

Cross-Cultural Equivalence: the Case of Global Sales Training

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Abstract

Over the past three decades myriad research has been conducted in the area of global sales training. If culture and equivalence issues are not taken into consideration when gathering primary data, then spurious contextual differences are reported. The purpose of this study is to review the extant sales training literature to understand if methodological issues exist in current global sales research. Eighteen articles were published in nine different journals with thirteen reaching press in “highly-“ or “well-regarded” outlets. Most studies are based upon small, convenience samples, empirical studies showed a lack of sophistication, and only translation equivalence was discussed in these articles. Based upon the findings, recommendations for future sales research and suggestions for minimizing cross-cultural equivalence issues are provided.

Introduction

Understanding how to manage a global sales force remains an important concern for sales firms, but did existing research studies follow cross-cultural research methodology when gathering primary data and interpreting study findings? The purpose of this study is to examine current articles regarding the methodology utilized and its adherence to satisfying construct and measure equivalence issues. Recommendations will help researchers minimize methodological issues encountered in global sales research projects.

Forces That Impact Global Sales Management

Two major forces that impact global sales management studies are culture and research equivalence. When conducting cross-cultural studies, it is important to isolate the impact of the macro culture on the behavior studied (Craig and Douglas 2000), since culture impacts nearly all aspects of global business. When researchers conduct studies in global markets, there is always concern about miscommunication or misinterpretation based upon the researcher’s *self reference bias*. Therefore, researchers should be sensitive

to the five components of national culture proposed by Hofstede (1980). When overlooked, study findings can be often attributed to “spurious contextual differences, rather than the real differences in the behavior studied” (Craig and Douglas 2000, p. 141).

Cross-cultural equivalence is concerned with the meaning, purpose, and classification of behaviors or ideas in one cultural context and how they compare with those in another cultural context (Reynolds and Simintiras 2000). Cross-cultural equivalence relates to meaning (conceptual, functional, and categorical equivalence), language (translation equivalence), and when and where training occurs (context and temporal equivalence). In summary, understanding cross-cultural equivalence is important for assuring research designs measure what they claim to measure.

An Analysis of Global Sales Training Articles

This study examined 18 global sales training articles published over a thirty-year period. We examined each article along the lines of conceptual/theoretical category, sample size, findings, adherence to equivalence issues, and quality of journals. Of the 18 articles examined, 11 (61%) are empirical and seven articles (39%) are theoretical/conceptual. Six articles (33%) appeared in *Industrial Marketing Management* (IMM), followed by three articles (17%) published in the *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management* (JPSSM), and two each or a total of four (22%) articles reached press in *International Marketing Review* (IMR) and *Journal of Business & International Marketing* (JBIM). Therefore, four journals (IMM, JPSSM, IMR, and JBIM) accounted for 13 training articles (72%) with acceptance rates of less than 20 percent.

Looking at Harzing’s 2010 Australian Dean’s Business Council ratings, *Industrial Marketing Management* and *International Marketing Review* were rated “A” or “highly

regarded,” while *Journal of Personal Selling*, *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, and *Services Marketing Quarterly* are rated “B” or “well-recognized.” Thus, most global sales training articles have been published in “A” or “B” journals with acceptance rates of less than 20 percent that are considered “high quality.”

Most existing empirical global sales training articles are based upon small sample sizes that compare sales managers/salespersons in two or more countries. Also, several studies rely upon convenience samples. Based upon these findings, the samples used in most IS training studies are relatively small in size and unbalanced in distribution.

In regard to equivalence, none of the 11 empirical articles discuss potential equivalence issues on the front end of the study. Conversely, nearly all the empirical cross-country articles followed recommended translation-back translation procedures. By planning for and analyzing equivalence issues in future IS articles researchers can greatly increase the level of sophistication and contribution to the sales discipline.

Conclusions

Three key findings emerge from the analysis:

- Nearly three out of four global sales articles were published in “highly-” or “well-regarded” journals, which suggests higher quality studies.
- Most published studies in all outlets are derived from small/convenience samples that rely on descriptive statistics, and lack sophistication.
- Few IS training research articles adhere to equivalence guidelines. While most cross-cultural studies followed translation-back translation procedures, the more important constructs of conceptual, functional, and categorical equivalence are seldom discussed.

Recommendations for Minimizing Equivalence Issues

In regard to *conceptual equivalence*, researchers must spend more time gathering information about current practices. The same is true of *functional equivalence*. With regard to *category equivalence*, assuring that categories are matched may be enough to help assure equivalence. *Contextual Equivalence* may require more thorough cross-checking and adaptation. Finally, *response equivalence* may require that additional qualitative measures are employed. Regardless of exact procedures employed, researchers need to take great care that equivalence standards are employed on all levels in order to assure valid results. Sales researchers must also find greater sources of data.

To understand how IS sales training efforts are managed and which managerial practices are successful, sales scholars must continue to conduct cross-cultural research. However, the sales discipline will advance intellectually only through more valid and reliable theory-based studies.

References

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