

In 1962 General Motors successfully introduced the Chevy Nova to the U.S. market. Ten years later they expanded the Nova market to the Spanish speaking countries south of the border. According to the story, GM executives were stunned when sales didn't take off in those countries – especially since the Nova was so popular in the U.S. – until someone came to the realization that in Spanish, “nova” is translated as “no go.” Who in his right mind would buy a car that doesn't go? Whether or not the tale is true, it illustrates a crucial point in public relations. In our global economy, understanding the cultural differences of nations is every bit as important as understanding our own culture.

To Shake or Not to Shake At one time in certain Arab cultures, men shook their own hands when meeting other men. To extend one's hand was considered an insult. Today in parts of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East the left hand is considered the “dirty hand,” so the extended hand must always be the right hand. And in many cultures, a man never extends his hand to a woman unless she extends hers first. As you can see, even basic cultural issues like shaking hands must be thoroughly researched before attempting to do business with other countries or you run the risk of offending a potential customer or business partner. Hence, the birth of intercultural communications as a discipline.

Studying the various cultures can include everything from the firmness of a handshake to whether or not to bow to physical proximity. In some Latin American countries it is very natural to stand within inches of the person to whom you are speaking, while many Asian cultures require a minimum distance. In some countries timeliness is an issue. In Costa Rica the individual with whom you are meeting might be an hour late and think nothing of it; however, in Japan your meeting counterpart is deeply offended if you are two minutes late.

It is also critical to be sure you fully understand the idiosyncrasies of the language of the country with whom you are doing business – just ask the American missionary to China who, after several months, learned that he was preaching not about God, but about a pig. (Consider the very slight difference in English between God and dog.)

Intercultural communication is a very up and coming field in global public relations and should be seriously considered by any young person entering the public relations consulting field. With the rapid globalization of business, thorough knowledge of other cultures will make you a hot commodity in the world of business.

Can you remember a case in which a brand was unsuccessful in another country because it did not customize its approach?

Do you know of any customs that are considered appropriate in some cultures yet offensive in others?

Think of a fictitious marketing campaign that would work in one environment, but not another?