



Home

Topics

Columns

Products

Subscription

Contact Us

Search

About Us

Sitemap

Automotive

Communicating Effectively in the Chinese Market

Written by Nils van Dorn

The Role of Intercultural Communication in Modern Marketing

Global brands and products compete in many continents, within diverse cultures and political systems. Despite this complexity, Western brands like Coca Cola, Nokia, BMW and Puma are well known all over the world. The question arises how global companies manage to communicate their image successfully in different parts of the world.

The German Chamber Network



Are there specific cultural conditions they need to pay attention to? How do they communicate their message in a way that is understandable to people from different cultural backgrounds? This article will try to give answers to these questions and show ways of communicating effectively on the Chinese market, by referring to the concept of intercultural communication.

Culture determines communication, with successful intercultural communication requiring an understanding of culture itself. According to Dutch scholar Geert Hofstede, culture can be defined as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or society from those of another".

Culture can therefore be seen as a collective phenomenon, a mix of values and norms, particular to one group, that are passed from one generation to the next during the process of socialisation. Values define "good" and "bad" and give us a sense of how to behave. They are already ingrained in early childhood and are slow to change. Norms are the group's collective sense of right and wrong. This shared system shapes human behaviour and allows frictionless communication within the group.

Key Cultural Features



With an almost infinite number of values, norms and behaviours, exploring every aspect of Chinese culture is nearly impossible. Instead of analysing all of them, Hofstede suggests that we focus on four key cultural features.

Power distance – the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions accept the unequal distribution of power; a society with a low power distance, for instance, de-emphasises such differences between citizens.

Individualism vs. collectivism. Members of individualistic societies are supposed to take care of themselves, while collectivism emphasises a group model in which the members subordinate their individual interests and needs to a common benefit.

Influence of masculinity or femininity. A society characterised by masculinity shows high emphasis on material possessions and assertiveness, while feminine societies are more nurturing and caring.

How societies cope with uncertainty and ambiguity. Societies with high uncertainty avoidance tend to stick to existing structures and traditional ways of behaving, while societies that are more open face uncertainty in a more open and creative manner.

These indicators can serve in cultural analyses and support effective cross-cultural communication, i.e. sending an understandable message to the receiver, who then decodes the message and gives feedback. In social terms this is simply a dialogue, with corporate communications being a quite similar two-way communications process. Companies can anticipate the possible response proactively as part of their market analyses, or simply wait for their sales to decrease or increase.

Distribution of Power

To be able to send understandable messages in China, then, requires communication that fits into the cultural settings of the Middle Kingdom. It starts with understanding the distribution of power. The traditional structure of society is shaped by Confucianism, which clearly defines reciprocal relations. Chinese are embedded in this vertical system and are highly dependent on family and network structures. This is evident in social relations, as well as obedience to the state and traditionally the emperor, whom Confucius regards as a father-like person.

This system still structures Chinese society today and plays an important role in people's everyday life. Advertisements that play with renegade behaviour or make fun of structures and authorities might be seen as "cool" or ironic in Western democracies, whereas in China the message might not be understood. An example is an advertisement in which stone

lions, a sign of authority and strength, were saluting a Japanese car. Chinese consumers took exception to the advertisement, and the campaign was withdrawn.

Individualism and Collectivism

Second, we have to investigate the extent of individualism and collectivism. As mentioned before, Confucian philosophy puts the individual into a clearly structured social system based on collectivistic values. This system differs from those of other collectivistic societies, for example Japan, where students are drilled to live and work in a group and where those who break group laws will suffer punishment: networks in China are based on social obligations and social status, and individualism can be practised within this system. Every member of the group can enhance their face by improving their social status. The Chinese concept of individualism is therefore not comparable with the Western concept of ego, which is very much based on self-centredness.

An interesting development in the eastern coastal cities is the rising importance of individualism for China's youth. Having grown up in relative prosperity and being familiar with Western culture, the young generation regards individuality as "cool". Fashion styles and branded electronics have become tools for Chinese kids to express their uniqueness, an attitude targeted by companies like Reebok, who uses basketball stars such as Yao Ming in its advertising, promoting the message: "I am what I am". China's youth probably understands the message. But this should not be misunderstood as disobedience to Chinese culture. Many signs of a modernising country can be found in China. If we look below the surface, however, we will still recognise a strong and deep-rooted traditional Chinese culture.

Femininity and Masculinity

Third, we should look at the balance of femininity and masculinity in the society. The decision to portray social or materialistic values, to emphasise collectivism or individualism, depends on the product. Marketing a sports car will surely shift attentions from social to materialistic values; portraying materialistic values is appropriate in this context as they are an effective tool for gaining more face. But as Chinese live in a network-based society, they also place strong emphasis on caring for their relatives and friends.

Advertisements for dishwashing detergents, among other things, make use of this cultural attitude by showing a caring mother and a loving child who supports its mother, so fulfilling its duties towards parents and elders. The significance of social values also manifests itself in the popularity of brands such as

Haier, Lenovo or Li Ning, all of which have dynamic and inspirational leaders. While Americans and Europeans may prefer more direct and explicit messages, Chinese tend towards high-context communication, pay attention to social status and prefer charismatic persons to anonymous brands.

Uncertainty

The last feature to focus on is uncertainty avoidance. China's development in the last 200 years – and in the last 30 years in particular – has been dramatic. The country has opened up to the Western world and incorporated Western concepts of living and working. The Chinese people have shown their curiosity about new ideas and improving their quality of life. They are open to learning about new products and using new marketing channels.

The preconditions could therefore hardly be better for Western companies. Those who are able to implement the concept of intercultural communication in their marketing strategies will be able to send understandable messages to Chinese consumers. The result will be better brand awareness, higher brand loyalty and, ultimately, an increase in sales.