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Crossing Cultures

THINKING LOCAL TO

Few design managers can avoid the headache of an international diversity of tastes. Since the 1980s, brand owners have dreamt of the economies of scale that global products promise, but managers on the frontline know that the reality of designing products for world markets is much more complex and ambiguous. The rogues' gallery of product faux pas that made disastrous translations to local culture is testament to the number of bear traps out there.

Early humans left the East African plains about 80,000 years ago. For the next 79,000 years people moved and grew apart from their shared beginnings. The multitude of cultures that bloomed over this period largely lived in ignorance of each other until pioneers such as Marco Polo and Columbus began an era of rediscovery and reconnection. This process, which we now call globalization, has accelerated rapidly over the past 50 years. Through developments in trade, travel, off-shoring, the Internet and concerns over climate change, global humanity has never felt so interconnected and interdependent.

At one level the Olympics, soccer, Hollywood, YouTube and Beyoncé are all agents of a global culture. And global markets do exist, particularly in premium categories aimed at the educated and well-traveled, upper-middle classes. This explains why brands like BMW, Apple, B&O and B&B Italia have less trouble customizing their portfolios to local markets. However, outside this global elite real cultural differences persist.

Material Factors

There are many concrete drivers of diversity, from the geographic to matters of infrastructure. Some factors, like Japan's dearth of habitable land, are not likely to change anytime soon. Japan's high-density living puts a premium on space and an emphasis on communal harmony, which in turn helps explain the cultural importance of miniaturization.

It will also be some time before Muscovites change their attitude about the seasons. Moscow's fashionistas have two very different winter and summer wardrobes. Winter outfits reflect their extreme thermal requirements, while summer gear expresses their joy that it's no longer winter. During a project about premium fashion mobile phones, a number of wealthy Russian women, who buy phones like handbags, liked a white prototype so much that they wanted to buy it as their winter phone—or maybe for weddings.

Other material factors, like India's chronically deficient infrastructure, will hopefully not prove so eternal. Nokia hit a home run in the sub-continent with the design and marketing of its 1100 model. Under the slogan "Made for India,"

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Nokia emphasized the phone's dirt-resistant keypad (right), which is a boon in the cloud of dust that is India; its integrated flashlight, a godsend in the often electricity-free evenings; and its general robustness, which is deemed essential by most Indians.

It is always wise to ground any cultural study on notable and relevant hard facts, whether they be climate, diet or gross domestic product. On this last point, although socio-demographic data is considered distinctly non-groovy, few factors are a more influential determinant of buying behavior than the income of the target group.

Deep Roots

Other influences on cultural variety are equally entrenched, but for more historical or belief-based reasons. The concept of face is a classic case in point. When dealing with people from a Confucian Asian culture, particularly China, Korea, Vietnam and Japan, it is unacceptable to publicly criticize them or expose an error. Mistakes are noted, but in public the proper behavior is to nod in agreement and hold your tongue to save face on both sides. The importance of respecting a person's reputation and integrity has been culturally embedded for thousands of years and is unlikely to change much in the 21st century.

Britain's global outlook and openness to other cultures can be explained by an accumulation of historical factors that occurred over hundreds, rather than thousands, of years. Being an early trading nation and later temporarily the center



of an empire encouraged an outward-facing perspective. More recently, a global mentality has been reinforced as British jobs have become increasingly dependent on foreign firms. Mass immigration over the last half-century has also made cities like London truly global. Since the 1980s Brits have learned to enjoy the best of global culture, whether it's a German car, Indian curry or a Japanese beer.

Some historical factors are much more recent. For example, one of the key forces behind mobile usage seems to depend on which took off first in a culture, mobile phones or the Internet. By the time most Americans owned a cell phone, they were accustomed to PC email and were therefore unenthusiastic about SMS text messaging on a phone; whereas, most Japanese first experienced the Internet on their mobile phone and were happy to accept its slower connection speed.

Whatever the market or budget, cultural questions are always best situated in a historical context. Ideally, before going out into the field, the team receives a top-level cultural overview.

Myth and Reality

The differences among countries rarely correspond with national identities, which tend to be based on wishful thinking and self-serving myths propagated by ruling elites. Take the self-image of two seemingly very different countries, the US and France. Despite the widespread belief in the American dream, a child born into poverty is less likely to



The most strongly perceived brands

UK	USA	France	Germany	Spain
1. Coca-Cola	1. Coca-Cola	1. Danone	1. Adidas	1. Nestlé
2. Body Shop	2. Ford	2. Airbus	2. Nestlé	2. Body Shop
3. Marks & Spencer	3. Peugeot	3. Nike	3. Puma	3. Coca-Cola
4. McDonald's	4. Janssen-Adhans	4. Nestlé	4. Volvo	4. Generali
5. Cadbury	5. Nestlé	5. Renault	5. Renault	5. Coca-Cola
6. Bournville	6. Nike	6. Peugeot	6. Volvo	6. Coca-Cola
7. Green Book	7. Ford	7. Philips	7. VW	7. Adidas
8. Nestlé	8. Ford	8. Chevrolet	8. Sony	8. Nike
9. Cadbury	9. Toyota	9. Coca-Cola	9. Toyota	9. Sony
10. Samsung	10. L'Oréal	10. L'Oréal	10. BP	10. L'Oréal
11. Amgen	11. Starbucks	11. Nestlé	11. Body Shop	11. Jet Airways
12. Nestlé	12. Jet Airways	12. Air-Link	12. H&M	12. Peugeot
13. Nestlé	13. Nestlé	13. L'Oréal	13. H&M	13. Peugeot
14. Nestlé	14. Conserve	14. Adidas	14. Mercedes	14. Peugeot
15. Nestlé	15. Nestlé	15. Chanel	15. H&M	15. Peugeot
16. Nestlé	16. Nestlé	16. Chanel	16. H&M	16. Peugeot
17. Nestlé	17. Nestlé	17. Chanel	17. H&M	17. Peugeot
18. Nestlé	18. Nestlé	18. Chanel	18. H&M	18. Peugeot
19. Nestlé	19. Nestlé	19. Chanel	19. H&M	19. Peugeot
20. Nestlé	20. Nestlé	20. Chanel	20. H&M	20. Peugeot

