

ONE

The Paradoxes in Global Marketing Communications

In a meeting between the Duke of Wellington and Napoleon after the battle of Waterloo, Wellington is said to have reproached Napoleon with the words, "You fight for power, we fight for honor," and Napoleon is said to have answered: "Yes, one always fights for what one does not have."

One tends to fight for what one does not have; one needs to learn skills one does not have. What seems paradoxical is that skills that come automatically in one part of the world have to be learned in another part of the world. Although teamwork training is big business in the United States, there is hardly a market for it in Japan. Individualistic behavior comes spontaneously to Americans, but the Japanese have to learn it. The Japanese, for whom group values are so important, have to learn to be more self-reliant and to take greater responsibility for their own actions. Leadership is a concept that comes automatically to the French: You have it or you don't. There is no proper word for leadership in either the French or the Spanish languages. In the United States, leadership is an integral part of primary education; children in elementary schools take turns being class leader for the day and may be publicly honored for it. American leaders are the heroes of capitalism; they are admired, whether they succeed or fail. Japanese leaders are faceless.

Chaos is said to be a key ingredient of Silicon Valley's success. But chaos management has not been accepted as a management style in all of corporate America because it conflicts with the desire for control. It is paradoxical to suggest that the Germans would benefit by a bit more chaos instead of rules. The Germans cannot thrive on chaos. On the contrary, German life is highly structured.

Tradition and modernity are seen as contradictions in the West; in Japan, they go side by side. The Japanese can be conservative and at the same time attracted by new

2 GLOBAL MARKETING AND ADVERTISING

ways. Whereas in the West the old must be discarded and the new must be embraced, in much of Asia, the traditional is exploited, recycled into modern ways of life.

The Value Paradox

Paradoxical values are found within cultures and between cultures. Every culture has its opposing values. Equality is an American core value, yet in the United States in particular, the gap between rich and poor is widening. What is confusing in the global marketplace is that certain opposing values of one culture also exist in other cultures but in reverse. An example is the individual freedom-belonging paradox. Individualism is a strong element of American society, and so is the need to belong. It seems paradoxical that both freedom and belonging are strong values of a single culture. The explanation is that in an individualistic society where people want to “do things their own way,” “go it alone,” people tend to become lonely if they don’t make an effort to belong. The reverse is found in Japan where belonging is an integral part of society, and it takes an effort to behave in an individualistic way. According to the American Society of Association Executives in Washington, D.C., in 1995 there were some 100,000 associations and clubs in America. Seven of every 10 Americans belong to at least one club.¹ There is no such phenomenon in Japan.

This is what I call a *value paradox*. Paradoxes are statements that seem contradictory but are actually true. Value paradoxes are found in the opposing values in value systems such as freedom-belonging, tradition-innovation, order-chaos. Value paradoxes are part of people’s systems; they reflect the *desirable* versus the *desired* in life. On the one hand, one should not sin; on the other hand, most of us do sin now and again. We don’t want to be fat, we should eat healthy food, yet we do eat chocolate or drink beer, and we get fat. Value paradoxes reflect the contradictory and meaningful things in life. A value paradox reflects a dilemma. It includes choice, preferring the thing one ought to do over what one wants to do or the other way round. Value paradoxes reflect people’s motives and include the elements that trigger people’s feelings and emotions, and thus they are used in marketing and advertising. Because the important value paradoxes vary by culture, value-adding advertising cannot be exported from one culture to another without losing effectiveness.

The value “belonging” is frequently found in American advertising, particularly in the sentimental, emotional form. But appeals to individualism, such as “go your own way,” “made for the individual,” and egoism are found next to the quintessential American homecoming feelings. Both go together. For the Japanese, belonging is such an implicit part of life that it is not a value to be used as an appeal in Japanese advertising. The opposite will be of greater importance: individuality or independence, which expresses the desire to be oneself, to be able to succeed. Advertising often appeals to what is lacking in society. Where family values are lacking, advertising will show happy families. The happy family is a popular item in North American advertising but less frequently used in Japanese advertising.

Those who do not understand the value paradoxes in global cultures may easily delude themselves and think that the world is becoming one global culture with

similar values. There may be similar values, but one culture's values may be the reverse of those in another culture.

