
Don't Buy This!

By Lothar Katz

Nike recently apologized for a footwear commercial which was banned by China on claims that the ad "sparked anger and offended national feelings." Featuring LeBron James, it showed the basketball star making easy work of enemies including a white-haired kung fu master, two women in traditional Chinese dresses, and a pair of dragons, a highly respected symbol of power in the country. The ad "violates regulations mandating that all advertisements in China should uphold national dignity and interest and respect the motherland's culture," the country's State Administration for Radio, Film, and Television said.

International marketing and advertising are interesting fields for cultural research. Fraught with misunderstanding and misinterpretation of messages and intentions, they expose fundamental challenges of working across cultures with which marketing professionals and others doing business across cultures frequently struggle. Most such issues fall into either of two categories:

Communication Challenges

Stories about marketing communication mistakes abound and often serve to educate International MBA students. Here are a few classics:

A large medical company marketed a new drug in the United Arab Emirate by showing pictures in a newspaper ad. From left to right, the pictures showed someone ill, the person taking medication, and the same person looking well. What marketers forgot was that in the Arab world, people read from right to left.

The Chinese translation of Pepsi's slogan "Come alive with the Pepsi Generation" translated into "Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the grave."

Israeli radio and press ran ads for the "Intimidate Dating Service." ("Intimi" is the Hebrew word for intimate.)

Scandinavian vacuum maker Electrolux advertised in the US that "Nothing sucks like an Electrolux." (For non-US readers: "sucks" also means "is useless/terrible.")

Cross-cultural advertisement gaffes tend to be caused by basic translation errors or other misunderstandings and oversights. Similar issues are frequent in other business exchanges. While incorrect translations often cause confusion, even people who speak the same language may interpret words in different ways.

Avoiding such communication issues altogether is difficult. However, a number of tactics help in achieving greater clarity:

- Avoid slang, adages, and other culture-specific verbiage, such as sports analogies.
- Consider that a statement's 'catchiness' may matter less in one culture than in another.
- For translations, use only native speakers living in the destination country.
- If unsure how well your message works, consult with several people belonging to the target culture.

Cultural Sensitivities

If failing to communicate the right message can be embarrassing, appearing to be culturally insensitive can be outright disastrous.

In the 1990s, apparel maker Benetton ran a campaign that stirred strong controversy and legal action in many countries. For instance, an ad showing a priest kissing a nun was ruled to be illegal by Italy's Supreme Court. The campaign stimulated numerous consumer appeals to boycott the company's products.

Toyota ads triggered furious responses and criticism from Chinese watchers, who saw them as deliberate acts by the Japanese car firm to insult the country. One of the ads showed a Toyota Land Cruiser pulling a broken-down truck, which looked similar to a Chinese military vehicle, implying that Japanese SUVs are superior to China's military equipment. Considering Japan's military past in the region, this was sure to draw heated remarks in China. Toyota stopped running the ad and issued an apology.

Showing respect for culture, history, and people is essential when working across cultures. Doing so requires knowing about, and paying attention to, the other country's values and practices. "Know before you go" is good advice, so unless you are well familiar with culture, history, values, and practices, do some reading, take training, and/or talk to others who are familiar with these aspects before venturing off to do business in any foreign country.

Lothar Katz is an International Business Advisor and the author of "Negotiating International Business – The Negotiator's Reference Guide to 50 Countries Around the World," released in 2006. He has a wealth of experience in achieving productive cooperation across cultures and driving business success on a global scale.

A seasoned former executive of Texas Instruments, a Fortune 500 company, Lothar regularly interacted with employees, customers, outsourcing partners, and third parties in more than 25 countries around the world. He teaches International Project Management at the University of Texas at Dallas' School of Management and is a Business Leadership Center instructor at the Southern Methodist University's Cox School of Business.

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469-233-3538, fax 214-764-6655

lk@leadershipcrossroads.com

www.leadershipcrossroads.com