



Consider language implications when addressing the global marketplace

By Martha Clement Roberts

In a global marketplace, we must know how different audiences will receive what we say and prepare for the consequences. Our marketing materials may be written for Americans, but what happens when they are read by a prospective investor or customer from another culture? While we may not have edited with an eye toward that audience, are we at least aware of our potential impact, and do we have a remedy, if necessary?

For example, Americans are irritated by fawning, and no one likes a sycophant. But, in parts of Asia, failure to know protocol and demonstrate the proper respect can cost us a relationship. I once mistakenly shook hands with a prospect in the Middle East, and that offense cost me a client. In my zeal to be taken seriously as a professional woman and having confused renowned regional hospitality for peer acceptance, I crossed a line; I extended my hand first and thereby demonstrated at best ignorance of the culture, at worst disrespect for protocol. Neither was my intention, but on their turf, I blew it.

In South Asia, I struggled to decipher the intentions of people who meant “no,” but never actually said it. I learned to avoid the word myself, tried hard to understand the concept of “face,” and swallowed my American candor. The ubiquitous phrase in Malaysia is “no problem.” You may be tempted to translate that literally, but don’t. It’s really an expression of well-meaning reassurance when nothing is actually assured. “Can you deliver the moon by close of business?” “No problem.”

The cultural divide goes beyond language and behavior. Culture also includes our attitudes, assumptions and frames of reference. At a fund-

raiser in Europe, for example, I had trouble soliciting the equivalent of small change for a good cause. Because most Europeans pay enormous amounts in tax, giving money to charity (as opposed to wealthy benefactors supporting the arts) is largely unheard of. Even “good corporate citizenship” resonates more among Americans, and the only way for me to secure European corporate support for the cause was to couch the solicitation as an opportunity to capture the attention of the wealthy expatriate customer base.

Most people in developed and developing countries discourage open challenges of authority. Students are unlikely to argue in class. Few patients question physicians, and, in many workplaces, junior staff will not address superiors by their first names. In many countries, titles take on a significance we may find excessive. However, if we fail to address someone with an honorific, we might fail.

Being successful

How does this translate from relationship building to other PR activities? A beer ad from the 1980s targeting the upscale Latin-American com-

munity depicts an elegantly dressed group celebrating the holidays and drinking beer. The ad backfired because it didn't reflect the reality of the target audience. Beer at a sophisticated Latin-American occasion? No. Shall we schedule a press conference between 1 and 4 p.m. in Sicily? Not if we want anyone to come.

Successful communication is about seizing opportunities as well as avoiding mistakes. Local customs, legends, holidays, celebrities and pastimes of our cultural customers, clients and stakeholders are vital tools. What are they? Ask a local. Think our message is spot on? Test it alongside local talent. Will a focus group leader from outside the test culture get what the group is trying to tell us? No problem.

It is rarely possible to produce messages of creativity and depth that have universal appeal, but if we know how our images, language, timing and tone will be received, our impact will be by choice, not by accident. **T**

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