It is the complexity of multiple paradoxes that makes communication in the global marketplace so difficult. Not all paradoxes are as obvious as the individual freedom-belonging paradox. The West-East paradoxes are strongest and seemingly obvious, but there is also a variety of paradoxes within regions. Within Europe, value paradoxes vary from freedom-order in Germany to freedom-affiliation in the Netherlands and freedom-dependence in France. The Germans cherish individual freedom, but too much freedom leads to disorder. The Dutch and Scandinavians value individual freedom, but affiliation needs are sometimes stronger. For the French, individual freedom goes along with dependence on power holders. When asked about the need for information, in the south of Europe consumers say they want more information than they say they do in the north, but they don't use it. If you ask them which information sources they have consulted before making a purchase, more say "none" in the South than in the North. This can be explained by culture (see Chapter 7).

People's value paradoxes are part of the culture of the country in which they grow up. It takes some reflection to discover one's own value paradoxes, and it is much more difficult to find the value paradoxes in other cultures. The value paradox concept is an integral part of this book. Examples of paradoxes in appeals in advertising will be given in Chapter 8.

The Global-Local Paradox

"Think global, act local" is a paradox. Thinking and behavior are equally influenced by culture. Someone who thinks globally is still a product of his or her own culture. Global thinking by a person of one culture may easily result in what is perceived as cultural imperialism by people of another culture. The way people think and perceive is guided by the framework of their own culture. One is inclined to see similarities from the framework of one's own culture. These similarities are often pseudosimilarities. They are based on what one wants to see, not on what is actually there. Perception of the phenomenon of Japanese individuality as a sign of Westernization of the Japanese is an example of such misperception. Watching young people worldwide drinking Coca-Cola or wearing jeans may result in thinking they are becoming the same, but there is ample evidence that to consumers the local is more meaningful than the global. For example, people increasingly prefer local music. In 2002 in the United States, 93% of music sold was by local artists. In Japan, it was 74% and across Europe over 50%.²

The Technology Paradox

Technological development is increasingly global, but the argument that technological development makes us global and leads toward similar needs for similar products is not correct. There is great variety in the adoption of technological

4 GLOBAL MARKETING AND ADVERTISING

innovations and usage of technological products. Developed Japan could be expected to have as many personal computers per capita as the United States, but it does not. In 2001, Japan had 35 computers per 100 people as compared with 63 in the United States, 46 in Canada, 37 in Britain, 43 in the Netherlands, 34 in France, 19 in Italy, and 17 in Spain.³ Whereas in 2003, 35% of the Danes accessed the Internet every day, 17% of the British and only 4% of the Greeks did.⁴ Cultural values can best explain these differences, in particular Hofstede's model of national culture that is used throughout this book. Statistical analysis of ownership and usage of technological products confirms that convergence of technology is not the same as convergence of people's values and habits. As early as the 1960s, the Canadian media philosopher Marshall McLuhan,⁵ who coined the concept of the "global village," said that new media technology acts as extensions of human beings and enhances existing human activities. He said that the new media could make what is similar more similar and what is different more different. Indeed, technology reinforces the differences and together with increased wealth leads to divergent behavior instead of convergence. People will embrace new technology to do the things they are used to, but in a nicer or more efficient way. This will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 2.

The Media Paradox

The growing number of satellites is supposed to create a global village in which anybody can receive any TV channel. This is theory. In reality, there is no viewer freedom. Increasingly, local cable companies are deciding what local viewers will see: usually local programs. A satellite dish is no solution, as a variety of techniques and coding systems across countries makes it virtually impossible to receive what is available. In some ways, in the less technologically advanced, noncommercialized Europe of the past when the airwaves were government controlled, there was more freedom to receive television programs from other countries than there is with the new technology.

Paradoxes in Marketing Theory

The concept of marketing and many of the theories of consumer behavior with respect to consumption, buying, and communication originated in the United States and have been copied and used by teachers in many other cultures. There is little evidence of meaningful adaptations of these theories to other cultures. As a result, numerous students of marketing and advertising have learned marketing practice and theory that reflects American values and thinking patterns that may not always fit well in their own environment. This has led to many paradoxical concepts.

Local Markets Are People, Global Markets Are Products

Markets are people, not products. There may be global products, but there are no global people. There may be global brands, but there are no global motivations

for buying those brands. The Sony Walkman is often used as an example of a global product, developed for global consumers with global needs, who would use it with similar motives. That is not true: There are two distinctly different motives for using that product. In the Western world, the motive is that of enjoyment of music without being disturbed by others. This was not the motive for Masaru Ibuka—cofounder with Akio Morita of the Sony Corporation—for inventing the Walkman. He wanted to listen to music without disturbing others.⁶

Advertisers take great pains to try to understand certain subcultures, such as youth culture, knowing that they can appeal to the young only if they address them in the right way. When it comes to addressing adult women or men of different national cultures with very different value systems, many advertisers suddenly think one standard message is sufficient. This is paradoxical behavior.

