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ONLINE AND ONWARDS

As the digital revolution speeds up, we compare Europe's three largest markets.

The French industry was known for its tardy adoption of online methodologies. Not because of a reluctance to innovate, but because of researchers' primary concern to improve their techniques. But providers are now described as "experienced users of online tools" by ESOMAR representative Elisabeth Martine-Cosnefroy, who adds, "we have accelerated development of new web methodologies."

She notes that the media sector was probably the first to request online methodologies in France. "But it is impossible to switch techniques so quickly, especially when the internet has not yet been adopted by a large majority of the French population." Having founded her own agency, Adequation, last year, she observes that the majority of her clients now want to use some form of online and/or mobile methodology.

Uptake of online surveys is related to the economic crisis and to greater adoption of the internet. Martine-Cosnefroy says this initially caused a turnover decline that has now levelled out. "We have more studies at lower budgets, probably coming from a larger number of companies." Increasingly, the cake needs to be shared with web-oriented agencies.

One such specialist is respondi, an international access panel and community manager with a growing presence in France. Managing director Orkan Dolay feels the French online market is "approaching maturity in quantitative research, learning fast in qualitative, and at the beginning of something really new in mobile."

Josiane Versini, founder and CEO of Exvisu, an agency specialising in qualitative analysis of the social web, says the French sector is entering a new phase of online/digital research. "Strategic analysis is emerging," but she also feels research as still "too focused on sentiment analysis descriptions" and a more creative approach to digital

and social is needed to understand consumers and markets in motion.

Dolay says that end clients may need more education in online quantitative research and adds, "we should exploit the benefits of online and mobile better, not just try to transpose offline research techniques to online."

Martine-Cosnefroy concludes, "the challenge is to promote new technologies as new opportunities, but not necessarily as less expensive and quicker, and certainly not as the only option."

GERMANY: CLIENTS IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT

The German research industry is coping with the challenges of increasing digitalisation and the rise of mobile research by offering a multitude of approaches and methodologies, according to ESOMAR representative Joachim Rittchen.

We only need look to the increased share of online interviews reported by ADM (the German association of research agencies): 1998: 1%; 2005: 22%; and 2011: 38%. New and specialised service providers, new access panels, and new technical possibilities are allowing clients to address topics like innovation research and communication research differently.

This development is often fuelled by client demand. "Clients are driving new developments by commissioning projects with a pilot character, so we seem to be in a phase of trying out what the best approaches are." He explains this by citing the strong pressure to deliver data within tighter timelines and lower budgets, and "an unspoken internal expectation to be one of the frontrunners in the industry, to justify the existence of a market research function."

Rittchen, head of market analytics at Roche Pharma, notes that there is also a discussion about the limitations of new tools, and the German market (like many of its advanced counterparts) is flooded with "unbeatable promises from many providers." Many of them did not originate in market



research, but in IT.

“The need for increasing speed and to adapt to tighter budgets must not lead to false compromises and jeopardise the quality of market research for decision making.” He stresses that both agency and client professionalism is required to navigate new technologies and approaches appropriately, and some quality issues need to be addressed, especially regarding validity and/or representativity of findings.

Rittchen sees price competition between panels and budget- and time-saving DIY projects leading to quality issues, and that new big data players like Google threaten to replace some classic market research business, although this impact is still to be seen in overall revenues. He also sees opportunities for traditional agencies “when new approaches are adopted and offered in the right package.”

Overall, Rittchen describes “an atmosphere of interest and a willingness to pioneer in a new and promising field.”

UK: THE LEADING EDGE

The UK has been quick to map out the research industry’s digital future. “UK firms have been among the pioneers in some forms of online research, notably panels, custom panels and online communities,” states Nick Thomas, managing director of MrWeb, an online news and jobs service for market researchers.

ESOMAR representative David Smith describes a market that does not need persuading that new technology is opening up great possibilities to add value to suppliers’ market intelligence offer. “So when it comes to embracing online qualitative technologies, using technology to explore social media, and using mobile phone technology, there would be few UK market researchers who do not see this as a wonderful opportunity.”

Smith, who leads his own DVL Smith agency, adds, “the UK

consider themselves to be at the leading edge of applying creative thinking to better understand customers, and if technology can be used to assist in this task it will be embraced.” He also feels that technology has helped UK market research in a sluggish economy. “The only slight reservation is that, in the current tough economic times, there is perhaps some reluctance to make major investments in the new technology.”

Thomas notes: “To most researchers, online is a huge area for innovation. But it’s another tool in the toolbox, as are neuromarketing, big data analysis and co-creation. So it’s not about to wipe out more traditional forms any time soon.” He adds, “those who think social media chat is representative of general public opinion for all or most research purposes could take a big, long reality check.”

For Smith, the main challenge is “to ensure that the research industry attracts talent with the ability to work across different types of data, feels comfortable with the new technology, and is able to communicate actionable insights to their clients.” **RW**



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