



Book Another One Bites the Grass

Making Sense of International Advertising

Simon Anholt
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Recommendation

Author Simon Anholt, an international advertising consultant, says that the dangers of globalization can be just as formidable as the opportunities - if you fail to research the culture of your new markets. We've all heard the marketing legends of companies that embarrassed themselves by launching products into foreign markets without checking the translation of their brand names. Anholt retells several of these tales to illustrate the perils that await global firms that don't take culture into account. Meshing advertising and marketing strategy, he presents a systemic approach to cross-border product expansion. *GetAbstract* recommends this book not only for its insightful, culturally adaptive marketing methodology, but also for the genuinely entertaining examples that might just make you laugh out loud.

Take-Aways

- More companies are marketing products and services abroad, but most advertisers don't understand other cultures.
- Adapt your advertising to cultural differences.
- Translated ad copy rings false; it doesn't reflect the nuances of language that affect readers.
- Before selecting a product name, research the reactions to it or you could mistakenly choose a name with undesirable connotations.
- Being culturally sensitive is critical to good advertising.
- Much advertising is drawn from popular culture.
- Culture mapping gives you a picture of how people will respond to different brands.
- To develop a global brand, define its essential idea, and adapt it to different cultures.
- Aim for conceptual creativity in seeking unexpected angles on familiar things.
- Use smart centralization by having a single agency clustered around a brand.

Summary

Adapting Advertising to Culture

In today's global marketplace, more and more companies are marketing their products and services abroad. However, the advertising industry is not keeping pace with this development, because many advertisers don't understand the needs of other cultures.

To develop globalization, follow a strategy of "smart centralization," which is based on creating real international communications for a brand. Start with the basic idea you want that brand to convey; then adapt it to the culture in which you are promoting it, using a single central agency dedicated to that brand. You need this flexible approach to make your brand "fit to travel." This concept is based on being sensitive to the culture of your overseas consumers. Consider this at the very beginning of the brand development process - not at the end.

“Saying the wrong things in the right language is simply making it easier for consumers to understand how little you understand them.”

Given cultural differences, the traditional network approach to advertising doesn't work in other countries and probably never will. Rather, in international advertising, small agencies are especially adapted to provide culturally customized services through smart centralization.

Using Words With Care

Be careful how you use words in ads or in naming products, because you can easily offend consumers in another culture or undermine your product. Consumers have very sensitive "cultural antennae," so they can readily recognize when an ad isn't really meant for them.

“If the bulk of the message isn't communicated visually, there's precious little chance it will get through, so agonizing over the correctness of the words rather than the correctness of the visual and cultural language shows fundamentally misplaced priorities.”

Many advertisers think in terms of translating advertising copy. But that approach never works, since the words don't work alone to make the copy work. The way words are combined and the subtle nuances of language most affect the reader. You can't convey these subtleties in a translation, because advertising is based on culture, not the words themselves. People may forgive you when you get their language and their cultural references wrong, since you sound like a foreigner. But when you speak like a local, but then say the wrong things, it's worse, because you show a deep lack of understanding of the culture.

“Some of the most powerful brand names in the world are actually little more than empty vessels, into which one pours brand equity through the diligent application of marketing.”

Thus, don't get your original copy translated. Rather, have fresh copy written by someone steeped in the language and culture who can convey what you are trying to say. Even if you have a highly competent copywriter, a translation will seem stilted and will lack the fluidity and dynamism of original writing. It will always ring slightly false. Instead, brief a skilled copywriter from that market on the message you want to get across and, preferably, don't show that writer any copy from another language. Just let that writer write.

Choosing Names and Slogans

Be careful about name choices. Research any product or brand names in the relevant marketplace before you launch it. Otherwise, you can make disastrous mistakes. One company launched an AMC car dubbed "Matador" in South America, thinking the name meant "bullfighter." However, the correct name for bullfighter is a "torero" and, out of context, "matador" means "killer."

“The best advertising in the world won't get you very far on the international stage unless your brand is fit to travel.”

Even if you have a product name that's very successful in one country, it may not work in another country. If so, change it. For

instance, the Japanese toilet paper "Krappy" is not one that would travel well into an English-language market.

To find a genuinely international brand name, use an international creative team. Brainstorm a longer list of names and do a disaster-check in different countries to be sure you don't have a problem. Some of the most powerful brand names start off as simply "empty vessels" into which you pour brand equity by good marketing. Start with a name that is distinctive enough for your company to own it fully and then create an aura of greatness around it with your marketing techniques. For example, the word "Nike" - originally the name of the ancient Greek goddess of victory - came to be associated with a cutting-edge brand for youths.

“Translating advertising copy is like painting the tip of an iceberg and hoping the whole thing will turn red: what makes copy work is not the words themselves, but subtle combinations of those words, and most of all the echoes and repercussions of those words within the mind of the reader.”

Be careful about slogans, too, because they don't travel well. For instance, the "Just do it" slogan for Nike wouldn't work well in France, since it is too blunt. To be polite, the French normally ask someone to do something, rather than giving an order.

Developing a Sensitivity to Culture

Becoming culturally sensitive is critical to good advertising. It is easy to be blinded by your own culture, because it is so much a part of your identity. You acquired your use of language through a kind of osmosis, so you think of it as very natural. However, your own culture shapes your perception and behaviors, which can be a barrier to understanding other cultures. If you come from a country with a long history of power, such as the U.S. or England, you may approach other cultures with an unconscious sense of superiority.

“Advertising is not made of words, but made of culture.”

By contrast, advertising should be culturally aware. It should speak the consumers' culture as well as their language. In fact, much advertising is based on popular culture. It builds on what is on TV, what is happening in the news or the latest music. The best ads follow changes in popular culture so closely that you can hardly tell whether the ads or the changes came first.

