

TEACHING MARKETING IN SAUDI ARABIA: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

Cross-cultural education presents many challenges and focuses attention on the significant differences in teaching and learning styles around the world. In 1995, I began the first of two teaching assignments in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabian culture, strongly rooted in Islam and the teachings of the Qur'an, bears little similarity to most Western cultures. Although this dissimilarity was apparent from the outset, I did not anticipate many of the trials I would face in the coming years, especially in the classroom setting. Although exhausting, the experience proved a rewarding one, allowing me the creativity to develop the strategies best suited to learning across cultures.

INTRODUCTION

The headline seemed to jump off the page, screaming "Fleeing Saudi Arabia: The bombing of Western compounds in Riyadh is driving out American professors" (Castillo 2003). I was shocked to read that the three suicide bombings of compounds where foreigners lived appeared to be creating an exodus of American academics. For many American scholars the benefits of being there were no longer worth the risks. This exodus is especially troubling for me since I had recently spent five years teaching marketing in Saudi Arabia, and I believe it is essential to have Americans who can help explain Saudi Arabian culture to other Americans. The purpose of this paper is to share some of my impressions and experiences as a marketing teacher in Saudi Arabia and, in this way, to help American educators to understand the way another culture shapes the educational experience. To think as a Westerner is not enough for a Western educator to select the most appropriate pedagogy in a non-Western cultural environment. My experiences validate the importance of eliminating the self-reference criterion in international marketing (Lee 1966) in which a decision-maker must break free from an ethnocentric orientation in order to find the best problem-solution. Before focusing upon those aspects of the Saudi Arabian educational experience that posed problems for a Western educator, it is first necessary to provide background on the country's environment and to explore the basic differences between Saudi and American educational practices.

A PORTRAIT OF PROGRESS

Saudi Arabia is geographically the largest country in the Arabian Peninsula. Located in the southwest corner of Asia and occupying four-fifths of the peninsula, it is a land extending from the Red Sea to the Arabian (Persian) Gulf, and a land portrayed by the novelists and poets as a mysterious place of romance and fantasy (Al-Farsy 1986). Most Americans know very little about the real Saudi Arabia. How Saudi Arabia became the wealthy power it is today is a fascinating story of determination and perseverance.

In the early 1900s, Abdul Aziz Bin Saud, who later became the country's first king, used his shrewd negotiating skills to unite the various tribes into one nation (Holden and Johns 1982). Thirty years later, the land achieved statehood and soon after, oil was discovered. During the 1930s, American firms built the Saudi oil industry, creating a complex relationship between the two countries, including close economic ties that were reinforced by concerns about common enemies such as the Soviet Union, and Iran after the 1979 Islamic revolution.

From the time King Abdul Aziz and American leaders established ties in 1933, oil for the United States and protection for the Saudi dynasty have been at the core of their relationship. Crude oil drives the Saudi economy and America's, as well. As the world's largest exporter of oil, Saudi Arabia provides the United States with its single largest source of crude oil, a dependence that figured prominently in the U.S. led Persian Gulf War against Iraq in 1991. It was the Gulf War, in fact, that moved the United States even closer to Saudi Arabia, which provided air bases from which American fighter jets launched strikes against Iraq. After the war, the United States left behind about 5,000 troops – a presence that the Saudi ruling class preferred to play down because of the anger it provoked among its residents, as well as the millions of other Muslims throughout the world.

According to the CIA World Factbook (2004), Saudi Arabia's imports and exports for 2003 are approximately \$30.4 billion and \$86.5 billion, respectively. The per capita GDP is \$11,800 with 25% of the population being unemployed. With a

seemingly unlimited supply of revenue, the Royal Family and Council of Ministers have developed an impressive infrastructure to provide social benefits to its citizens. Saudi Arabia operates one of the world's most advanced welfare states. Saudis get free health care and interest-free home and business loans. College education is free within the kingdom and heavily subsidized for those who study abroad. Electricity and telephone service are available at far below cost, as are gasoline and domestic air travel. And, in one of the driest places in the world, water is almost free.

Phenomenal development during the last quarter of the Twentieth Century created a strong demand for personnel to support Saudi Arabia's institutions and facilities. Roughly one-third the size of the United States, this country has an estimated population of 26 million people, which includes approximately 6 million non-nationals (CIA World Factbook 2004). About a quarter of Saudi Arabia's population, and more than a third of all residents aged fifteen to sixty-four, are foreign nationals, known as expatriates. Seventy percent of all jobs in Saudi Arabia--and close to 90 percent of all private-sector jobs--are filled by foreigners.

From an economic point of view, there are difficulties in increasing the number of Saudi citizens in the work force. One difficulty is that potential Saudi workers for low-skilled and other jobs were becoming less competitive with foreigners in the private-sector labor market. Wages of non-Saudi workers had been adjusted downward since the early 1980s, and, with a ready supply of non-Saudis willing to work in low-skilled occupations, the wage gap between Saudis and non-Saudi workers widened. In addition, as the government recognized, Saudi secondary school and university graduates were not always as qualified as foreign workers for employment in the private sector. Although the Riyadh-based Institute of Public Administration (IPA), with which I was affiliated, offered training programs to increase the competitiveness of Saudi nationals, our programs had difficulty attracting participants.

