

ABSTRACT

MAKING USE OF "DUAL" MESSAGES IN THIRD WORLD MARKETING

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Third-world business practices often pose unique dilemmas for U.S. marketers. This paper explores the need for those who deal with certain "third-world" (Arab, Asian, African) nations to explore a potentially "hidden" dimension of their relationships with foreign counterparts, one that may prove especially important during the initial stage of market entry. The problem may be most acute among non-Western peoples still in transition from communal to capitalist values, for in these areas, aspects of their commerce may be based on earlier traditions of which we may be unaware.

In consequence, businessmen within these cultures may follow a "dual" logic that differs from our own, yet must be grasped to penetrate their markets. In commercial dealings, consequently, it may sometimes seem as if they operate on two dimensions. One reflects their individuality; the other, their communal heritage. We cope easily with individual behavior. Communal concepts, however, may have no U.S. analogues, thus could form a second level of the local marketing message to which we might not properly respond.

Consider, for example, the moment of initial contact among Japanese businessmen. Even greetings have dual messages that relate to business. We know, for instance, that Japanese make contact with a bow. At one level—obvious to foreigners—it simply signals recognition of another individual. At a second—less obvious—it signals social, commercial, and (nowadays) corporate status. When groups assemble within corporate settings, "bowers use peripheral vision" (Miller 1962), observing the depth and number others give to determine relative status. As each perceives his "proper" standing, he modifies his speech—superiors adopting certain nuances, subordinates others—thus reflecting their awareness that both aspects of the greeting have been understood.

Missing the second aspect, however, may indirectly damage U.S. marketers, and thus affect their hope of U.S. market entry. We often hesitate to bow. Unaware that it has dual meanings for our colleagues, we mistakenly equate it with personal subservience, rather than communal (and corporate) status. On being taught both meanings, however, we may prove willing to adjust, even symbolically, by bowing on appropriate occasions.

Even symbolism, of course, may please our foreign counterparts. No Japanese expects U.S. executives to be so cognizant of local status as to bow appropriately. Notwithstanding, they may approve of U.S. colleagues whose symbolic but sincere participation implies awareness and respect for local ways. Such approval may be a critical first step to market entry. To earn it, however, we must first become aware that even business greetings may hold dual messages.

Consider an alternate business/social situation, the invitation to a foreign colleague's home. In Eastern Africa, such invitations may also have dual meaning. At one level, your local host may simply wish to make you welcome, introducing you to influential (male) members of his social network. Often, the foreign guest

is seated at the center of the room, thus both immobilized and honored, since everyone must come to him. Gradually, the local notables arrive, to sit in gradually expanding circles around the foreigner and grow acquainted with him in their turns.

The second aspect of the invitation, however, may only grow apparent as the visit ends. Each guest (including foreigners) incurs unspoken obligations, some of which may have no U.S. analogue. Having accepted hospitality, for instance, they are expected to provide it—not only to their host, however (as in America), but to all other members of his social circle who may drop by. Of course, if unaware of these unspoken expectations, we may embarrass our commercial colleague, offend the men he hoped would become useful contacts, and jeopardize a means of local market entry. Conversely, if we are told that local invitations have dual meanings, we may prove able to adjust in ways that satisfy both foreign colleagues and our corporations.

But who interprets "dual messages" for U.S. marketers in third-world markets? Perhaps the most effective answer is reliance on ourselves, for many people know the answers—if we ask the questions. Three steps should therefore be considered before seeking third-world market entry. The first is simply to decide that hidden levels can exist in third-world marketing situations, and therefore must be actively investigated to be understood. The second—before leaving the U.S.—should be consultation with those area experts—academic and commercial, U.S. and foreign born, with knowledge of the peoples with whom you intend to deal. The third—on arrival abroad—is to seek foreign mentors, who will not only answer queries but act as expert guides, leading you with ever more finesse into the intricacies of local commerce.