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Lost in Translation: 10 International Marketing Fails

By *Skye Schooley, Staff* August 12, 2019

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Expanding your business internationally can be an exciting step for any entrepreneur, but marketing your product or service abroad requires adequate research and preparation. For businesses to succeed overseas, they must appeal to their international consumer base.

Without the proper considerations, marketing to a foreign audience can have disastrous outcomes. Sending the wrong message can not only discourage consumers from buying your product, but could lead them to boycott your business altogether.

Mariko Amekodomo, CEO and founder of international marketing and consulting agency [Mariko Communications](#), said that one of the most common marketing mistakes businesses make when taking their company international is not understanding their market and audience.

"There can be a cultural gap from one country to the next where campaigns, slogans and initiatives don't resonate or make sense to the end user," Amekodomo told Business News Daily. "Companies can avoid basic marketing mistakes, like slogans that don't translate appropriately, by putting in the due diligence to research and understand the new market."

Conveying your marketing message to an international audience is not as simple as inputting your message into Google Translate and sending it off to consumers. You must understand your audience and the nuances of their language.

10 international marketing mistakes

Many large enterprises have learned the hard way that an ad or marketing campaign that worked domestically did not have the same charm when translated into a foreign language.

Here are 10 well-known companies that have made international marketing translation mistakes.

1. American Motors

A translatable product name is an important element in global branding and can derail a marketing campaign before it even starts. American Motors made this mistake in the early 1970s when naming its midsize car, the Matador. Although the name was intended to conjure images of courage and strength, it may have been a little too aggressive for Puerto Rican consumers – in Spanish, "matador" translates

to "killer." Needless to say, the name didn't instill a great deal of confidence in drivers.

2. BMW

The German car giant BMW made the marketing mistake of improperly using the UAE national anthem in a car commercial. The ad displayed the Al Ain Football Club singing the anthem and then breaking into a run toward several BMW cars when they heard the sound of the engine. Although the brand was trying to arouse intense emotion, it evoked rage instead of passion. Emiratis found it incredibly offensive that the car company suggested their cars were more important than the anthem. The company explained its intent was never to offend, and it soon replaced the ad with a less offensive version.

3. Braniff Airlines

Braniff Airlines got in trouble in 1987 when it promoted its new leather seats south of the border with the same campaign it used in the United States: "Fly in leather." While the Spanish translation, "Vuela en cuero," was appropriate throughout much of Latin America, it had different connotations in Mexico, where the expression also means "fly naked." The promotion may have appealed to some flyers, but it was far from the message the airline intended to send.

4. Coors

American beer maker Coors discovered that slang doesn't always translate well. When launching its "Turn it loose" campaign to Spain, it appears executives forgot to ensure the translation would resonate with consumers. When translated into Spanish, the tagline used an expression that's commonly interpreted as "suffer from diarrhea." While the campaign made its mark on Spanish shoppers, it was for all the wrong reasons.

5. Dolce & Gabbana

A recent international marketing disaster was committed by luxury brand Dolce & Gabbana. It [shared a series of ads](#) on social media in which a Chinese woman attempted to eat Italian food with chopsticks while a male voice gave her

directions. The ad was denounced, and Chinese consumers, one of Dolce & Gabbana's largest markets, threatened to boycott the brand entirely. Even the Chinese government weighed in. When advertising your brand abroad, it is important to create culturally appropriate material that appeals to your international consumer base.

6. Electrolux

Not all translation blunders have been made by U.S.-based companies. Swedish vacuum maker Electrolux got a quick lesson in English slang when it introduced its products in the states. Intending to highlight its vacuum's high power, the Scandinavian company's ad campaign boasted, "Nothing sucks like an Electrolux." While the slogan might have been grammatically correct, it never really took off with U.S. shoppers.