Then there is the demographic problem. Saudi Arabia has one of the highest birth rates in the world, approximately 30 births/1000. Ninety-seven percent of all Saudis are sixty-four or younger, and half the population is under eighteen. The presence of so many working age people places enormous pressure on the economy.

A faltering Saudi economy, which grew rich on high oil prices in the early to mid- 1980s, adds to the problem. Per capita income has dropped by more than two-

thirds; there are fewer jobs and a lot less money. The functioning of Saudi Arabia's advanced welfare state is influenced dramatically by oil price fluctuations. In the early 1980s, oil sold for nearly \$40 a barrel and the annual per capita income was approximately \$29,000. Just prior to the Gulf War, a barrel of oil was selling for \$15 and then sky rocketed back to \$36 a barrel during the war before quickly falling again. Prices are once again close to \$40, but with the combined effects of inflation and the population explosion per capita income has decreased to below \$7,000.

MAJOR CULTURAL VARIATIONS

Assimilating the changes brought on by rapid development has been a struggle for Saudi Arabia. Although eager to acquire the benefits of Western technology, the Saudis have been careful not to embrace progress at the expense of their cultural heritage. Several cultural variations help to create barriers to adopting Western educational approaches.

Saudi culture is one of well-established tradition and exceedingly strong family, religious, and social values. These values influence the students' learning styles and their ability to adapt to training and the type of career for which they are being prepared. Among the most evident effects of these values are the severe restrictions placed on interactions between men and women. For example, throughout all levels of education, men and women are separate. Saudi students traditionally attend gender-segregated primary and secondary schools. Even at the college level, where coeducational universities do exist, male-female interaction is strictly limited, and students are generally instructed by teachers of the same gender.

Traditionally, the emphasis on family time has been an additional barrier to educational and professional pursuits in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabian women and men marry early and do not routinely delay starting a family. Couples place a high value on time spent with the family. Attending classes all day and studying at night is deemed unacceptable to either gender because this interferes with family time. In addition, the extended family structure also makes it highly unusual for a young person to live independently. The adjustment to independent living was a challenging and independence-building experience for the students. For the majority of them, this educational experience represented the first time they had lived independent of family. Many of the students came from homes where expatriates were hired to do the domestic chores. Now at school, the students had to take care of themselves.

Islam is the dominant religion in Saudi Arabia (100% of the population according to the World Factbook, 2004). It not only influences its followers' values, but it also influences the timing of many of their activities because of the duty to pray. Just as their ancestors before them, strict interpretation of Islam requires all Muslims to bow toward Makkah (Mecca) for prayer five times each day.

A special challenge for me to overcome was my frustration with students who were distressed by the fact that their concerns could not always be addressed immediately. In Muslim culture the concept of *Shura* is the prevalent custom and refers to the practice in which a leader is available to hear the concerns of his subjects directly. In Saudi Arabia the *Majlis Al-Shum* is the government body through which the king hears his subjects' concerns (Saudi Arabia 1996). For example, at the outset I encountered difficulty with the students' methods for contacting me. Initially, I often received multiple calls at home on a given evening from a student seeking an immediate and direct response.

Then, too, the traditional approach to Saudi Arabian education is a didactic one. Memorization is much more important than in Western education and problem solving skills must be developed from a more basic level. The culture's perspective on time also clashes with the linear perception of time in American culture with our deeply-imbedded habits of saving, scheduling, and managing time and of setting and meeting deadlines.

Although the aforementioned factors represent the challenges faced on a grand scale, other more direct challenges presented themselves throughout my 5 year teaching experience. In my work at both the IPA and King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFPUM) faculty taught in English and followed western educational patterns. Since there were considerable differences between Middle Eastern and Western approaches to education all students participated in orientation seminars. No amount of orientation, however, prepared the students or me for the de facto challenges they would have to face.

The environment of Saudi Arabia influences education and poses some special problems for Western educators. Table 1 summarizes the relevant environmental influences, educational problems encountered, and strategies selected.

TABLE 1
ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES ON TEACHING STRATEGIES SELECTED

Environmental Influences	Educational Problem	Strategies Selected
State supported education, high standard of living, and high proportion of foreign workers	Lessened motivation to succeed	
Strong family values	Unwillingness to work or attend classes in the evening	
Extended family structure	Students coping for first time with taking care of themselves as well as studying	Over time, these activities seemed to have helped the students to develop every day problem-solving skills, which appear not to have been previously tested.
Muslim duty to pray five times daily	Hours of prayer differ and interfere with rigid class scheduling	Class schedules had to be designed to accommodate prayer times
Educational emphasis on memorization	Problem solving skills need more basic development	
Custom of leaders holding audiences to hear the concerns of their subjects	Student demands for immediate response and solution to problems	Eventually, the students learned that acceptable organizational methods for contacting me included making appointments or using regularly scheduled office hours.
Perspective on time	Initial difficulties in taking deadlines for assignments seriously	The students learned that large organizations function only when each individual performs correctly and on time. After that, only on occasion were deadlines and punctuality a problem.

