

4.8: Culture, Globalization, and Advertising

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After studying this section, students should be able to do the following:

1. *Describe* the advantages and disadvantages associated with standardization versus localization in global markets.
2. *Explain* the concept of semiotics and its impact on communication and marketing.

Culture is the accumulation of shared meanings, rituals, norms, and traditions among the members of an organization or society. We can't understand advertising unless we consider its cultural context: culture is the lens through which consumers make sense of marketing communications.

Myths and Rituals

In China eight is the luckiest number. The Chinese word for eight is *ba*, which rhymes with *fa*, the Chinese character for wealth. It was no coincidence that the Summer Olympics in Beijing opened on 8/8/08 at 8 p.m.

Myths and rituals are the stories and practices that define a culture. A **myth** is a story with symbolic elements that represents a culture's ideals. Each culture creates its own stories to help its members understand the world. Many companies (and perhaps most advertising agencies) are in a sense in the myth business; they tell us stories that we collectively absorb. Some marketers tell these stories more overtly than others: Disney stages about two thousand Cinderella weddings every year; the princess bride wears a tiara and rides to the park's lakeside wedding pavilion in a horse-drawn coach, complete with two footmen in gray wigs and gold lamé pants. And the Shrek movies remind us that even the ugliest suitor can land the princess if his heart is in the right place. To appreciate some more of the "popular culture gods" we worship, just tune in to next year's Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade and observe the huge balloon figures floating by.

A **ritual** is a set of multiple symbolic behaviors that occurs in a fixed sequence and is repeated periodically. We all engage in private consumer rituals, whether this involves grooming activities that we perform the same way every morning or that obligatory trip to Starbucks on the way to school. And as members of a culture we share public rituals such as Thanksgiving, the Super Bowl, or even tuning in each week to vote on *American Idol*. Advertisers often create messages that tie in to these myths and rituals, such as selling HDTVs for the Super Bowl and Doritos to share with your friends as you watch the game. Sometimes they deliberately create rituals among their customers, be it an evening cleansing ritual for a beauty product or a nine-step pouring ritual to pour a perfect beer.

Is the World Flat?

Since a country's culture is so complex and integral to how we make sense of the world, advertisers constantly grapple with a Big Question: does advertising "travel" from country to country? There are two viewpoints on this important issue.

Yes: Standardize for Greater Efficiency

Some advertisers say that advertising does travel from country to country. Proponents of this viewpoint argue that many cultures, especially those of industrialized countries, have become so homogenized that the same advertising will work throughout the world. By developing one approach for multiple markets, an advertiser benefits from economies of scale because it does not have to incur the substantial time and expense to develop a separate campaign for each culture. Theodore Levitt, *The Marketing Imagination* (New York: The Free Press, 1983). The 2006 World Cup, which was broadcast in 189 countries to one of the biggest global television audiences ever, illustrates how a standardized approach looks. MasterCard ran ads that appeared in thirty-nine countries, so its ad agency came up with a spot called "Fever," in which a hundred-odd cheering fans from thirty countries appear. There's no dialogue, so it works in any language. At the end, the words, "Football fever. Priceless" appeared under the MasterCard logo.

No: Customize to Appeal to Local Tastes

Other advertisers point to huge variations across cultures. They feel that each culture is unique, with its own value system, conventions, and regulations. This perspective argues that each country has a **national character**, a distinctive set of behavior and personality characteristics. An advertiser must therefore tailor its strategy to the sensibilities of each specific culture.

At a basic level, the need to customize is a no-brainer: Consumers speak many different languages, and intended meanings in one tongue don't always translate seamlessly to another. It's unlikely that Bimbo, a popular Mexican bread brand, or Super Piss, a Scandinavian product to unfreeze car locks, would go over well in the United States.

Advertisers have (for the most part) learned the hard way over the years to avoid obvious language gaffes. They often conduct *back-translation*, where a different interpreter retranslates a translated ad back into its original language to catch errors. Still, mistakes do creep in:

- The Scandinavian company that makes Electrolux vacuum cleaners introduced the products in United States with this slogan: "Nothing sucks like an Electrolux."
- When Parker marketed a ballpoint pen in Mexico, its claim "It won't leak in your pocket and embarrass you" came out as "It won't leak in your pocket and make you pregnant."
- *Fresca* (a soft drink) is Mexican slang for "lesbian."
- Ford also ran into problems in Latin markets. The company had to change the names for its Fiera truck and its Caliente and Pinto cars. In Spanish, a *fiera* is an ugly old woman and a *caliente* is slang for a streetwalker; *pinto* is Brazilian slang for "small male appendage."
- Buick had to rename its LaCrosse sedan the Allure in Canada after the company discovered that the name comes awfully close to a Québécois word for masturbation.
- IKEA had to explain that the Gutvik children's bunk bed is named "for a tiny town in Sweden" after German shoppers noted that the name sounded a lot like a phrase that means "good f**." IKEA has yet to issue an explanation for a workbench it calls the Fartfull.

Language aside, there are many instances where cultural sensitivities vary widely, and advertisers that try to export their own symbolism to another country do so at their own peril. In China, an ad for Nippon Paint (a Japanese brand) caused an uproar; it showed a sculptured dragon unable to keep its grip on a pillar coated in smooth wood-coating paint. Dragons are potent symbols in China, and seeing one easily defeated by a Japanese product proved too much.

How Local Do Ads Need to Be?

So what's the correct answer? Although it feels warm and fuzzy to state that people are people wherever you go, in practice the standardization perspective hasn't worked out too well. One reason for the failure of global marketing is that consumers in different countries have varying conventions and customs, so they simply do not use products the same way. Kellogg's, for example, discovered that in Brazil people don't typically eat a big breakfast—they're more likely to eat cereal as a dry snack.

