

CULTURAL DIMENSIONS AND ADVERTISING: A COMPARISON OF THREE COUNTRIES

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INTRODUCTION

Researchers have examined how trade barriers affect business internationally, but little research has examined how culture affects advertising strategies. Teaching these skills has usually been accomplished by case studies, but a more pro-active, hands-on approach may be more effective.

This study applies Hofstede's dimensions to understand an ad campaign developed for the U.S. and then required students to develop a campaign strategy for Malaysia and Sweden. Understanding how other cultures react to advertising strategies can help students plan better advertising strategies to use when entering a new market. The exercise also helps students internalize the broad nature of culture and appreciate cultural differences and similarities.

Culture

Loudon and Della Britta (1979) outline a number of issues important in analyzing cross-cultural consumer behavior. Among those factors most relevant to promotion are: the relevant motivations in the culture; the broad cultural values relevant to the product; the characteristic forms of decision-making; and the promotional methods appropriate to the culture. Thus, cultural differences may influence the effectiveness of promotional campaigns in various societies. While trade barriers are coming down, cultural barriers are not (Miller 1995). Therefore, studying cultural values and putting them to practical use can help students better understand this important factor.

Hofstede's Dimensions

Hofstede describes four cultural dimensions that represent the value systems of over 40 countries: masculinity; individualism; uncertainty avoidance; and power distance (Hofstede 1980).

Masculinity "refers to the degree of traditionally

masculine values -- assertiveness, materialism, and a lack of concern for others that prevail in a society. Power distance measures the extent of inequality among individuals in a culture. Cultures with a small power distance de-emphasize inequality and seek equality in power, status, and wealth (Sudhir and Barnes 1992). Uncertainty avoidance is the degree to which people in a society feel threatened by ambiguous situations. Strong uncertainty avoidance societies express fear of uncertainty, avoid risks and exhibit little aggressiveness. Finally, individualism defines the degree to which people in a society look after themselves and neglect the needs of the broader society. Low individualism societies express more collectivism, a need of belonging to the group and a belief of group decision instead of individual decisions (Deresky 1997).

The degree to which each culture is influenced by their cultural values, measured by how they score on the Hofstede's dimensions, may provide clues as to which values should be expressed in advertisements, in order to optimize effectiveness. By performing such an exercise, students should gain a deeper understanding of culture, cultural differences, and why advertising strategies may be more or less effective in different cultures.

Advertising Strategies

Planning an advertising strategy for one's own country poses a difficult enough task, but planning advertising strategies for different countries requires not only marketing skills, but also knowledge of that culture. Albers-Miller (1995) suggests that "[i]f advertising differences across cultures are predictable at least to some extent, the task of the advertiser is simplified" (pg. 2). Kanso (1996) indicates that human wants and needs are universal, but the way to address them is not.

One recent study used Hofstede's value dimensions to understand if advertisements mirrored cultural differences (Albers-Miller and Gelb 1996). Using content analyses of advertisements in business publications, this study tended to confirm the use of Hofstede's dimensions in a majority of the ads tested.

Using Hofstede's dimensions to plan an international advertising strategy demands keeping in mind what attracts people in international markets and what does not. In other words, an effective advertising strategy must consider the unique cultural values of the target society. For example, strong uncertainty avoidance cultures will probably respond to ads that emphasize uncertainty reducing attributes, such as well-known brand names, superior warranties, and money back guarantees. Strong uncertainty avoidance cultures demonstrate greater preference and tolerance for hard-sell approaches. Weak uncertainty avoidance cultures "evinced greater receptivity to a soft-sell approach and non-aggressive sales techniques" (Sudhir 1992, pg. 9).

Low masculinity/high femininity cultures might relate better to ads that promote environmental concern. In high individualism societies, promotion strategies could demonstrate a product's variety and luxury, appealing to self-image. High individualism societies prefer to see in ads the characteristics of the product that will maximize self-interest, while societies with low individualism will be more interested in promotion strategies that benefit everyone in the society. In cultures with large power distance, effective ads emphasize the status, rather than function of the product. Earning trust, therefore, is more difficult in large power distance societies (Sudhir, 1992).

Three Divergent Markets

Three divergent international markets were selected for the study. The U.S. was chosen as a base for comparison. Malaysia and Sweden was selected to demonstrate two different clusters of Hofstede's dimensions model.

