

Great Cross-Cultural Advertising Blunders

Companies sometimes naively assume that their domestic market brand name, product, positioning or advertising will do the job. How wrong they can be!

The following examples were picked up through some quick research:

- A car with the name “Nova” was launched in Spanish-speaking markets at a cost of millions of dollars. Anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of Spanish knows that “no va” means “it won’t go”, a rather unfortunate way to describe a car!
- Parker Pen thought the word for “embarrass” in Mexico was “embrazar” which actually means to impregnate. Therefore their ad slogan for a new pen read: “It won’t leak in your pocket and make you pregnant”.
- A Scandinavian vacuum manufacturer (Electrolux) used the clever slogan “Nothing sucks like an Electrolux” in the USA, not realizing just how far they were talking down their own product.
- Colgate once introduced a toothpaste brand in France which also happened to be the name of a well-known porno magazine!
- A Pepsi ad slogan in Chinese got so garbled it actually translated as “Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the grave”.
- When “Coca Cola” was first translated phonetically into Chinese, it apparently sounded like “female horse stuffed with wax”.
- KFC’s famous “finger lickin’ good” slogan in Chinese apparently came off as “Eat your fingers off”.
- American Airlines “Fly in leather” campaign in Mexico meant “Fly naked” when literally translated.
- During its 1994 launch campaign, the telecom company Orange had to change its ads in Northern Ireland. Their successful campaign “**The future’s bright ... the future’s Orange.**” However, in the North the term Orange suggests the (Protestant) Orange Order. The implied message that **the future is bright, the future is Protestant, loyalist...** didn’t sit well with the Catholic Irish population.

We can all laugh at the above blunders, however, all companies are susceptible. To avoid them you need to:

- Hire a translator with marketing savvy who won’t translate your campaign too literally and spot any obvious pitfalls for you.
- Do your market research on brand and product names to catch any unintended double meanings.
- Keep an open mind about changing your core product/brand benefits for a particular audience.

- Do a “soft launch” to test different alternative executions before investing heavily in one.