

Towards a better understanding of market research in Africa

Since opening its Africa division, Freshly Ground Insights (FGI) has teamed up with the Research Bureau International (RBI) to gain additional expertise within the African markets. RBI group CE Tendai Mhizha shares some of her research on the challenges facing research in Africa.

FGI has already partnered with RBI on a number of research projects in Africa and aims to bring the latest technology, the most proven methodologies and best research expertise in Africa to business.

The challenges facing research in Africa

Less than a quarter of African countries have access to regular and robust audience media survey information. African countries lacking in research resources are those in Central and West Africa, including DRC, Equatorial Guinea, Sierra Leone and Rwanda.

This can be attributed to the fact that multinationals are not pushing for research; government politics; and low levels of consumerism and branding. Consumers in these countries buy more on commodities as they do not have as much disposable income.

Tendai explains that "it's not about the wealth of the nation, but the distribution of wealth". Interestingly enough, the expected real gross domestic product (GDP) for 2012, in the abovementioned countries where research is lacking, is higher than South Africa (4.3%). The expected real GDP for DRC is 6.4%, Equatorial Guinea is 7.5%, Sierra Leone is 6.0% and Rwanda is 7.0%.

There are certain challenges with respect to conducting research in Africa. Accessibility is an issue, with many rural and deep rural areas being difficult to reach, especially in the rainy season as many of the roads are not well maintained. This requires the acquisition of heavy duty vehicles in order to access outlying areas, which can be costly.

Lack of spacial data

The lack of spacial data (in terms of mapping) can also pose a challenge - making it difficult to plan and coordinate research projects. In countries such as Angola, hiring suitably qualified and experienced interviewers at a reasonable price poses a major challenge. Language barriers exist in many countries so translation and translator costs also need to be budgeted for.

Some of the general challenges that African countries face include: no internet access; regular electricity cuts; and poor quality reception in terms of mobile networks.

Tendai explains that very few people have a landline (even the wealthiest) and conducting interviews telephonically is not an option in Africa. The banking system is also a problem and this makes projects on the ground more difficult to manage, as interviewers require subsistence allowances plus payment by cash.

How to bring quality insights from the African markets

Although challenges are presented from an infrastructural perspective, there are technological advancements that assist in the research process. The use of mobile phones, GPS mapping information, and scanning mechanisms for data processing are all technologies that are slowly being adopted in Africa for research purposes.

African countries are vastly different from one another in terms of culture but there are also some similarities. Much like SA, there are rural, urban and peri-urban populations. African countries generally, however, have much larger rural population and their urban areas are very unstructured, according to Tendai.

Understanding the respondents

Tendai also explains that one needs to be cognisant of one's approach when conducting research in African countries. It is not like South Africa where one can approach respondents in a busy shopping centre, for example, and expect them to engage with the researcher. It is important to take some time to get to know the respondent first before the interview.

Tendai clarifies that it's about respect and engagement. This affects how you obtain your interview and it will also affect the quality of your interview. It is important to be able to relate to respondents in their own language and that is why all interviews are done in the vernacular.

Interviewers are usually bilingual and questionnaires are translated depending on which country the research is being conducted in. Locals will usually be deployed to conduct the interviews, unless the interview is conducted with very high-end consumers. In these cases, use can also be made of web-based surveys.

The importance of localisation of brands

The concept of localisation is important to African consumers. Tendai indicates that brands need to ask whether or not they speak to consumers in their language. There also needs to be a shift in focus to providing real value: bringing the community into the world. African consumers might have less money but does not mean that they do not deserve value.

Tendai continues to explain that a brand is a new relationship in Africa and that "a brand means more in markets that have less". As things decentralise, the brand becomes the familiarity and the thing that consumers trust. Socially engaged brands deliver value: what the brand says about the individual; what it does, and how it makes the individual feel. Value for money is important to the African consumer but in the true sense of the statement, not price.

Common misconceptions of Africa

There are many misconceptions that people have about Africa and Tendai elaborates on these:

- Firstly, Africa is not one place.
- Secondly, there is also a perception that Africa needs the rest of the world more than the rest of the world needs Africa. This is not true, as Africa is rich in terms of resources and there is much value in Africa that is missed.
- A third misconception is that Africa is poor. Africa's wealth extends beyond money. Those who have come into Africa and who have contributed and built have also gained.
- Lastly, Africa does not need hand outs, but rather co-creation - opportunities to build sustainable wealth/revenue together. Tendai explains that aid doesn't help Africa and that Africans want to work w

the world. They have pride in what they build.

Lessons to learn

There are many lessons to be learnt from conducting research in Africa but the only way to really learn is to immerse oneself in the environment. A mobile network, eg, tried to conduct research in Africa by sending SMSes to its subscribers. What they did not realise is that there are 10 users per cellphone. This indicates the importance of understanding one's audience from a grassroots level.

Research in Africa extends beyond desktops and corner offices. There is definitely a gap for independent research and researchers have not even begun to uncover the stories of the lives of the continent's consumers.

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