The choice of these countries has realism in that competitive marketers search out international markets that offer new opportunities. The markets that hold the greatest potential for dramatic increases in U.S. exports are not our traditional trading partners in Europe and Japan, which now account for the overwhelming bulk of trade, but the ten Big Emerging Markets, including Malaysia (BEM's Home Page). The scores on the four cultural dimensions for each country are listed in the Table (Deresky 1997).

Table. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

	Malaysia	Sweden	United States
Power Distance	98	33	40
Masculinity	50	9	62
Uncertainty Avoidance	37	29	45
Individualism	26	71	90

Comparing the three countries, one observes that the scores were very similar for uncertainty avoidance. Malaysia, Sweden and the United States apparently are not afraid of taking risks or being in ambiguous situations. The other dimension scores show more variance. The low power distance scores for Sweden and the U.S. suggest that these societies prefer more equality, while titles and status formality have less importance. In contrast, Malaysia scored 98 in power distance; suggesting that this society values hierarchy and that employees would be expected to respect authority figures.

As for masculinity, Malaysia and the U.S. had an average score of 50 and 62, while Sweden differed greatly by scoring a 9. Sweden's score indicates a society placing great value on feminine characteristics, such as nurturing and consensus building. For example, Swedish women are expected to work and "parents are given the option of paternity or maternity leave care for older children" (Adler, 1990, pg. 55).

Finally, individualism scores vary greatly between the three countries. Malaysia's score of 26 shows that this society values doing things for and with groups, especially for the good of the larger society. Sweden measured a score of 71, suggesting that this society is somewhat individualistic, but not as much as the U.S., with a score of 90. In the U.S. people prefer to work as individuals, caring mostly about their own needs and those of their immediate families. In the U.S., society's needs are less important. These scores allow one to compare and contrast the three countries on specific cultural dimensions, which may suggest appropriate promotional strategies for each country.

DEVELOPING AN ADVERTISING STRATEGY

The following examples of advertising strategies for Malaysia and Sweden were planned using Hofstede's value dimensions. As a basis for comparison, ads were gathered from U.S. sources to observe the way marketers advertise their computers and to investigate which, if any, of Hofstede's cultural dimensions were observed in the ads. The product used as an example for the advertising strategies was a personal computer system. This was assumed to be a product in which consumers in all three countries might be familiar and highly involved, thus reducing chances for involvement level bias. The target market was assumed to be higher educated consumers with high incomes.

United States

From the United States, four different computer ads were obtained from *Fortune* and *Business Week* magazines. These magazines were assumed to be commonly read by the target market. The first ad was for an Hitachi PC. In this two-page ad, the first page includes a well-dressed businessman sitting in a comfortable chair outside of a building and people walking by with their notebook PC's. The next page emphasizes 15 significant features of the PC. "With Fax/Modem and LAN you're ready to influence events from wherever you do business." This ad mentions how the consumer will save time by doing business from any location.

The second ad was a two-page ad for Compaq

computers, describing different PC's, their features and costs. "The best technology money can buy? Or the best technology for the money?" This ad emphasizes money, performance and value. The third ad is also from Compaq computers and is a one-page ad including a computer, but half of the page is for a picture of two proud parents with their daughter in her graduation gown. "We did our homework to help the kids do theirs." This ad attracts the consumer by letting them know that with Compaq computers, the consumer's children will do better in school. Everyone in the family will be able to use this easy computer. Finally, the last two page ad is for Hewlett Packard and includes a very small paragraph at the bottom of the first page stating a little about the computer, but the whole page was used for one sentence: "You may be employed by a company, but you work for yourself." On the next page a woman works in her bed late at night.

The U.S. scored high in individualism and somewhat high in masculinity. Most of these ads have used these dimensions to attract the consumer's attention. In the four ads, there are pictures of one person working alone or there are pictures of a family. As an individualistic society, U.S. consumers will be attracted to ads that show product characteristics that will benefit the individual consumer, but not necessarily the whole society. Thus, the last ad suggests that although a consumer might be employed by someone else, as an individual, one wants what is personally best for herself.

In addition, all these ads mention the performance and value of the PC's, and how the consumers will improve the quality of their work by using these computers. For a high masculinity culture, materialism is important, and the marketers have used this concept in their ads. For example in the U.S., which scored low in uncertainty avoidance and power distance, no celebrities or people of high authority endorse the product because U.S. consumers are concerned more about the value of the product than who is endorsing the products. Also, few ads mention money back guarantees or warranties, but the ads do mention how much the consumer receives for what he or she pays.

