

Global marketing disasters and recoveries

Elliot Polak, Text Appeal, and Frank Cuttita, The Center for Global Branding, show how cross-cultural ad campaigns can be minefields for the unwary

TOYOTA AIRED A COMMERCIAL in Malaysia with Brad Pitt as the pitchman. The country's prime minister promptly banned it and declared it was time for Asian advertising to use Asian figureheads, who, he pointed out, can be just as handsome as westerners.

This may or may not be an overreaction, but the warning is clear. Globalisation has led to the converse: raised sensitivity regarding all that is local. Respect - or perceived lack of respect - of people's roots, local values, beliefs, cultures, iconography and language, is ignored at one's peril. The stakes for global brands to make sure their message is locally relevant and appropriate are higher than ever.

Volumes have been written about cross-cultural advertising disasters by some major brands. (Some have been proven to be urban legend, the most infamous being GM launching the Chevy Nova in Latin America only to find that it meant 'won't go'.)

While these stories (and legends) highlight the importance of checking and double-checking translation, transcreation, glocalisation or whatever this month's trendy term is (we prefer 'adaptation'), the truth is that most major cross-cultural faux pas run much deeper than pure translation issues.

Words and images are only the tip of the cross-cultural iceberg. For managing

global brands, the real danger zone is well below water level (see Figure 1).

How do these cross-cultural mistakes typically manifest themselves? The top five can be categorised as organisational, verbal, visual, legal and market difference.

Organisational flux

The international battle for centralised versus decentralised brand message control dates back to Marco Polo arguing with the Chinese about how to brand pasta in Italy!

History will show that many cross-cultural advertising disasters occurred because of a disconnect between local teams and global headquarters. Headquarters have an institutional paranoia that the creative is brilliant but the local geographies would never admit it for fear of totally losing brand-messaging authority to HQ. On the other hand, the local markets fear that HQ will develop advertising that is too culturally neutral - while not offensive to any culture, it is interesting to none.

This ongoing challenge of finding the organisational 'sweet spot' for developing creative has resulted in a slew of buzzwords for where the epicentre should fall. One of our favourites is computer giant Intel's late-iggos strategy of 'global chassis ... local body'. McDonald's new approach is described by global marketing director Dean Barrett as 'freedom within a framework'.

The beauty of these strategies is that they empower local operations to develop advertising creative 'within the framework' or on the 'global chassis' that can easily be exported to other geographies that choose to use this work.

Unfortunately this balancing act is not for the faint at heart. Total centralisation requires incredible political clout, trust and accountability. Total decentralisation requires patience and policing mechanisms found in precious few headquarters of advertising organisations. Finding the correct balance is an exercise in constant experimentation littered with

numerous geological minefields.

However, with pressures for increased economies of scale and higher ROI on global branding efforts, more and more creative strategy is being driven from the centre, despite the political fallout. Few companies have the financial resources of P&G or Unilever to test, test and re-test, nor multi-billion budgets where 'small' mistakes are a budgetary rounding error. Thus smaller to intermediate-sized companies must learn from the mistakes of the well-endowed behemoths.

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Further complicating the matter is that cross-cultural mistakes are much more immediate than they were ten years ago. As soon as a company has an IP address on the internet, they are branding globally, whether they chose to or not. Search engines like Google, and more recently thousands of easily accessible blogs, result in brands being promoted 'involuntarily' and relatively instantaneously.

Verbal mix-ups

Often slight transpositions and rearrangements of wording in the local language make enormous differences - like flapping butterfly wings in one place that provoke a hurricane in another. If this seems theoretical and of no great practical concern - perhaps delegated to local country managers, a translator or

FIGURE 1

The cross-cultural 'iceberg'





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a junior copywriter at some global ad agency outpost to worry about - consider Google.

Thousands of people, called 'maximisers', at this company spend their days making slight variations to the wording of small text ads on the side of the screen. A single word change can double, triple, quadruple click rates. With ad revenue reaching \$7 billion, this is literally making billions of dollars of difference.

The same principle applied to any global brand means that slight changes in local language headlines, body copy, scripts and voice-overs can shift sales rates, market share and perception by significant percentages. The reason is simple: what makes copy work is not the words themselves, but how they are combined and resonate with the consumer's mindset.

Taglines, for instance, used to be kept in English for consistency. However, focus-group evidence shows they are much more memorable and effective in the local language. A few years ago, Levi's spent a great deal of time and money trying to get continental Europeans to understand 'Levi's Engineered Jeans' in English; people never did quite get the idea that 'engineered' could also mean 'made by'.

Today global brands often attempt to adapt taglines to the local language. This leads to other quandaries, due to concept drift and unintended meanings.

Fallon in London recently produced

successful broadcast advertising for drinks company Bacardi designed for the UK, with the punchy line 'The way it should B - Bacardi'. Suppose it was used abroad. What do you do with the double meaning of 'B' in foreign markets ('Be' and 'B for Bacardi')? The received wisdom is not to use puns in international advertising. Today, however, watered-down global messages simply won't register in the minds of over-solicited consumers, and when wordplay cleverly links consumers to the brand we believe it should not be avoided.

Text Appeal found that in all markets except one there are ways to work around this, and to adapt the tagline, including the letter B in positive ways that respect the core message. The exception, fortunately pointed out at an early stage, is Russia, where, when pronounced out loud, 'B' means 'prostitute'.