climb to wealth in the US than in France. French politicians and the cultural elite love to define Frenchness in opposition to American values. However, despite the celebration of slow food, subsidies for French films and anti-American rhetoric, the French lap up Hollywood blockbusters, France is McDonald's most profitable European market, and the French recently voted Nike and Coca-Cola into its A-list of the top-10 most ethical brands.

India is another case in point. For many in the West, Mahatma Gandhi represented the embodiment of Indian values, including anti-materialism. Gandhi may have rejected material wealth, but few Indians see any contradiction between their religion and the pursuit of wealth and good fortune. Indians are acutely aware of status and the symbols that project social rank. The psychoanalyst Alan Roland has remarked that Indians possess a radar-like sensitivity to the relative importance of a person. And a recent survey of Asian consumers found Indians the group that most identified with the statement, "I measure success by the things I own." Bling rules on the streets of Mumbai.

Other differences may not shatter myths, but they certainly run counter to accepted wisdom. For instance, in spite of its notoriously wet weather, Britain is Europe's largest market for convertible cars. And while Italy is widely held to be the home of style, taste and design, electrical stores in Milan are plagued by small, awkwardly designed, yellow and green appliances. There is a grain of truth behind every national stereotype, but they should always be the first assumptions to be challenged—the truth is often counterintuitive.

Flux

Probably the most troubling element of intercultural work is that preferences are in a constant state of flux. One of the clichés of cross-cultural design is that white products should be avoided in East Asia since white is a taboo color associated with death. While in the abstract this precept remains true, in the context of high-tech products, particularly brilliant gloss white gadgets aimed at younger consumers, it is no longer absolute—just look at the iPod.

One of the most fluid influences designers need to understand is social status. As Abraham Maslow pointed out in the 1950s, as people rise up the affluence curve and fulfill more basic needs, such as safety and security, their priorities shift to higher-level needs, such as those associated with self-esteem and social status. As many social groups throughout the world are surpassing these needs, they are now striving to fulfill even higher goals, such as the pursuit of knowledge, and expressing their creativity and aesthetic connoisseurship. A Chinese market researcher recently assured me that sections of Shanghai's middle class are turning away from material status symbols and spending more on education and experiences. Whereas status anxiety remains at fever pitch in Moscow, even for the super-rich. As Russian society struggles to stabilize itself around a new post-Communist hierarchy, many feel compelled to restate their social standing at every opportunity.

Cultural mores are not set in stone; they wax and wane. As received wisdom tends to be out of date, it's vital to act on authentic and contemporary insights.

Achieving Balance

Consumers' response to specific product types vary among cultures. This sensitivity tends to be related to the age and cultural significance of the product category. For example, furniture and cooking utensils are far more culturally specific than more recent high-tech sectors, such as computers and mobile phones.

Expectations also differ. In the case of automotive engineering quality, there are few tougher critics than the

Germans with their obsession with panel gaps and the sound of a slamming car door. Competitive environments also differ and are often skewed by national champions like Motorola in the US and Renault in France. For these reasons and many more, it is vital to have at least one local team member with a strong product background.

Tackling a cross-cultural project in a structured way and with the right mix of skills will ultimately be more powerful than solely relying on local knowledge. The balance of the project team is pivotal, ideally mixing perceptive and eloquent local cultural experts with worldly and open-minded outsiders. I also strongly believe that designers should be highly involved in both the research and analysis, as non-designers often miss telling details that can provide the catalyst for an idea.

We always begin by attempting to limit unconscious prejudices by removing our cultural spectacles. We then pan out to reach an understanding of the social and cultural context, before zooming in to observe consumer preferences within the product category in question. Our approach is firmly rooted in having broad contextual knowledge, a willingness to challenge assumptions and an eye for pivotal details.

The key to planning, executing and communicating such projects is an implementation-orientated framework, which drastically simplifies the cross-referencing and analysis of data. Depending on the objectives, such a framework might cross-reference regions or countries with consumer segments and/or product categories. For example, in a Pan-Asian study we compared the design preferences of particular segments across regions to identify common traits around which to base a segmented design strategy.

To influence decision makers outside the design department, the framework should deliver a robust, multidimensional viewpoint populated with hard and soft data from different perspectives and sources. We try to synthesize insights from a range of sources, including socio-economic data, publications, local experts and user observation. On one project we even trawled junk markets to build a picture of that country's material and product culture.

While I've focused on cultural differences, the strategic priority in most cases is to leverage commonalities across cultures—balance the financial benefits of global economies of scale while addressing the need for culturally sensitive customization. However, commonalities cannot be grasped without understanding differences—they are two sides of the same coin. In my experience, people have far more to unite them than divide them. **The most powerful products transcend national boundaries and touch our common humanity. ■**