“Advertising works when consumers believe they are being spoken to by somebody who understands them.”

Build in the cultural needs of your overseas consumers at the beginning of the advertising process. You can recognize the personality of different cultures through culture mapping, which provides a picture of what most people in the country are like and how they will respond to different brands. A number of such models exist. One common model proposes these parameters:

- Power distance - How do people handle inequality in society?
- Uncertainty avoidance - How threatened do people feel by unfamiliarity or ambiguity?
- Individualism/collectivism - How loyal or self-interested are people, and how interested are they in their families, or in larger groups or the society as a whole?
- Masculinity/femininity - To what degree are masculine values, such as achievement, held to be important, as compared to feminine values, such as altruism?
- Orientation - Do people have a long-term orientation or a short-term orientation?

“The only way to produce effective, distinctive and creative copy for any market is to brief a skilled copywriter from that market to write the thing in his or her own language, ideally with no reference whatsoever to existing copy in other languages.”

As you apply this model, you can discern differences among cultures. For instance, the success-oriented U.S. is a more masculine culture than Scandinavia, where there is a more feminine culture. Thus, promoting a brand as "big, fast, smart, powerful and success-oriented" might work well in the U.S., but not in Scandinavia, where qualities such as "small, slow and wise" have more appeal. U.S. culture is strongly individualistic and values personal opinions and expression. By contrast, in the collectivist Japanese culture, qualities such as humility, indirect communication and furthering the common good are more highly regarded.

“Failing to research something as crucial as the name of your product in the relevant marketplace before you launch is staggeringly idiotic behavior.”

Even with the globalization of the marketplace, national culture is still very much prized. In many countries, local cultures and subcultures feel threatened by the "erosion of their specialness and difference." And, many are fighting to reclaim their traditional languages and religious traditions. Thus, you need cultural sensitivity to sell products in another culture.

“The marketing and advertising industries’ persistent failure to see culture as their biggest challenge is the main reason why, historically, there have been so many more failures than success in international marketing programs.”

This sensitivity can be measured on four levels, starting with ignorance and intolerance and a kind of condescending political correctness where you try to ignore differences using your "superior influence" to protect those who are different. Then, comes tolerance and respect for differences. True cultural sensitivity stems from wanting to know more about those from another culture for increased understanding. Cultural sensitivity creates successful international marketers and businesspeople, as well as politicians, diplomats and journalists.

Creating a Global Brand

Big corporations that try to develop international brands find that problems reside in their complex chain of command or in the disconnect between those who decide brand policy and those who speak for the brand in each market. Seek richness in a brand as long as it remains true to its essential idea or archetype. Internationally, your brand needs to "embrace many diverse qualities," yet it has to stay true to type. The brand must maintain its core personality even as you show people from different cultures who speak different languages different ways that it appeals to them.

“Because our culture is as much a means of perception as it is a system of behaviors and attitudes, we can only observe other cultures through our own. In order to view another culture objectively, we would first have to abandon our own, and this is something which most of us, most of the time, just cannot do.”

Because you probably don’t know what kind of traits work in each country, don’t decide on your branding construction from the center. Rather, determine the brand’s international characteristics based on the way consumers in each country act and perceive things. Many international companies build their communications and marketing actions from the inspiration of the "lead country," "lead language" and "lead culture." For a successful international campaign, avoid that approach. Instead, define your brand’s fundamental essence in a culturally neutral way so the brand itself is constant, but then use a mode of communication that is tailored to the different needs of consumers in different cultures.

“Cultural sensitivity is specially important for people who wish to sell their products (or their clients’ products) in other countries.”

Make most of your cultural adaptation and changes in the copy itself, since visual elements travel more easily between cultures and that’s where you will spend most of your production budget. Just check your images carefully to avoid problems (such as white being associated with purity in the West but with death in the East). You can probably standardize images, and then use the words in the ad to convey cultural differences. This is where you can encourage the greatest creativity in sharing the message of your brand with another culture.

The basic trick to being creative internationally lies in looking for "unexpected angles on familiar things." Aim for conceptual creativity rather than executional creativity, though such creativity is quite rare. Executional creativity involves finding interesting ways to convey a message, such as a dramatic new digital post-production treatment. But, with conceptual creativity, the focus is on a new idea, and sometimes these ideas can transcend cultural and linguistic difference. A good example is the Avis line: "We try harder." The notion of trying harder works well in any language or culture.

The International Advertising Structure

To achieve cultural sensitivity and greater creativity, restructure the way your advertising is provided. The big network approach may work for large, complex, mature, multinational corporations. Their well-established marketing activities and high budgets help local full-service agencies be effective. However, large networked agencies often aren’t well suited to smaller-budget international accounts. Sometimes independent agencies work in loose alliances or "independent networks" but, problematically, they are actually still part of a traditional network. Instead, use "smart centralization." Centralize your global campaign’s strategic, creative and

production processes into a single agency, which clusters around the brand. Then, this agency can be sensitive to both the "culture of the brand" and the "culture of its consumers."

The advertising agency is the link between the brand and the consumer. In the traditional "network agency" international model, a lead agency handles the brand in the domestic market and seeks to influence the local agencies working with consumers in foreign markets. But with smart centralization, there is no lead agency/local agency split. Instead, agency-trained individuals from each foreign market are relocated to a single central agency in one office, where they cluster around the brand and guide its development from that source.

About the Author

Simon Anholt is the founder and chairman of World Writers Ltd., an international advertising consulting firm that provides strategic services to other advertising agencies as well as to clients such as DuPont, Time-Warner, Sara Lee, Sony and IBM.
