critically needed by global sales organizations. Qualitative marketing research is uniquely qualified to provide the depth of information required by today's successful MNCs.

To determine who will use the product and to identify all possible characteristics of users, a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the foreign marketplace is critical. In the global marketplace, sales research becomes more critical since many cultures (e.g., Mexico, Japan, India, and China) require that substantial time be spent getting to know customers' needs and wants before selling the product. The most important and basic step is listening to foreign customers and their underlying motivations to use products and services. Listening allows the salesperson to improve marketing effectiveness by becoming a fundamental market research tool for the selling organization. The information obtained by the salesperson

is transmitted back to the home office and becomes a good source of data for strategic decisions.

In brief, qualitative research has become an essential tool as it provides insights into the meaning and context of buying/purchasing, usage/consumption, and performance characteristics (Sinkovics, Penz, and Ghauri 2005a). Foreign market knowledge obtained through international sales research helps to improve the overall sales ability of an organization. In order to be effective in selling in a foreign market, an organization's sales team must be knowledgeable and self-confident in their selling approach. The insight gained from qualitative research provides more depth of customer insights, which are necessary to build and test theories using quantitative methods. Therefore, international sales research helps organizations to develop meaningful international sales strategies.

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