

## Pitfalls and Rewards in International Marketing

By Jade Boneff-Walsh

Three Americans walk into a bar in a foreign country. The first one, speaking English, asks for a beer. The bartender gives him a shot of bourbon. The second American, seeing the mistake, asks for tequila in the bartender's native language. He gets exactly what he asked for. The third American, encouraged by his colleague's success, tries to repeat the same words for a shot of tequila. He receives, instead, a punch in the nose.

This anecdote reflects three very common situations in international marketing. The first American would be a company that attempts to export without detailed research and preparation. The second American exemplifies the successful exporter, who has done all the homework internally and is ready to stake his claim in a foreign marketplace. Sadly, the third American represents the most costly and damaging attempt to international marketing, and one we see far too often. That type of company tries to copy initiatives that brought success to another company, or worse, attempts to literally translate their brand to a foreign culture/language. The result is usually a painful and costly misunderstanding.

The GM Nova case study has become a favorite among marketing experts to illustrate that point (when General Motors attempted to launch Nova in Latin American markets, it was apparently unaware that "no va" in Spanish means "it doesn't go"). That example doesn't, however, stand alone. There is also the famous Pepsi literal tagline translation to Chinese, which resulted in something along the lines of "We will bring your ancestors back from the dead". As funny as that sounds, Pepsi's executives probably saw very little reason to laugh as their valuable brand became the joke of that country.

Each year, reputable corporations stumble when trying to communicate their message to a different cultural environment. It could happen right here in the US, where we are seeing emergent multicultural markets surpass mainstream America's buying power. The problem goes beyond the language barrier, and encompasses wrong visual, inadequate customer service processes, packaging that is not familiar to consumers, and so on.

Not all damage can be translated into dollars and cents. Market embarrassment deals a hard blow to the brand's credibility, not to mention a mutiny in the making with shareholders, boards of directors and private investors.

Looking at all these challenges, how can a company even consider going global? The answer is actually very simple: because they have to.

The world is getting smaller, which makes potential markets much bigger. Technology and trade policies have allowed us to extend our commercial reach beyond geographic and political boundaries. The last obstacle to overcome is the cultural boundary.

(Cont.)



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The decision to export might be motivated by financial or growth reasons, but it must be supported by an understanding of the company's own internal culture, and its ability to adapt to a new environment. Before packing their garment bag and laptop, executives need to take a hard look at these questions:

1. **Brand Translation** how will your successful brand look and sound in that foreign culture? Can your tagline be translated and keep its message without double meaning? Will your logo remind foreign consumers of a different company (perhaps one you *don't* want to be associated with)? Do your colors represent mourning, or bad luck? What about the name of your company? Can it be pronounced in a different language? Does that pronunciation invoke inadequate parallels?
2. **Product or Service** the same concern about name, colors and taglines should be revisited for each product or service a company plans to export. Does the packaging make sense for consumers in that country?
3. **Marketing Principles** the same questions from the original product/service launch will be asked again. What is the competition like? What is the life cycle of similar products/services in that new environment? What kind of pricing structure will make sense? What are the distribution channels?
4. **Customer Service** do you have bilingual staff? Are they prepared for the cultural differences that go beyond language (personal space, tone of voice, body language, gestures)? Are you prepared to address time zone differences? Is your return/refund/replacement policy in tune with native processes?
5. **Marketing Materials** are all your marketing materials adequately translated to the foreign language, including visual elements and reading flow? Is your website easy to navigate? Does it contain the expected information in the expected format? Does your advertising campaign take into account cultural nuances like music, ethnic representation, and taboo themes?
6. **Personal Protocol** are your representatives armed with knowledge about handshakes, correspondence, dress code, business entertainment, taboo conversation topics, negotiation process, gift giving, and forms of address?

While challenging, international marketing can bring phenomenal growth to a company, both financially and culturally. Going global will strengthen your own brand promise, because you may rediscover its true meaning while attempting to transport it elsewhere.

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