

## Some Humorous Cross-Cultural Advertising Gaffes!

*When a passenger of foot heave in sight,  
tootle the horn. Trumpet him melodiously  
at first, but if he still obstacles your  
passage tootle him with vigor."*

-From a brochure at a Tokyo car rental firm

Many of you may have heard of these infamous errors made by multinational corporations when translating brands or slogans abroad. Language, of course, is only one of many cultural barriers you may have to bridge with your partner organization. We hope this list will entertain you while giving important insight on the potential pitfalls of cross culture communication and serving as a reminder of the importance of a good sense of humor! American and Canadian groups may need to explain to their international partners some of the finer meanings of certain words used below.

- ❖ When Kentucky Fried Chicken entered the Chinese market, to their horror they discovered that their slogan "finger lickin' good" came out as "eat your fingers off"
- ❖ Chinese translation also proved difficult for Coke, which took two tries to get it right. They first tried Ke-kou-ke-la because when pronounced it sounded roughly like Coca-Cola. It wasn't until after thousands of signs had been printed that they discovered that the phrase means "bite the wax tadpole" or "female horse stuffed with wax", depending on the dialect. Second time around things worked out much better. After researching 40,000 Chinese characters, Coke came up with "ko-kou-ko-le" which translates roughly to the much more appropriate "happiness in the mouth".
- ❖ Things weren't much easier for Coke's arch-rival Pepsi. When they entered the Chinese market a few years ago, the translation of their slogan "Pepsi Brings you Back to Life" was a little more literal than they intended. In Chinese, the slogan meant, "Pepsi Brings Your Ancestors Back from the Grave".
- ❖ But it's not just in Asian markets that soft drinks makers have problems. In Italy, a campaign for "Schweppes Tonic Water" translated the name into the much less thirst quenching "Schweppes Toilet Water".
- ❖ The American slogan for Salem cigarettes, "Salem – Feeling Free," got translated in the Japanese market into "When smoking Salem, you feel so refreshed that your mind seems to be free and empty."
- ❖ General Motors had a perplexing problem when they introduced the Chevy Nova in South America. Despite their best efforts, they weren't selling many cars. They finally realized that in Spanish, "nova" means "it won't go". Sales improved dramatically after the car was renamed the "Caribe."
- ❖ Things weren't any better for Ford when they introduced the Pinto in Brazil. After watching sales go nowhere, the company learned that "Pinto" is Brazilian slang for "tiny male genitals." Ford pried the nameplates off all of the cars and substituted them with "Corcel," which means horse.
- ❖ Sometimes it's one word of a slogan that changes the whole meaning. When Parker Pen marketed a ballpoint pen in Mexico, its ads were supposed to say "It won't leak in your pocket and embarrass you." However, the company mistakenly thought the Spanish word "embarazar" meant embarrass. Instead the ads said "It won't leak in your pocket and make you pregnant."
- ❖ Foreign companies have similar problems when they enter English speaking markets. Japan's second-largest tourist agency was mystified when it expanded to English-speaking countries and began receiving requests for unusual sex tours. Upon finding out why, the owners of the Kinki Nippon Tourist Company changed its name. The company didn't change the name of all its divisions though. Visitors to Japan still have the opportunity to take a ride on the Kinki Nippon Railway.
- ❖ When Braniff translated a slogan touting its upholstery, "Fly in Leather," it came out in Spanish as "Fly Naked."
- ❖ Coors put its slogan, "Turn It Loose," into Spanish, where it was read as "Suffer From Diarrhea."
- ❖ The Dairy Association's huge success with the campaign "Got Milk?" prompted them to expand advertising to Mexico. It was soon brought to their attention the Spanish translation read "Are you lactating?"
- ❖ Scandinavian vacuum manufacturer Electrolux used the following in an American campaign: "Nothing sucks like an Electrolux"
- ❖ Clairol introduced the "Mist Stick," a curling iron, into Germany only to find out that "mist" is slang for manure.
- ❖ An American T-shirt maker in Miami printed shirts for the Spanish market which promoted the Pope's visit. Instead of "I Saw the Pope" (el Papa), the shirts read "I Saw the Potato" (la papa)

### And some more differences in cross-cultural communication styles to consider...

From <http://www.us-expatriate-handbook.com/chpt3.htm>:

"Consider the story of an American executive who was designated to deliver a formal presentation at a Japanese conference. During her presentation, the woman became acutely aware of a man in the audience who proceeded to make strange faces at her. Following the conclusion of her presentation, the woman voiced her disapproval to the Japanese hosts. And while an apology was immediately provided, it was discovered that the man in the audience had not intended to offend the American speaker. He simply became so fixated on her facial gestures that he inadvertently began imitating her. Should this story be considered an isolated incident of a simple misunderstanding or is this a prime example of everyday miscommunication between cultures? Many experts would support the second conclusion.

"Most of the problems caused by cross-cultural clashes are usually the result of the failure by some or all parties involved to recognize and account for differences in culturally-based communication styles. They assume that all peoples communicate using the same set of modes and rules (many of which, like body language styles, are unconsciously held). For example, numerous professionals from the US make the mistake of assuming that all people want to be spoken to informally, just as they assume that simple body gestures strike the same chord in any culture, or the notion that an openly frank style of negotiating is most appreciated.

"We should first realize that there is no such thing as a universal form of communication. Take the simple gesture of a smile. It is not unusual for Americans to exchange smiles with complete strangers. We smile at people on the street, at the airport, in restaurants, shopping malls and so on. We consider it a friendly gesture. However, in other cultures a smile can take on a completely different meaning. A smile can be considered insulting or it can signal embarrassment. Many Americans fail to realize that common gestures such as shrugging one's shoulders or scratching one's forehead can be completely misinterpreted by someone from another country.

"Each culture has its own rules of communication. A French executive would probably be offended if a new acquaintance were to address him by his first name. Giving the "thumbs up" signal in Australia is impolite. And a display of frankness so common to Americans perpetuates the Japanese impression that the American people exhibit a lack of discipline. Even though such cultural collisions often elicit negative feedback, they rarely provoke extreme hostility. Instead, committing a cultural taboo is usually regarded as improper, discourteous, or disrespectful. The individual who has the misfortune of committing the taboo is "rewarded" with expressions of anger or flat-out silence, which in turn can be misinterpreted. Such mishaps in communication almost always serve to diminish one's credibility.

"Usually, cross-cultural gaffes stem from misjudging situations that involve mingling and communicating with others. These include: the dress code for appointments, the manner in which we introduce ourselves and greet others, expressing thanks to the hosts as well as proper etiquette for the presentation of gifts. While the majority of Americans consider such events to be very routine, the fact remains that the interpretation of these social commitments varies from country to country. If we fail to educate ourselves in advance as to what is and what isn't acceptable, then we prime ourselves for unintentional embarrassment, possibly at the worst given moment.

"Miscalculating the pertinence of cross-cultural communications can be counter-productive at best, or abysmal at worst. Cultural differences with regard to eye contact, when it is acceptable to smile, and name protocol for addressing foreign counterparts are all qualities that dramatically impact all angles of negotiation and interpersonal communication. For example, the word "no" is a response that the Japanese tend to avoid altogether. As strange as it may seem, if they are not optimistic about a given proposal, rather than tell you in so many words, they may choose to make a counter inquiry, they may avoid eye contact with you, or they may simply choose to walk away. Their answer is for all practical purposes spelled out in their behavior. Obviously, this can be very frustrating to American negotiators who are used to a straight forward "yes" or "no." Understanding and accepting cultural differences is critical if one expects to be successful in an overseas assignment."