



Cultural differences

The world seems smaller than it once was due to globalization. It is faster and cheaper than ever before to travel vast distances. This makes it easier to use suppliers and resellers that are far removed from your location. Also the Internet has opened up the world to us and given us, as customers, a much broader spectrum of products and services to choose from. However, with globalization comes the difficulty of knowing exactly who your customers are and what cultural expectations they have.

WHAT IS CULTURE?

To put it very simply, culture means the common experiences, beliefs and accepted social behaviour we share within a community. When we try to understand something new, we filter the information through what we know and believe.

A community could be a country, a region, age, gender, education, language, sexual orientation, social standing, lifestyle or religion. This means a person could belong to more than one community. You could be born into a working class family, work hard and become very successful. You end up living in an upper class home with designer furniture and lead a very different life from that of your parents. However, your core values that you learned as a child, will always be with you even though you change your lifestyle and where you choose to live.

You could now say you are part of two communities, that from which you came, and the one you moved in to. You have expanded your knowledge and now filter new information through your collected experiences.

Culture is how you make sense of the world.

VERBAL & NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

When we meet another person and strike up a conversation with that person, we communicate through both verbal and non-verbal communication. The spoken is only around ten percent of what we actually say. The other parts are our tone of voice, which is about thirty-five percent, and our body language, which is as much as fifty percent of our communication. This shows you how important it is to know as much as possible when you want to do business in another country.

- Eye contact; in some countries eye contact means you are an honest and trustworthy person and in others it's considered disrespectful or aggressive.
 - In most western countries a certain eye contact is expected. However holding ones gaze for too long can make people feel uncomfortable.



- In Arab countries people expect you to keep eye contact, by not doing so you could be regarded as having a lack of respect of the other person. However eye contact between men and women can be seen as flirtatious or threatening. Men of these communities who do not make eye contact with women and vice versa.
- In South Asia eye contact is considered rude.
- In Sweden direct eye contact is important. Not doing so will be interpreted as you are not interested in having contact with the person.
- Personal space; we all have our own rules as to how close we like standing to another person. This space can be bigger or smaller depending on who we are talking to, the situation and our cultural upbringing.
 - We vary our distance because we want to:
 - keep away from someone we dislike
 - make sure we are not suddenly attacked
 - be intimate with someone
 - communicate easier
 - to threaten someone by invading their space

Finally, if you are not sure how to behave, look around at the locals to see what they do. Don't be afraid to ask someone if you want to act correctly. Most business people have been in the same situation and know how hard it can be to do the "right" thing. In general people like telling foreigners about their own culture. It could make for an interesting dinner conversation.

YOUR MESSAGE

Words are amazing. You can get people to buy things and convince them to vote for a certain party. But you have to know how to use them correctly. This is hard enough in your own language; however to get the same meaning in a different language is even tougher. Most of us have encountered some really weird translation in manuals and adverts. Our recommendation is to always have a native copywriter look at your text and rewrite the message so that it works in that particular country.

IMAGERY

Design & colour choice

- Choose your images carefully; an image can decide whether a person will read your message or not. Remember that images as well as words can have different meaning cross culture. Make sure to contact a native person or a person with great knowledge of the culture before any big campaigns are launched.
- Symbols and numbers can also have different meanings in different cultures; shooting stars for a Chinese person symbols death and to Koreans the butterfly symbols



masculinity. The number 4 in China, Japan and Korea represents death where as number 8 in China equals prosperity and fortune.

- When writing the name of a living Japanese and Korean person, never use red colour as it is used to write the names of the diseased. You should also refrain from typing a business letter in red ink as it signals the end, or death, of a relationship.
- The use of white space in design has been argued cross-culturally for quite some time now. Generally, you can say that northern Europeans values white space and North Americans like the space filled.
- Scandinavians prefer a subtle colour choice where as South and North Americans like a fuller colour palette.
- White is the colour of purity and innocence in the West, but in East it's a sign of funerals and mourning.

There is much to learn about different cultures and how to design and behave for the best business practice. On the Internet you will find a lot of sites, which talks about these issues. But the best way to learn is perhaps through experience and sharing information with people around the world. Why not start your own networks to swap experiences and learn from each other?