True, some large corporations such as Coca-Cola have been pretty successful at crafting a single, international image. Still, even the soft drink giant must make minor modifications to the way it presents itself in each culture. Although Coke commercials are largely standardized, the company permits local agencies to edit them so they highlight close-ups of local faces. In their product as well as their advertising, Coke modifies the flavors of its product based on the tastes of the locals. These flavors can be taste-tested at Coke Headquarters in Atlanta or World of Coke at Disney's Epcot Center in Orlando.

For a standardized approach to work, it needs to appeal to consumers in each market that share a lot in common (other than perhaps language and allegiance to one soccer team or another). Two types of consumers are good candidates: (1) affluent people who are "global citizens" and who come into contact with ideas from around the world through their travels, business contacts, and media experiences; and (2) young people whose tastes in music and fashion are strongly influenced by MTV and other media that broadcast many of the same images to multiple countries.

Semiotics: What Does It All Mean?

Advertising is about communicating meaning—but how do we know what something means? This question is not as obvious (or perhaps as crazy) as it seems. Very often we make sense of a word, phrase, or image because we've learned to associate extremely subtle cultural distinctions with it. For example (speaking of standardizing advertising across cultures), some Chinese companies use ancient pictograms to create new corporate logos that make sense both to native consumers and to potential customers elsewhere. The Chinese alphabet uses symbols that stand for the words they signify. For example, China Telecom's logo features two interlocking letter Cs that together form the Chinese character for China but also represent the concept of "customer" and "competition," the firm's new focus. In addition, though, the symbol also resembles the horns of an ox, a hard-working animal. The software company Oracle redesigned its logo for the Chinese market by adding three Chinese characters that signify the literal translation of the word *oracle*, "writing on a tortoise shell." The expression dates back to ancient China when prophecies were

scrawled on bones. The California firm was enthusiastic about the translation because it conveyed Oracle's core competency—data storage.

Semiotics is the field of study that looks at the relationship between signs and symbols and their role in assignment of meaning. Advertisers turn to semiotics to help understand what meanings people assign to specific symbols. These may vary across taste cultures and geographies—a spokesperson in a dark business suit signifies one thing in New York City and another in Silicon Valley.

Why do they bother? Their goal is to create product names, brand names, logos, and visual images that people will naturally interpret as meaning something they hope to convey. For example, advertisers might use the image of a cowboy to signify rugged individualism. The challenge is to come up with continually fresh, new, distinctive images that still both carry the intended meaning and stand out in the clutter of ad images.

This task gets interesting because on the surface many marketing images have virtually no literal connection to actual products. What does a green lizard have to do with an insurance company (GEICO)? How can a celebrity like Morgan Fairchild enhance the meaning of a store like Old Navy? Does supermodel Heidi Klum really eat at McDonald's? A computer created the name Exxon—just what does that mean anyway?

Components of Meaning

From a semiotic perspective, every marketing message has three basic components: an *object*, a *sign* (or symbol), and an *interpretant*. The **object** is the product that is the focus of the message (e.g., Burger King's menu items). The **sign** is the sensory image that represents the intended meanings of the object (e.g., a funky "King"). The **interpretant** is the meaning derived (e.g., quirky, cool).

Signs relate to objects in one of three ways: They can resemble objects, be connected to them, or be conventionally tied to them. An **icon** is a sign that resembles the product in some way (e.g., the Apple logo is literally an apple). An **index** is a sign that is connected to a product because they share some property (e.g., the Rock of Gibraltar that stands for Prudential Insurance conveys the property of enduring dependability, which is what the company hopes clients will associate with its policies). A **symbol** is a sign that relates to a product by either conventional or agreed-on associations (e.g., the green Starbucks logo depicting an "earth mother" with long hair conveys environmental responsibility and alignment with nature). A lot of time, thought, and money go into creating brand names and logos that will clearly communicate a product's image. The Nissan Xterra combines the word *terrain* with the letter X, which many young people associate with extreme sports, to give the brand name a cutting-edge, off-road feel.

Hyperreality

One of the hallmarks of modern advertising is that it creates a condition of **hyperreality**. This refers to the process of making real what is initially simulation or "hype." In other words, advertisers create new relationships between objects and interpretants as they invent new connections between products and benefits, such as when they equate Marlboro cigarettes with the American frontier spirit.

Over time, the true relationship between the symbol and reality is no longer possible to discern in a hyperreal environment. The "artificial" associations between product symbols and the real world may take on lives of their own. Fictional characters routinely cross over from make-believe to the real world—sometimes they even "endorse" other products, as when a talking Mrs. Butterworth's syrup bottle shows up in a TV commercial for GEICO insurance.

Key Takaway

Advertising is an integral part of culture, and culture is an integral part of advertising. We need to understand the norms, beliefs, and practices of a culture in order to communicate with people who inhabit it. Many advertising messages relate to a culture's myths and rituals; in some cases they create new ones. Because a culture is so complex, a major strategic question is how much a campaign needs to be customized to each individual country if it is involved in several markets. While some standardized approaches can be effective, overall it is best to take into account local differences to ensure that the meanings the campaign intends to communicate are what the audience receives. Successful execution in these situations requires attention to the semiotics, or meanings, of images and words that represent underlying values and properties.

EXERCISES

1. Identify the arguments for and against standardization versus localization of global products and communications.
2. Define semiotics. Describe how advertisers can use the principles of semiotics to enhance their communications.

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