

10

International Advertising and Communications

Babak Taheri and Sean Lochrie

The internationalisation of marketing communications

International advertising can be defined as a “phenomenon that involves the transfer of advertising appeals, messages, art, copy, photographs, stores, and video and film segments (or spots) from one country to another” (American Marketing Association, 2015). International advertising encompasses areas such as planning, budgeting, resource allocation issues, message strategy, media decisions, local regulations, advertising agency selection, coordination of multi-country communication efforts, and regional and global campaigns (Percy & Rosenbaum-Elliott, 2012; Solomon, 2013).

It is suggested that advances in communication technologies have led to consumers around the world increasingly desiring the same products (Levitt, 1983). As Levitt (1983: 93) highlights, “the world’s needs and desires have been irrevocably homogenised. This makes the multinational corporation obsolete and the global corporation absolute”. Therefore, Levitt (1983) argues that international firms should stop acting like ‘multinationals’ which tailor their products to fit local markets, instead, they should become global through standardising the manufacturing, distribution and advertising of their goods across all nations. In other words, organisations should follow an internationalisation strategy, which can be described as an approach to designing, producing, distributing and advertising products and services that are easily adaptable to different countries, cultures and languages (Turnbull & Doherty-Wilson, 1990).

Despite this focus on standardization, the need for organisations to embrace local needs and tastes is of great significance (Kanso & Kitchen, 2004; Melewar & Saunders, 1999). For example, American fast food restaurant KFC, originally branded Kentucky Fried Chicken, successfully penetrated the Chinese market by balancing the fundamental core of their brand, fried chicken and fast service, with offering China-specific food to supplement its standard Western cuisine. This exemplifies the argument made by Quelch and Hoff (1986, p. 59) that the pertinent question in international marketing “is not whether to go global but how to tailor the global marketing concept to fit each business”.

Internationalisation in advertising can be traced back to the start of the early twentieth century, but the importance of this phenomena was given credence when in 1899 American marketing communications agency, J. Walter Thompson, opened its first office in London. The internationalisation of advertising has been studied from several perspectives. For example, Levitt (1983) argues that a common advertising campaign with some minor adjustments can help to promote the same service or product across borders. However, it requires separate messages for consumers in different markets, as there are some incompatible differences (e.g., cultural, economic and media elements) between countries or even between regions in the same country. Additionally, Pappavassiliou and Stathakopoulos (1997) argue that adaptation of advertising decisions is not a dichotomous one and such decisions can be viewed on the continuum, as there normally exist degrees of international advertising adaptation. Moreover, geographers and economists examine a variety of issues with regards to the international evaluation of ad agencies and the international regulatory implications on the companies as a result of liberalisation of advertising services (Roberts, 1998). Turnbull and Doherty-Wilson (1990: 12) note that “the internationalisation of the advertising agency business has made it necessary for multinational as well as national agencies to direct more attention to corporate strategy and policy decisions. While agencies generally see internationalisation as a natural business progression, whether they choose to exist as a multinational or a national agency, they must position the agency properly within that environment to ensure their survival and prosperity”. They also argue that ad agencies sometimes utilise employee-related and non-related diversification strategies in both domestic and international levels.

International marketing communications is a challenging phenomenon. According to Monye (2000: 4) an important element in the planning of marketing communications is how different organisations can communicate with “a range of messages about value, quality, reliability and brand image to a

whole variety of global audiences". Pivotal to successful marketing communications is the organisation's ability to develop a brand that means something to its target audience. In today's world, geographic and cultural borders are *permeable* because of the internet, cable and satellite television. Globalisation and increased geographical mobility mean that even regional advertising has to attend to the different cultural frames of reference of non-indigenous populations. This in return can create potential foreign markets for domestic producers and increases competition in the market (Hackley, 2012; Percy & Rosenbaum-Elliott, 2012). For instance, in Europe there are stereotypical beliefs that the best policemen are British, the best chefs French, the best mechanics German, the best lovers Italian and the best organisers the Swiss. As the old joke goes, "Hell is where the police are German, the chefs are British, the mechanics are French, the lovers Swiss and it is all organised by the Italians" (Hackley, 2010: 196).

As another example, popular Scottish clothing brands such as Harris Tweed and Pringle have been able to penetrate global markets, taking once domestic and local brands to the world stage. If a fashion brand A is successful and active in the foreign market, then fashion brand B also would like to play active role in this particular foreign market and remain competitive in the domestic market. However, international and cross-cultural communication remains an area of tension between local cultural norms of meaning systems and global (often Western) brand ideologies. For example, even within one country a given advert can be exposed to heterogeneous consumers whose interpretive frame of reference is informed by specific cultural norms which reflect ethnic, religion, family, sub-culture, peer-group and other values and presuppositions and advertising regulation (Hackley, 2012; Percy & Rosenbaum-Elliott, 2012). Furthermore, the differences in international advertising regulation and the different interpretation of frame of references in dissimilar cultures can influence the standardisation and advertising campaigns. Therefore, a particular advertising campaign might be acceptable in a country (e.g., portraying nudity) but not be acceptable in another country.

Exercise

Consider a popular brand – for example, a sports clothing brand, a car manufacturer, or a restaurant chain. Can you identify elements of their marketing communications which are distinguishable and can be seen to exemplify an internationalisation approach to advertising? You may want to consider things such as logo, colours, and slogans.