Malaysia

The Table indicates that Malaysia's scores exceed the average in power distance and masculinity. Thus, an appropriate promotion strategy for Malaysia would emphasize these two dimensions. For example, an employee may be asking his boss after working hours what his thoughts are about a computer system that the employee would like to purchase. Portraying the employee's boss instead of a friend would be more believable in Malaysia, a high power distance country, where employees respect higher authorities.

Malaysia's low score in individualism suggests that

Malaysians prefer products that benefit their society. Ads might portray the same employee, after he had purchased his computer, sharing the computer system with his family or friends, or suggesting ways in which a computer might benefit the village or the larger society. Emphasis would be on the collectivism attributes of this computer. Also, an effective spokesperson for the ad might have a high level of authority in Malaysia, someone whose opinion consumers would respect and trust. Uncertainty avoidance and masculinity would not be emphasized because Malaysia's scores in these dimensions were average. Malaysia scored low in uncertainty avoidance. Thus, Malaysians are not afraid of taking risks, so emphasizing money back guarantees or warranties would be convenient, but not necessary. Masculinity received a score of 50, so for this dimension showing both masculine and feminine values in Malaysian ads would be appropriate.

Sweden

Sweden scored low in power distance and masculinity. Effective advertising strategies would therefore focus on these two dimensions. Two friends with the same educational level may be talking about computer systems, rather than an employee with his boss, as was the case with Malaysia. A low score in masculinity indicates Sweden subscribes to feminine values, so effective ads may have a woman buying the computer system or acting as spokesperson to emphasize how concerned she is in selling the best computer systems to her customers. An effective ad may mention how this computer company is concerned with environmental issues. Low masculinity countries are more concerned about environmental issues than high masculine countries. Feminist values also mean a concern for quality of life, so the ads might mention that by using this computer, consumers would have more time to spend with family and friends. The ad may also mention how the consumer's quality of work will improve with the product. Sweden scored very low in uncertainty avoidance and, as in the case with Malaysia, Swedes are willing to take risks. Again, emphasizing risk-free attributes would be convenient, but not necessary.

The score for individualism was a 71, this indicates that Sweden is somewhat an individualistic society. An effective ad would have the consumer looking at different personal computers, but later the consumer would be making the final decision together with his family or friends.

CONCLUSION

This study attempted to observe how culture influences the way consumers perceive advertising and how using Hofstede's dimensions might facilitate learning

about cultural differences and applying this knowledge in developing advertising strategies for other countries. The advertising strategies planned for Malaysia and Sweden were designed using Hofstede's four dimensions. These countries' advertising strategies differed from one other depending on the scores each country received for Hofstede's four dimensions. As a learning tool, the effectiveness of the exercise is in the understanding of Hofstede's cultural dimensions and in their applications in various cultures. Students must apply critical thinking skills and imagination to build effective ad campaigns in other cultures.

Using Hofstede's value dimensions is useful from another pedagogical perspective. Students may question the universality of the dimensions. Even within a relatively homogeneous society, do the value dimensions apply to all segments? Since the value dimensions were validated using Western observers, there may also be a Western bias to the dimensions, which can be explored in the context of non-Western societies. Perhaps there are other dimensions that need to be considered in a specific society. Finally, Hofstede's value dimensions were developed within an organizational framework. While they have been often generalized to marketing and consumer behavior settings, are these valid assumptions?

In addition to the questions posed regarding Hofstede's value dimensions, broader questions may also be discussed regarding applicability of ad campaigns across societies and the use of local experts in developing locally-specific ad campaigns. Certainly the marketing literature is replete with examples of cultural mistakes and insensitivities in advertising. In an effort to capitalize on economies of scale, some ads may send the wrong message in a particular culture. Employing local experts to screen ads for language and other communication nuances that may send an inappropriate message is often good insurance. Ideally, these natives to a culture should be involved early in the planning process. Finally, while culture is traditionally thought to change at a rather slow pace, the rapid spread of technology, including the World Wide Web, may accelerate these changes. International marketers must be aware of these changes, subtle though they may be, to more effectively satisfy consumers in all markets.

These questions, and others, may be fruitful springboards for class discussion.

REFERENCES

References furnished upon request. Please contact Peter Raven at Seattle University.