Brand names can be especially tricky in Asian languages like Chinese due to the disconnect between written characters and pronunciation. For instance, Motorola is pronounced 'me de lou la' in Cantonese, which means 'nothing to take'. In some southern Chinese dialects, the Peugeot 416 is pronounced 'si yi lu' meaning 'die all along the road'. The preferred solution is to choose suitable characters: Cola-Cola in China is 'tasty and happy' ('kekou kele'). This is also culturally relevant, since the Chinese have a fondness for names that express goodwill.

Visual boo-boos

Some of the greatest battles in international business have been fought over the pictures in an ad. Most arguments derive from the fact that the cultural context of HQ is dramatically different than that of the local operations. When given free rein over in-country branding, local teams let their creative juices flow - using the local mores as the basis for what is 'creative'.

This was the case for the old Siemens Nixdorf (SN) when it was informed that its subsidiary in Taiwan was running print ads with images of Adolph Hitler and a swastika used to reinforce 'the Germany of the past' versus SN being the 'Germany of the future'. The local distributor was quick to point out that they too felt that these images were offensive, as was what they stood for. However, these images helped the ads stand above the clutter, increasing exposure and recall. The Munich headquarters of SN immediately forced the ads to be pulled with little regret about lost impressions.

This was also the case when Hewlett Packard was informed that a local distributor had taken liberties with the use of amorous kangaroos to reinforce 'reproduction quality'.

This was not unlike the famous Benetton ad using the same imagery. The ad ran in 20 countries, with bans being upheld in only two.

Again, while these ads in isolation may not have been offensive to the local >



Brands that should have known better: Siemens Nixdorf, Smirnoff and Bordeaux

Top five cross-cultural tips

1. Align organisation with marketing objectives

Coca-Cola decentralises advertising in 2000 and eliminates central global marketing (after having invented it in the previous century). It recentralises again in 2005 with the agency hub network Wieden & Kennedy to gain creative focus and global consistency.

2. Use locally relevant verbal expression

A P&G Herbal Essences global commercial features a woman under the shower culminating with an orgasmic cry. In order not to offend, this is successfully replaced in Japan by a cute giggle.

3. Check visuals for unintended meanings

Burger King withdraws its ice-cream cones in the UK after a man protests the packaging is sacrilegious to Islam and threatens a 'Jihad'. The lid of the dessert's design, meant to look like a spinning ice-cream cone, is almost identical to the Arabic inscription for Allah.

4. Know the legal environment

Fashion company Benetton is unable to use children sticking out their tongues in the Middle East as showing 'internal body parts' is illegal.

5. Be attuned to marketing particulars

The market for cognac in most parts of the world is sophisticated and well-to-do. However, Courvoisier's strongest international sales are in the US, with the up-and-coming 'gangsta rap' crowd.

hugely successful in Japan because it represented exotic images of the Wild West, wide-open spaces and US culture. All very interesting to the Japanese, considering that they were so different from daily life in Japan.

When the same ad ran in some regions of the People's Republic of China, the images reportedly caused a very different reaction. The Marlboro Man was thought by some to be lonely ... in fact a loner. Rather than identifying with the visual of the cowboy, many consumers felt sorry for him.

Legal traps

Other creative can fall victim to tiny changes in advertising law and self-regulation standards. Increased restrictions on advertising to children have carried over to ads that are not targeted to children at all.

For example, the use of what arguably resembled the well-known storybook and animated character, Stuart Little, in a Smirnoff ad resulted in the ad being pulled by parent Diageo, because of risk of condoning drinking to the young.

Most marketers would assume that countries like France would be the most natural for using sensual or sex appeal images to sell alcohol. But many have met the harsh reality that using lifestyle elements to sell alcohol is against the regulatory code (for example, the Bordeaux advertisement on the previous page).

Market set-ups

'Oh you can't reach Yoko. She's got Vodafone.' If advertising can suffer cultural rejection or amplification, so can the products and services being marketed.

When Vodafone launched its competitively priced 3G phones around the world in 2005, many markets responded well, but sales were flat in Japan. With DoCoMo and G4, the Japanese were already used to cutting-edge services and high-definition graphics on their phone displays: few people wanted to downgrade. (There is also a cultural and social status bias in Japan towards quality: one may simply not wish to be seen with a cheaper, less-sophisticated product.)

Vodafone re-hired a legendary Japanese leader who had helped it get

established in the 1990s, and is now tailoring its offer to the local market.

Conclusion

There is no way of knowing if a compelling ad here will turn out to be a disaster there - without checking.

'While global and regional brands must all have some form of health-check procedures in place, it is also critical to use appropriate local skills to help local teams convey exactly the right tone and sentiment'

To avoid costly cross-market mistakes, the first stop for every global advertiser should be a 'health check'. Text Appeal, for instance, has devised a procedure called the 'cross-cultural disaster check' that systematically reviews potential pitfalls of advertising concepts, copy, visuals, sound, and so on. That way, even before creative is finalised, most potential areas of risk can be eliminated.

While global and regional brands must all have some form of health-check procedures in place, it is also critical to use appropriate local skills to help local teams convey exactly the right tone and sentiment. Then, as P&G does with its Golden Library of worldwide ads, the best local work can be shared between all countries. Perhaps such global sharing of outstanding local work will diminish our need to share disasters, mistakes and 'worst practice'. We can then, while remaining ever vigilant, move on to the 'best practice' cross-cultural success stories. •

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market, they meant yet another headache for the manager policing the decentralised approach back at headquarters.

When negotiating the invisible bottom of the cross-cultural iceberg, there is a risk in using certain imagery that paints with a broad brush. The Marlboro Man is perhaps one of the most immediately recognisable advertising icons in history. However, the subliminal attributes of the graphic are magnified by culture. This can even happen in regions where one would suppose that there was some creative homogeneity.

For example, the Marlboro Man was