The decision to standardize has more to do with corporate culture than with the culture of markets and nations. Many global advertisers are not market oriented; they are product oriented. They search for that one universal great idea to sell their one standard product to assumed universal, global consumers. This is demonstrated by the fact that economies of scale are most often mentioned as cost-saving arguments for standardization. In reality, the cost of developing one standard idea that truly crosses borders is very high.

In order to get consensus over a “great idea” or “global platform,” product managers, marketing managers, country managers, advertising managers, account supervisors, account directors, and creative directors of advertising agencies and the like in various countries have to get together, have to organize meetings and travel. Then, in the end, it appears that many adaptations are needed. Voice-overs or subtitles have to be made, pack shots must be changed, and texts have to be translated, adapted, or rewritten. Slogans developed for global use have to be translated, and in the end some translations appear to include subtle changes of meaning influenced by culture. An example is how Philips’s statement, “Let’s make things better,” was translated into Spanish as *Juntos hacemos tu vida mejor*, into Italian as *Miglioramo il tuo mondo*, and into French as *Faisons toujours mieux*.

Not only do people of different countries speak different languages; their languages also represent different worldviews. Translations do not uncover the different worldviews, different ways of thinking, and different intellectual styles. International advertising consultant Simon Anholt⁷ says, “Translating advertising copy is like painting the tip of an iceberg and hoping the whole thing will turn red.” Advertising is more than words; it is made of culture.

The Universal and the Particular

Marketing and advertising textbooks generally draw from the social sciences: psychology, sociology, and economics. Theories developed in one particular culture are generally presented as universal and do not differentiate for the particularities of other cultures. Many of these theories draw from studies conducted in the United States yet are presented as universal. Americans also have adopted theories developed by philosophers of other cultures. For example, Freud’s philosophy is

6 GLOBAL MARKETING AND ADVERTISING

found in many textbooks, regardless of the fact that a philosophy of someone of Austrian-Hungarian origin might not work as well in the Anglo-Saxon world. Rarely is the culture of origin of such concepts and theories taken into account when presenting them in books on consumer behavior. Motivational segmentation methods based on Freud's theories are offered to global advertisers,⁸ although these theories are valid only for a limited number of cultures.

Some products are perceived as universal and culture-free, but the way they are used is not culture-free. Motives for using them vary. Certain global brands have become so ubiquitous that marketers think they satisfy universal needs. In reality, there are few truly global brands. Most reflect the culture of the home country. Coca-Cola and McDonald's reflect American values, and Gucci carefully keeps reflecting Italian culture.

Focus on a Unique Individual

Theories of buying behavior, decision making, and communication behavior generally describe individuals of Western societies, who are defined as unique personalities. When the influence of groups on individual buying behavior is considered from the sociological perspective, the individual is implicitly unique, as in Western societies. The group dynamics of Eastern societies are ignored.

The concepts of self and personality that are the basis of Western consumer behavior theories are drawn from Anglo-Saxon psychological research and include the hypothesis that people will buy products that are compatible with their self-concept or that will enhance their ideal self-image. Culture plays an important role in the construal of self and in the perception of ideal images. An example is the ideal woman's figure. Advertising in the Western world has been accused of propagating the ideal woman's figure as slim: The figure of the Barbie doll has become a white adolescent ideal. But even within the United States, the degree to which this is perceived as ideal varies: Contrary to white teens, black teens connect a full figure, rather than a slim one, with health and fertility.⁹

Modern branding theory was developed in the United States and the United Kingdom and uses concepts from Western psychology. Metaphors such as brand identity and brand personality are used and exported to countries in which words like *identity* or *personality* do not even exist in the local language. Asking people about "brand personality" in Asia will result in irrelevant answers.

The Paradoxes in Consumer Trends

The marketing and advertising profession thrives on trends, to point out what is new and fashionable. Many of what are presented as consumer trends to be exploited in marketing are based on value paradoxes. In the 1990s, for example, the trend of "cocooning"—withdrawing from social life into the home—was a reaction to a too competitive and individualistic life. One ought to go out into the world all alone and succeed, but in reality one wants the protection of the home. Also, hedonism as a

trend with respect to food can never be a global trend. It is related to what the individual *should* do versus actually *does* do with respect to food: eating light products, remaining slim and healthy—or splurging. What is desirable or desired with respect to food and health varies by culture. There are few countries in which more extremes are found with respect to food and health than the United States—very thin next to very fat people and lots of junk food next to a variety of low-calorie foods. In France and Spain, food is more an element of social and family life.

