

1.6.1: Culture and Communication

Learning Objectives

- Describe strategies to adapt communication for an intercultural audience



Culture and communication are inextricably linked, and messages can be misconstrued without an awareness of a particular cultural or subcultural context. As Richard Bucher notes in *Diversity Consciousness: Opening Our Minds to People, Cultures and Opportunities*, “Communication takes place whenever meaning is attached to a message.” However, because of differences in how a message is interpreted, the intended meaning or message may not be what is received. When people attach different meanings to gestures, symbols or words, miscommunication can result, with significant financial repercussions.

In the aftermath of the Air-Allah incident, Nike Communications Manager Roy Agostino reflected “As our brand continues to expand, we have to deepen our awareness of other world communities.”^[1] The way Nike responded to this incident provides perspective on how to adapt communication for an intercultural audience. Two of the keys to effective communication—and business—are cultural awareness and respect. Although well intentioned, Nike’s initial fumble was making a slight modification in the air logo design without additional testing or review. Alerted (or confronted, depending on the point of view) to the offense by CAIR, Nike attempted to do damage control and divert the Air shoe stock from “sensitive” markets. CAIR issued a demand for a total recall, referring to the proposed diversion as a cost-benefit analysis proposition that didn’t show respect for Muslims and stating that the logo was offensive regardless of where the shoes were sold. Nike’s subsequent actions reflected its intent to work toward the cultural awareness and engagement end Agostino identified. Timeline excerpts:

- NIKE apologized to the Islamic community for any unintentional offense to their sensibilities.
- NIKE implemented organizational changes to their design department to tighten scrutiny of logo design. Responsibility has been centralized into one department, and all graphic designs must now be approved by a design review board.
- NIKE has taken measures to raise their internal understanding of Islamic issues. Specifically:
 - Worked with CAIR to identify reference materials to include in their Design Library
 - Scheduled a discussion on Islamic imagery at their next Design Summit
 - Centralized the graphic design process to ensure those with familiarity in Islamic issues evaluate all graphic designs
 - Conducted a formal investigation into this issue, and CAIR is satisfied that no deliberate offense to the Islamic community was intended.^[2]

Note: Although Nike was ultimately “cleared” of any ill intent by CAIR, twelve years later the perceived offense was still being heard in the court of the Internet, with agitators “calling into question the faith of people who do not then forward the email on to an x number of other Muslims.”^[3] Perspective point: In the case of cultural relations, the sales adage “it is better to ask forgiveness than permission” does not apply.

1. Jury, Louise. “[Nike to trash trainers that offended Islam](#).” *Independent*, 25 Jun 1997. Web. 26 June 2018.

2. Khan, Mas’ud Ahmed. “[‘Allah’ on Nike Shoes](#),” 20 Oct 2008. Web. 24 April 2018.

3. Ibid.

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