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International Services Research: Opportunities and Challenges

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International research in the decision sciences often incorporates the fields of economic development, culture, anthropology, geography, and communication, to name a few. The challenges presented by the richness of this area of study lead to numerous opportunities for cutting-edge research. International decision sciences are far more complex than purely domestic studies due to the interaction of diverse variables unique to the global environment. There is a need for more international research in the decision sciences; this is especially true in the international service areas of the decision sciences, which are nearly untouched.

Because of the customer contact required in many services, there has traditionally been a propensity for service provision to be established locally. In the past few decades international changes have spawned the expansion of global service businesses. The growth in international business in general has enlarged the need for international travel and hospitality services. Growth in global manufacturing has spawned increased need for support services on an international scale. Technological advances in information management have greatly improved the viability of global financial services and have increased productivity and quality of services in widespread locations. However, research has not kept pace with practice in the dramatic expansion of international services.

In this article we share with you one of our international research projects in the hope that more researchers will become interested and involved in this interesting arena of study.

An International Services Study

Early in this decade westerners became familiar with the waiting line problems that had developed in the Soviet Union. Shortages of many goods, fueled by production and supply difficulties, created excess demand for several products. The amount of time that consumers were required to wait contributed to the resulting decreases in societal productivity.

These events, combined with cultural, economic, and political differences, impacted Soviet consumer satisfaction with and expectations for waiting line experiences. This article reports preliminary findings of an empirical study of how waiting line perceptions differ across cultures, specifically between Russia and the United States.

While designing this study we decided that the wait needs to be experienced by the study subjects in order for the results to be as valid as possible. The problem with studying actual wait situations is an inability to adequately control for a wide variety of perception-influencing factors. Certainly those confounding factors would differ across cultures, making a comparison difficult at best.

After much deliberation, we decided on an experimental study based on video waiting-line scenarios. The film location we chose was a small bakery, similar to what is common in both the U.S. and Russia. Further, we commissioned actors who could easily fit in either culture.

We had a professional crew film and edit two treatments (video scenarios) and one control video segment. Each treatment exhibited a different cause for the customer

wait. Subjects were randomly assigned the video segment they viewed. After viewing a segment, each subject answered a brief questionnaire about their perceptions of waiting time, service quality, server friendliness, and satisfaction.

Six total video segments were produced; three treatments were in English and three in Russian. All were the same length of time and were filmed with the same actors. The only difference between the Russian and English segments was the language dubbed for customer voices (their mouths were not filmed), and a short film segment of the server, who was fluent in both English and Russian.

Each segment featured four customers receiving service. The first two customer video segments were exactly the same in all six scenarios. The third customer segment differed by the cause of the wait. The subject, portrayed as the camera, was the fourth customer. This fourth portion of all six videos was also identical.

What We Found

Based on our assumptions about cultures, our hypotheses included an expectation that Russian consumers would perceive the waiting time to be shorter than U.S. consumers would estimate. We were surprised to find that there were no significant differences in waiting time estimates between country groups, nor among treatments. However, we did find that satisfaction with

the waiting time was strongly ($p < .01$) correlated with time estimates for the Russian respondents; there was no such correlation for the U.S. respondents. Although there was a large amount of variation in waiting time estimates in both country groups, the U.S. consumers showed no relationship between waiting time estimates and their satisfaction with the waiting time.

One challenge in the study was the large amount of variance in customer estimates of the passage of time for specific scenarios. We used video technology to control the actual wait times exactly. Nevertheless, the subjects' estimates of wait times had a variance which was a large percent of the mean estimate. We suspect that the variance in reported estimates is a function of human inability to accurately estimate the passage of time.

We are exploring the estimate variance issue in an extension of this research. We are excited about the prospects for this continued research. And we encourage others with interest to likewise pursue international research, since we are convinced there are fascinating discoveries waiting to be made.

A Call for International Service Research

Since customer contact is an important aspect of many services, deeper understanding of regional differences and similarities

will help to improve service delivery and promotion. The need for direct communication with customers deepens a business' need to better understand the customer and the impact of culture upon expectations and satisfaction. International service providers face unique challenges beyond those faced by global manufacturers. Decision scientists have an important task in identifying those research questions which will lead to advances in the practice of global services management.

However, international and cross-cultural research will not be accomplished without some challenges; and we experienced our share of challenges in this project. The survey instrument required multiple translations, back-translations, and validation to increase measurement accuracy. Each video segment was carefully planned and reviewed to eliminate any mannerisms, intonation, or language-based signs that might bias responses. Data collection in the former Soviet Union was complicated by the tight control of video equipment in some areas. However, these and other challenges become less problematic when you experience the satisfaction of exploring research questions that are both timely and relevant. There is a definite need for much more research in the area of international services and other international areas of the decision sciences. We encourage interested researchers to participate in this rich and interesting area. ■

DSI REGIONS

Northeast Region

by Susan E. Pariseau, NEDSI Program Chair, Merrimack College

An important issue facing management education is establishing an effective mechanism to evaluate the outcome of various programs. This is particularly crucial for schools of business seeking accreditation or re-accreditation by the International Association for Management Education (AACSB). Many business schools have already engaged in a process of outcome assessment that is mission-based, involves all major stakeholders, and facilitates continuous improvement. The Outcome Assessment Track which, for the first time, is included in the program of the 1999 NEDSI

Meeting will provide a forum of educators as well as deans and other administrators from schools of business to address various issues concerning outcome assessment. Topics include, but are not limited to, the following: Mission-Based Outcome Assessment, Student Satisfaction Survey, Faculty Involvement and Assessment, Alumni Survey, Involving Major Stakeholders, Outcome Assessment Techniques, Implementation of an On-Going Assessment Process, Documenting and Communicating Outcomes, Outcomes as Guidelines for Continuous Improvement,

Outcome Assessment Cases and Lessons Learned, and Financial and Human Resources Required. ■

For additional information regarding this new track, please contact:

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