“Trends,” or temporary movements in society, may reflect a reaction to a too strong focus on the desirable. Trends or fads in business and management tend to reflect actual culture and of that culture the gap between the desirable and the desired. Chaos management may be the desired, but it conflicts with the desirable: control.

The Global Advertising Paradox

The anthropologist McCracken¹⁰ points out that advertising works as a method of meaning transfer by bringing the consumer good and a representation of the culturally constituted world together within the frame of a particular advertisement. A creative director decides how the culturally constituted world is portrayed in an advertisement and the decision makers at the company decide if that view reflects their cultural framework. This begs the question of what advertising represents—the culture of the consumer or the culture of the company. To give an example: In German advertising, fewer humorous devices are used than in British advertising. Does this reflect that German consumers have less sense of humor? No, it does not. It reflects the risk-avoiding attitude of German management.

Ideally, effective advertising means that the values in the message match the values of the receiver. It is the culture of the consumer that should be reflected in advertising. Analysis of advertisements in international media such as *Newsweek*, *BusinessWeek*, and CNN shows that, in reality, international advertisers target international audiences with their home country's value system. Thus, the full potential of cross-border media is not used.

For a long time, international advertising strategists in the United States have thought that emotional or “feeling” appeals would travel better than “thinking” appeals because of the assumed universality of human values. Thus, much standardized international advertising has included appeals like happiness and love. Analysis of international advertising shows that this practice of using values in global advertising is mainly a U.S. practice. European companies focus more on innovative product attributes that are communicated in a culturally relevant way. This is discussed further in Chapters 7 and 10.

It is paradoxical that global advertisers prefer to develop what is universal instead of what should appeal to specific people in particular. In an age of increasing communication overload, people's selective perception mechanism will work harder. Add to that an increased amount of advertising reflecting cultural values that are not theirs, and not much imagination is needed to understand why advertising effectiveness is decreasing. On the one hand, advertisers know that advertising

8 GLOBAL MARKETING AND ADVERTISING

must be understood quickly, that instant recognition is necessary because there generally is little time to convey a message. On the other hand, global advertisers think they can export messages made for their own home culture to other, very different cultures. If they travel to other countries themselves, they employ travel agencies and read detailed travel guides. Yet they think that their messages can travel without guidance.

Effective Advertising Needs a Shared Culture

Common assumptions are that an advertisement will be effective if the viewer or reader decodes the advertisement successfully, if there is a meaningful transfer of “properties.” The creator of the advertisement selects the elements of the advertisement according to his or her expectations about how the audience will respond, assuming shared cultural conventions. Receivers of the message must use the same conventions to evaluate the stimulus in order to be able to formulate the response. Thus, when developing one single idea for the whole world, or one global stimulus for different cultures, the assumption is that responses will be similar, too. This will only happen if sender and receiver share one culture. If there is no shared culture, the response is likely to be different from what is intended and expected. This does not result in effective advertising.

For cost efficiency reasons, companies prefer to standardize products and advertising. However, products may be similar, but usage and buying motives vary for most products. Levi’s jeans may be the same all over the world, but for some they are the worker’s outfit, for others they reflect an American lifestyle, whereas again for others they provide prestige. If buying motives for standardized products vary by country or area, how can a standardized advertising campaign be equally effective in all countries? Arguments for standardized advertising are all about standardizing the stimulus without taking into consideration the response to standardized stimuli. In this age of accountability, much is written about cost efficiency in the production of advertising, but little is written about the effectiveness of standardized advertising. The cost savings of a standardized campaign are easily offset by wasted media expenditures caused by less effective advertising messages. One of the reasons may well be that there is so little fundamental research on how advertising works. The relationship between advertising and culture will be discussed in Chapter 7.

How Advertising Works

There are continuous heated discussions among researchers across countries about how advertising works. Time and again, new models are developed. The assumption that the way advertising works may be related to culture is rarely included. Because the United States has a longer research history than other countries, its methods and styles are often used in cross-cultural advertising research. As a result, a characteristic of most studies is their “American-ness.” Hypotheses are

based on American assumptions, and research methodology is based on American conventions and philosophies of how advertising works. This is the ethnocentric approach. American concepts do not necessarily explain how advertising works in other cultures.

