

Cultural Differences and Their Influence in Marketing Communication

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Communication has always played an important role in our political, religious or cultural life.

From the very first moment of our lives we have been trying to communicate, so to transmit our thoughts and feelings in order to attain our objectives, even if we do this consciously or unconsciously.

Considering communication an important and current developing process, we cannot neglect its historical aspect, based on a very popular story from Bible: Babel Tower. Being afraid of mankind's ability of becoming as knowledgeable as Himself, God adopts the easiest strategy: a mixture of different languages and cultures, so not to allow people to communicate or collaborate in order to reach the absolute truth.

Seen as an impressive obstacle at the beginning, this multitude of traditions, customs, attitudes and values gathered under the name of "cultural differences", which became more and more known and respected within the last decades.

Culture is often at the root of communication challenges. Exploring historical experiences and the ways in which various cultural groups have related to each other is key to opening channels for cross-cultural communication. Becoming more aware of cultural differences, as well as exploring cultural similarities, can help people to communicate with others more effectively.

According to numerous studies, there are specific characteristics that distinguish one culture from other. And as Clement W. Stone says, "There is little difference in people, but that little difference makes a big difference. This little difference is attitude. The big difference is whether is positive or negative."

For example, in some cultures, looking people in the eye is assumed to indicate honesty and straightforwardness. In others it is seen as challenging and rude. Most people in Arab cultures use to keep a permanent visual contact, in opposition with South Asian cultures which consider direct eye contact aggressive and rude. In English culture there is no problem

to look directly in your interlocutor's eye as long as the eye contact is not too much, making them feel uncomfortable.

Unfortunately, some companies' attempts of categorizing cultural characteristics may often end up in cultural stereotypes that are unfair and misleading.

But not only people have to communicate with each other, but also the companies have to inform their clients about the availability of their goods and services, and moreover to present them in an attractive manner, so to increase the number of customers.

There is a wide range of mistakes made by the big companies due to the incomplete process of gathering information about the specific characteristics of every culture.

One example is that of a highly successful ad campaign referring to a popular toothpaste for children, which has boosted sales in the US, Canada, Europe, and Australia, but was not well received in Bangkok, because it was considered "too American".

The ad tried to express the parent's appreciation for the good brushing the child had done with the toothpaste specially designed to appeal to children, through a pat on the head. What the brand manager didn't know was the fact that he was breaking one of the most unwritten rules in many Asian countries, which says that you do not have to touch the head of

another person according to their Thai education allowances.

The style of the brands is even more rooted in the culture. Germans, whose ad culture grew from magazines, want hard facts. Latin cultures are inclined to imagery and may resist hard sell. Asians are sensitive to symbolism, Britans to humor.

It is also very popular the launching of Dacia Nova on the Latin markets. Unfortunately, the buyers were suspicious about this car, especially about its viability, because in the language "no va" means "it is not working". Creating a good product, better than the competition's products is the first step in becoming a successful company on the market, but it is not enough. A right price, a well-organized distribution, and what is more important, an efficient communication is more than necessary, they are mandatory.

There are some rules that a company shouldn't break, rules that are named cultural differences. It is a great mistake trying to use in one of the promotional clips for a detergent on the Chinese market, a housekeeper washing and wearing white clothes. Even if the white reflects better the efficiency of the detergent in cleaning perfectly the laundry, this clip cannot be promoted in China, as long as for these people white is the mourning color.

Multinational companies should also avoid ad campaigns for condoms or alcoholic drinks on Muslim markets, because it is known that these

products are forbidden due to their religion education, or to use some animals in promotional clips, as the cow in India, because this animal is considered saint and the clip can be regarded as offensive and rude.

We all know what happened when a European soap was sold on the Arabian markets. The succession of the three images on the package – from the left to the right: dirty hands, hands holding and using the soap, and finally clean hands – suggested the idea of good and useful products. Just the Arabians are used to read from the right to the left. The effect was contrary to the expectations of the company.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, employees were regarded as simple workers, being remunerated according to their jobs and responsibilities. In those times there were no internal procedures that should have been communicated inside the departments, no team buildings, no training programs developed in order to assure the expected or planned efficiency level or what is more important to provide more satisfaction to the most reliable resources of the company, human resources.

Nowadays, the majority of the enterprises use public relations, one of the marketing communication techniques to satisfy and inform not only the business partners as suppliers, distributors, insurance companies or banks, mass media or clients, but also the employees.

This internal communication is based on respect and understanding of the cultural differences between the employees, especially when they are working in a multinational company.

When one of the employees cannot identify the cultural issues and as a consequence, they cannot take action, this can lead to a cultural shock, recognized by the following symptoms: the employees feel isolated, anxious and worried, their job performance decreases, being also characterized by high energy and helplessness.

Not coping with cultural shock symptoms when they appear can lead to a very negative situation. Awareness of cultural differences and recognizing where cultural differences are at work is the first step toward understanding each other and establishing a positive working environment.

For example in Austria, Great Britain, Israel or Germany it is unacceptable for the managers to benefit from their position in the company, the law and the rules are the same for everybody, otherwise the employees can go on a strike or criticize their superiors' behavior.

It is not the same situation in France, or Latin countries, where the superior is seen as a good parent, but he has also authority in front of his employees, and moreover he can enjoy some special advantages that are not easily obtained by usual workers.

Between these two extremes leading styles we can place USA or Japan, both

of them being characterized by a productive collaboration between manager and simple employee, but the second one accepts the authority of his superior.

Guiding itself after the quote “our client is our master”, a company should make the difference between a North American client and a Latin American, or an Asian or an Arabian one and adapt its marketing communication to each of them, taking in consideration their specific characteristics.

While a North American client or business partner wouldn't accept a meeting delay, considering it respect less and rude, for a Latin American this is absolutely normal. The French one would allow a five minute delay and the Romanian partner would understand a fifteen minute delay.

An official meeting should not be longer than forty-five minutes for a North American client and should be organized and planned long time before. The situation is not the same for Arabians or Asians, because in their mentality to plan some activities can be seen as respect less. They can even forget about the meeting if it is planned long time before, and moreover if the meeting is too short they can misunderstand it, and consider it as an interest fault and coldness.

In conclusion, it is very important for a company to search for these cultural differences and adapt its communication policy especially when it intends to enter new markets where

it is trying to launch existent or new products or to employ people, the most important and reliable resource.

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