7. Ford

Auto giant Ford found that in Belgium, enticing customers with a dead body in every car isn't the best way to make a sale. Hoping to highlight the cars' excellent manufacturing, Ford launched an ad campaign in the European country that execs thought said, "Every car has a high-quality body." However, when translated, the slogan read, "Every car has a high-quality corpse" – far from the image they were hoping to invoke.

8. HSBC Bank

HSBC Bank was forced to rebrand after a failed international marketing campaign. In 2009, the worldwide bank spent millions of dollars on its 5-year-old "Assume Nothing" campaign. In many countries, the message was translated as "Do Nothing." In the end, the bank scrapped its original campaign and spent \$10 million to change its tagline to "The world's private bank," which has a friendlier translation.

9. KFC

While most businesses try to make a good impression when expanding into a foreign country, fried chicken franchise KFC got off on the wrong foot when

it opened in China in the late 1980s. When the company opened its doors in Beijing, the restaurant accidentally translated its famous slogan "Finger-lickin' good" to "Eat your fingers off." In the end, the blunder didn't hurt KFC too badly: It's the top fast-food restaurant in China today, with more than 5,000 restaurants.

10. Pampers

Sometimes, companies run into problems overseas not just for what they say but how they say it. When Procter & Gamble started selling its Pampers diapers in Japan, the packaging featured an image of a stork delivering a baby. While the imagery may have worked in the U.S., it never caught on with Japanese parents. After some research, the company learned that customers were concerned and confused by the image of a stork on the packaging. The tale of a stork delivering a baby to parents isn't part of Japanese folklore. There, stories tell of giant floating peaches bringing babies to awaiting parents.

How to avoid international marketing mistakes

If you are taking your brand global, there are a few steps you can take to avoid international marketing fails like those described above. Identify whom you are targeting with your marketing strategy, and modify your advertising accordingly.

Vera Mirzoyan, an international marketing specialist at [AIST Global](#), said customization is key, especially when considering language, culture, visuals, gestures and trends.

"Everything should be customized to the market your brand is introduced in," said Mirzoyan. "Learn as much about the destination of your brand as possible to ensure the success of your business."

A simple yet crucial marketing tactic is to localize your content instead of simply translating the language. Scott Kellner, vice president of marketing at global marketing agency [George P. Johnson](#), said that localization for each country or region is imperative to communicate nuance, which is often the hallmark of positioning and taglines.

"It is imperative to study the culture and the way people communicate on a daily basis, and to also ensure you have people on the team who know the culture you're marketing to inside and out to ensure your message will be interpreted in a way that resonates rather than upsets," said Kellner.

Amekodommo said the medium of communication is also an important factor to consider when creating a global marketing strategy. "Just because a Facebook campaign might have great results in the U.S. doesn't mean the same campaign will have similar results on WeChat."

Amekodommo and Kellner both suggest cross-referencing your campaign with local experts before you promote it. This will help you gain insider oversight and feedback.

"Do not publish, share or promote anything on an international scale without cross-referencing the content with individuals from the respective area who are fluent in the language and culture," Kellner said. "Ensure you avoid idioms, jargon or regional diction that could otherwise be misinterpreted."

When in doubt, [look to successful marketing ads in your target country](#) to see what tactics are effective in that market.

How to correct international marketing mistakes

Whether you unintentionally create a commercial that's ill-received or a slogan that just doesn't translate well for an international audience, correct your marketing mistake by addressing it head-on.

If your campaign is offensive, take responsibility and apologize. Since [apologies differ across the world](#), make sure your public statement is tailored to resonate with the culture you are trying to reach.

Amekodommo recommended hiring a local agency or consultant to help you strategize new campaigns to handle the bad press.

"We see it all the time in China as Western campaigns never translate correctly, and it potentially becomes entertaining, because it's expected foreigners will make these mistakes," she said. "Once the original humiliation has died down, use the

local agency or consultant to create new campaigns that will truly connect with audiences."

Additional reporting by Chad Brooks.

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