Diverse thinking patterns make advertising people think differently about how advertising works. Defining advertising primarily as “persuasive communication,” for example, is typical of the Anglo-Saxon intellectual style, but it is not a universal way of thinking. I have been involved in advertising education in the Netherlands from 1971 onward, at a time when advertising theory was developed from American textbooks. The concept of persuasive communication, ubiquitous in American textbooks, has not become a core concept in Dutch advertising theory, although it is used in advertising effectiveness research by multinationals. The persuasion and “hard sell” models are specifically American. They are too often used as the basis for explaining how advertising works in other cultures.

An example of such cultural blindness is asking “how the persuasive process is supposed to work at the individual level in Japan.”¹¹ Persuasiveness is not an ingredient of Japanese advertising, and the collectivistic nature of Japanese culture hardly includes an “effect at the individual level.” Categorizing advertising according to hard sell versus soft sell is part of the American framework but is not practiced solely by American researchers. In fact, the practice is also adopted by researchers in other cultures where it does not apply.

The Research Paradox

By definition, value and lifestyle research is culture-bound, yet studies based on the value patterns of one culture are indiscriminately exported to other cultures. Value and lifestyle studies developed in the United States are used in Europe; and within Europe, studies developed in one country are sold to other countries as if equally valid. For example, Belgian value studies have been sold to the Netherlands, although the value systems of these markets are very different.

Although a large part of the world uses more visuals and symbols in advertising than words, the American term used for advertising research is *copy research*. This reflects a strong bias toward valuing the verbal and factual elements of advertising over the visual elements. The frameworks of researchers of one culture are systematically used to measure effectiveness in other cultures.

Much of the literature on the cross-cultural aspects of international advertising describes studies of advertising of different countries by comparative analysis of the content of advertising. The methods used are based on the conventions of the culture of the researcher, not on the culture of the material to be analyzed.

General findings of cross-cultural studies are that advertising styles vary widely across nations, but very few studies explain why. What these studies usually analyze is the stimulus, the symbols that a creative director has selected from her or his cultural frame of mind. Comparisons of audiences’ assumed differences are usually crude. An example is comparing the United States, Europe, and Asia, or “developed” markets with “developing” markets, assuming that these categories include

cultures with similar motivations or response patterns. There are few studies that attempt to match stimulus and response across cultures. In order to do this, the cultures of both the sender and the receiver must be studied.

When testing advertising, companies try to economize by selecting one or two countries in an area like Europe that should be representative of Europe. As the reader will discover when reading this book, this is very dangerous. One country is never culturally representative for the whole of Europe. An advertisement that is effective in France will not necessarily be effective in Germany or the United Kingdom.

The Culture Paradigm

Instead of converging with increased wealth, globalization, and technology, consumer behavior diverges across countries. As the British sociologist Anthony Giddens¹² says, "Globalization is the reason for the revival of local cultural identities in different parts of the world." With greater wealth, in what I call postscarcity societies,¹³ consumers are increasingly able to express their values, and these values vary across cultures. In Europe, where countries are converging with respect to national wealth and where differences in consumer behavior are persistent, the only variable that can explain differences in consumer behavior across countries is culture. International marketers are only slowly becoming aware of the importance of culture. In the past, culture was viewed as something intangible that could not be quantified, but now several cultural models are available that help structure cultural differences. Such models will be discussed in Chapter 4. One of these models, by Geert Hofstede, allows quantifying cultural differences and will be used throughout this book to explain the various aspects of consumer behavior that are influenced by culture. This is important for CEOs and marketers of international companies who tend to ask for hard data when they want to develop international marketing strategies.

Conclusion

Those who believe that the future holds one global culture are deluded by value paradoxes that make the values of one culture seemingly similar to those of another, different culture. The most obvious example is the assumption that the Japanese are Westernizing because of increased focus on individuality. The global-local paradigm is another paradox: One cannot think globally; every human being thinks according to his or her own culturally defined thinking pattern. One can act globally, and that is what global companies do. When they globalize, they produce and distribute globally. For global communications, however, thinking must be local; to be effective it must focus on the particular, not on the universal.

In global marketing communications, we use the systems of one culture to develop advertising for other cultures. We use categorizations of one culture to describe others. We do not have one adequate global language by which we can

reach global consumers. We find pseudo-similarities and think they are real and universal. We use one culture's motives to try to move people of other cultures. What we need is a new language to understand what moves people of different cultures, to develop systems to understand the differences and find the real similarities, which are few and far between. As a start, we have to learn to see the value paradoxes in the global marketplace and to understand them. This chapter has presented only a few examples. The rest of this book will focus on the value paradoxes used in marketing, branding, and communications; and tools will be presented for understanding the paradoxes for developing effective global advertising.

Notes

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