

4.3: The Social and Cultural Environment

Learning Objectives

After reading this section, students should be able to ...

1. list the various elements in a firm's cultural environment

The cultural environment consists of the influence of religious, family, educational, and social systems in the marketing system. Marketers who intend to market their products overseas may be very sensitive to foreign cultures. While the differences between our cultural background in the United States and those of foreign nations may seem small, marketers who ignore these differences risk failure in implementing marketing programs. Failure to consider cultural differences is one of the primary reasons for marketing failures overseas.

This task is not as easy as it sounds as various features of a culture can create an illusion of similarity. Even a common language does not guarantee similarity of interpretation. For example, in the US we purchase “cans” of various grocery products, but the British purchase “tins”. A number of cultural differences can cause marketers problems in attempting to market their products overseas. These include: (a) language, (b) color, (c) customs and taboos, (d) values, (e) aesthetics, (f) time, (g) business norms, (h) religion, and (i) social structures. Each is discussed in the following sections.

Student Example

I travel out of the country to Mexico almost every year. I can see the immense cultural differences between Mexico and the United States, from the language to colors, to the values, religious beliefs, and business norms. As soon as I step out of the plane in Mexico, I feel like I am in a different world. In terms of the language, the primary is obviously Spanish; however, in the past few years, I have noticed signs in the airport with translations to English and Chinese. In terms of values, they seem to focus more on survival. For example, marketing food, shelter products, and clothing. Their religious beliefs are centered around Catholicism.

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Language

The importance of language differences cannot be overemphasized, as there are almost 3,000 languages in the world. Language differences cause many problems for marketers in designing advertising campaigns and product labels. Language problems become even more serious once the people of a country speak several languages. For example, in Canada, labels must be in both English and French. In India, there are over 200 different dialects, and a similar situation exists in China.

Student Example

I believe language is very important in marketing, advertising, and product labels. In the United States, I have noticed that most products have product labels in English and often you can peel off for a Spanish label under. Although I have heard many people complain about the fact that there are two languages on every product in America, it is very necessary. In the United States, we have many individuals who speak Spanish, or a language very similar to that, especially since we are so close to South America. Companies and organizations have come to terms with the fact that their product may be in the hands of an individual whose primary language is Spanish; thus, they provide a label in Spanish to properly cater to their consumers.

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Colors

Colors also have different meanings in different cultures. For example, in Egypt, the country's national color of green is considered unacceptable for packaging, because religious leaders once wore it. In Japan, black and white are colors of mourning and should not be used on a product's package. Similarly, purple is unacceptable in Hispanic nations because it is associated with death.

Consider how the following examples could be used in development of international marketing programs:

- In Russia, it is acceptable for men to greet each other with a kiss, but this custom is not acceptable in the US.
- Germans prefer their salad dressing in a tube, while Americans prefer it in a bottle.
- In France, wine is served with most meals, but in America, milk, tea, water, and soft drinks are popular.

McDonalds Corporation has opened 20 restaurants in India. Since 80 percent of Indians are Hindu, McDonald's will use a non-beef meat substitute for its traditional hamburger. The likely beef substitute will be lamb, a very popular meat in India. In anticipation of its restaurant openings, McDonald's conducted extensive market research, site selection studies, and developed a relationship with India's largest chicken supplier. McDonald's has opted to market its product in India, largely because India's population of more than 900 million represents one-sixth of the world's population.

Values

An individual's values arise from his/her moral or religious beliefs and are learned through experiences. For example, in America, we place a very high value on material well-being and are much more likely to purchase status symbols than people in India. Similarly, in India, the Hindu religion forbids the consumption of beef, and fast-food restaurants such as McDonald's and Burger King would encounter tremendous difficulties without product modification. Americans spend large amounts of money on soap, deodorant, and mouthwash because of the value placed on personal cleanliness. In Italy, salespeople call on women only if their husbands are at home.

Aesthetics

The term *aesthetics* is used to refer to the concepts of beauty and good taste. The phrase, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder" is a very appropriate description for the differences in aesthetics that exist between cultures. For example, Americans believe that suntans are attractive, youthful, and healthy. However, the Japanese do not.

Time

Americans seem to be fanatical about time when compared to other cultures. Punctuality and deadlines are routine business practices in the US. However, salespeople who set definite appointments for sales calls in the Middle East and Latin America will have a lot of time on their hands, as business people from both of these cultures are far less bound by time constraints. To many of these cultures, setting a deadline such as "I have to know next week" is considered pushy and rude.

✓ Student Example

While traveling this past summer I was able to spend time in Italy. It took me a while to get used to having to plan around their typical schedule. During lunch they take what is called a *riposo*, or an extended lunch break where they go home to eat and spend time with their families and relax. This is in direct contrast to the culture in America, where I have on many occasions worked through lunch breaks. In the world of business, this would be something people would need to be sensitive to so that there would be no issues with trying to schedule meetings or even work lunches.

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Business Norms

The norms of conducting business also vary from one country to the next. Here are several examples of foreign business behavior that differ from US business behavior:

- In France, wholesalers do not like to promote products. They are mainly interested in supplying retailers with the products they need.
- In Russia, plans of any kind must be approved by a seemingly endless string of committees. As a result, business negotiations may take years.
- South Americans like to talk business "nose to nose". This desire for close physical proximity causes American businesspeople to back away from the constantly forward-moving South Americans.
- In Japan, business people have mastered the tactic of silence in negotiations. Americans are not prepared for this, and they panic because they think something has gone wrong. The result is that Americans become impatient, push for a closure, and often

make business concessions they later regret.

These norms are reflected in the difficulty of introducing the Web into Europe.

Religious Beliefs

A person's religious beliefs can affect shopping patterns and products purchased in addition to his/her values, as discussed earlier. In the United States and other Christian nations, Christmastime is a major sales period. But for other religions, religious holidays do not serve as popular times for purchasing products. Women do not participate in household buying decisions in countries in which religion serves as opposition to women's rights movements.

Every culture has a social structure, but some seem less widely defined than others. That is, it is more difficult to move upward in a social structure that is rigid. For example, in the US, the two-wage earner family has led to the development of a more affluent set of consumers. But in other cultures, it is considered unacceptable for women to work outside the home.

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