FACILITATING KNOWLEDGE ACQUISITION

In addition, there are some basic differences in educational practices between Saudi Arabia and America (gender separation, didactic learning styles, lack of exposure to constructive criticism in front of others, time dedicated to study or work versus family, instructor-student role relationship, test-taking style, level of self-direction, maintenance of good self-esteem, and even expectations for level of accomplishment, to name a few), even though a number of academic factors differentiated the programs I was affiliated with from traditional Saudi Arabian educational programs. In both programs faculty used American teaching and learning methodologies, textbooks and other resource materials.

Since English was a second language for the students, effective communication was the key to resolving curricular, personal, social, cultural, and academic concerns.

In addition to paying close attention to whether students really understood the information some accommodations had to be planned into the didactic learning situations to meet the Saudi students' special academic needs. It was important to review teaching methods and styles on an ongoing basis to make certain they were meeting the learning needs of the students.

I gave considerable time and attention to determining how to effectively teach marketing to students whose English skills were often weaker than I had expected. Language instruction in Saudi Arabia emphasizes conversational English, thus reading comprehension and English writing skills were not always well developed. In addition to a lack of understanding of the meanings and definitions of many words, especially the lexicon of business and marketing, the students often did not understand the nuances of context.

In addition to English language difficulty, many of the Saudi students' lacked traditional Western test-taking skills. For example both multiple choice questions and cumulative examinations were difficult and often perplexed the students; many were unable to recognize either questions grouped by topic or repetitive questions. Inability to recognize contextual references presented a sizable challenge to the students on examinations as well.

Initially, the students performed best on fill-in-the-blank questions and were tested exclusively in this manner. I worried, however, that tailoring tests to the Saudi students' strengths would neither improve their

English skills nor adequately test their comprehension. As a first step, I assigned specific pages of text from which test questions would be drawn and encouraged the students to read these in English. Before this, the Saudi students often translated entire chapters into Arabic in order to study them. By emphasizing specific short passages, I helped the students learn to save time by eliminating the translation step in their reading and understanding of English. As the students' English and test-taking skills progressed, I used increasingly complex testing. Daily quizzes encouraged students to prepare for class and learn more material. Care had to be taken through item analysis to ensure that tests showed no cultural bias. Progressively, each student performed better on complex multiple choice and short-answer questions. This performance aided in the assessment of the students' conceptual knowledge.

Lectures and class discussion had to take into account the limited English comprehension skills. Specifically, several presentation techniques were adjusted to accommodate the Saudi students, such as speaking more slowly and using examples they could understand. When it became apparent that textbook assignments presented difficulty in comprehension, detailed study guides or copies of the lecture notes from which students might better identify important points of the reading were provided. Comprehension increased with the use of visual aids and simple, uncluttered lectures. The students gradually learned to take notes on their own. Also, they learned to use the textbook as a resource and a reference, to spell correctly, and to use the pictures and diagrams to reinforce their independent study and learning efforts outside of class. In other words, increased English comprehension paved the way for the students' growth into independent, self-motivated learners.

As time progressed, it became apparent that academic independence was a significant step because in Saudi Arabia's educational system, the students had not been encouraged to be self-directed. They consequently required structure, guidance, and repetition of lessons and objectives throughout each assignment. I learned to start out with firm structure and specific guidance, gradually allowing students independence at a rate which they could handle. This is particularly important given the Saudi students' emphasis on grades and class standing. By outlining course expectations early and often, students were given optimum opportunity to achieve the high grades and standing they desired. Furthermore, when stated expectations were met, students benefited from good self-esteem and the existence of a positive learning environment.

Once established, an integral component of the positive learning environment focused on maintenance of good self-esteem. The Saudi culture is a proud one, and to be embarrassed in front of one's peers would constitute a blow to self-esteem. I quickly learned, therefore, to allow students to raise their hands in response to questions rather than call on one of them by name. In the event that I did call on a student and found the student struggling to answer, it was helpful to quickly comment that "this is a difficult question" and invite the rest of the class to help with the correct answer. Teamwork mitigates the individual self-esteem issue by moving the focus from the individual to the group. Constructive criticism was not a familiar concept to these students. Thus, it was important to keep them apprised of their lack of progress, but in an extremely confidential manner.

CONCLUSION

The keys to overcoming some of the cultural challenges clearly were observation, sensitivity to cultural differences and learning needs, communication and flexibility. For the Saudi Arabian students, effective communication first meant mastering a common language with which to communicate. With this completed, they had a tool with which ongoing dialogue could take place, allowing discussion of difficulties, strategies, and solutions. This flexibility to break with tradition and develop new, culturally sensitive teaching methods appropriate to the program became the hallmark of success. This lesson will be indispensable for future programs. Students the world over are not all alike. To successfully educate them, their special needs must be met with dedication, flexibility, and educational integrity. Keep in mind the need to eliminate the self-reference criterion to educational practices in the educator's home country in adapting teaching strategies.

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