

GARY MUDDYMAN LOOKS AT WHY IT IS SO VITAL FOR INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS PROFESSIONALS TO FACTOR IN THE LOCAL DIMENSION WHEN COMMUNICATING WITH A MULTI-NATIONAL OR MULTI-CULTURAL ORGANIZATION



Mind your

LANGUAGE



One of the most oft-repeated gaffes of the reign of George W Bush is his use of the term 'Pakis' during one of his great attempts at diplomacy.

To refresh our memories, this is what he said: "We are working hard to convince both the Indians and the Pakis that there's a way to deal with their problems without going to war."

(He was not quite working hard enough, quipped *The Guardian*.)

Perhaps because of the utter offence of it, or perhaps because of our disbelief that this most powerful of men could be either so insensitive or just plain daft, it received incredibly wide coverage in the UK – more so than in the US. While the North American media went to pains to explain why it was unacceptable, Britons have been aware for at least 20 years that it is an offensive term.

Then again, racial conflict has been experienced in vastly different ways on the two continents. There was never a term 'Paki-bashing' in the US. Other offensive terms towards various ethnicities, yes, but not this particular insult.

My point is not to say that one nation is or more or less sensitive than the other, but that words have vastly different meanings, even among countries that speak the same language. Cultural nuances are many and varied, they have valid and personal meaning and should not be taken lightly. I have no doubt that Dubya's offense was unwitting, but it does not excuse it.

There is an important lesson in this for

internal communicators with a global audience. And it's to learn quickly that no matter how great you are at your job, no matter how embedded you believe your corporate values are into the global workforce, you will never – can never – understand all the cultural nuances, norms and taboos that exist within the national cultures that populate your organization.

That's not to say communicators cannot do their jobs well; it just means they should be thinking of 'localisation' rather than just 'translation' when it comes to communicating important company information. Localisation is the cultural and linguistic adaptation of products, communications and messaging.

International communication is not just about the conversion of words. Direct translation may be fine for an instruction manual, for example, but when there is meaning in your words that you would like to provoke an action or behaviour, then localisation is required.

If we agree that an internal communicator's role is to engender an understanding of an organization's vision, mission and goals; facilitate communication between leadership, management and employees; forge a sense of community and unite under a common pur-

Tips for international communicators

DO

- »Be patient
- »Respect cultures
- »Introduce feedback loops
- »Trust local communicators to adapt your message

DON'T

- »Rely on humour to translate well
- »Use slang or jargon
- »Think one message fits all

pose, then we should also be able to agree that it is just as crucial to engage employees based in non-domestic markets as it is to engage those at home.

To do that effectively, communicators have to take the time to understand the cultural differences within their organization. Specifically, I mean cultural differences in terms of work customs, practices and ways of talking and addressing people.

National culture affects the way we think, feel and act. Many organizations talk about diversity and, as communicators, this should include the consideration of cultural differences within our organization when crafting and distributing messages.

Two Dutch academics, Geert Hofstede and Fons Trompenaars, have spent considerable time over the past 30 years thinking about cultural diversity and its effect on business.

While each is critical of the other's work, both men have come up with a series of 'cultural dimensions' that they use to consider how culture affects organizational behaviour.

By analysing where your audience fits in these dimensions (see page 8), you can better structure your communications so that they elicit the response you desire. There is no doubt

No matter how great you are at your job, no matter how embedded you believe your corporate values are into the global workforce, you will never – can never – understand all the cultural nuances, norms and taboos that exist within the national cultures that populate your organization

that these cultural analyses can seem confusing at first, but it's the role of a competent and expert translation and localisation provider to put it in context for you.

So let's think about an example, and what it may mean on a practical level for – let's say – a British company with offices in France and Malaysia. What do Trompenaars's and Hofstede's cultural dimensions say about what the different audiences want in a company message?

For the British, you will give the facts. Britons will want to know how the message affects them as individuals as well as the wider business goals they've been working towards.

The French are concerned with rules and procedures. They will want to know if there will be a change to these and how it will affect them, their colleagues and the company, since

they typically stay in a job for a long time.

In Malaysia, a more hierarchical structure exists. The message will speak with authority and tell employees exactly what they have to do.

Now, of course, this is an oversimplification of reality. I use it only to demonstrate how Trompenaars and Hofstede can help you target

your message. Because the fact is, that by speaking to people how they like to be, and indeed expect to be, addressed you are more likely to get the reaction you want.

Localisation considers the meaning and the feeling the message is trying to convey and adapts the message to evoke the same reaction as the original copy.

So, instead of thinking about the words in your message, think about the point of your message. What do you want employees to do as a result of this particular piece of communication? How do you want them to behave? This understanding should structure your message, rather than a heavy reliance on the accurate translation of the words you have drafted from a specifically British perspective.

Inevitably, the cultural dimensions of both Hofstede and Trompenaars involve an element of national stereotyping and, as such, should not be taken as gospel. Both men themselves acknowledge this. But they should act as a practical guide to further your understanding of how best to get your intended meaning out to your global audience. ♦

About the author

»Gary Muddyman, MD and CEO of Conversis, spoke at CIB Central Region's Heart of the Matter conference in the West Midlands earlier this year. See www.conversisglobal.com



eight >

EXAMPLE

Double take: one country, two categorisations. Under Hofstede's model Japan leads the masculinity -vs- femininity model as 'masculine, aggressive and assertive', Trompenaar classifies it as 'familial' – 'power from on high but with a deep concern for its members...'

**GOING DUTCH***Trompenaars -vs- Hofstede***4 TROMPENAARS'S FOUR TYPES OF CORPORATE CULTURE**

Trompenaars developed a cultural diversity model for application in business by considering the effect of national cultures on the notions of 'person -vs- task' and 'centralised -vs- decentralised' organization structures. He came up with these four types of corporate culture:

- » **Guided missile** – a project-oriented approach; concerned with results. This group looks for practical solutions to shared challenges via multi-disciplinary teams. The UK and US fit into this group.
- » **Eiffel Tower** – a role-oriented group in which hierarchy is important; top-down management style. To manage change, the business would have to change rules and procedures. France and Germany score high in this model.
- » **Familial** – this is a power-oriented model in which a 'family' approach is taken. Power comes from high but is well known and there is a deep concern for all members. Japan and Belgium fit into this model.
- » **Incubator** – fulfilment-oriented group who see all members as 'co-creators'. A relatively egalitarian structure in which individuals are given the freedom to improvise. Silicon Valley is a good example of where this has worked to great effect.

5 HOFSTEDE'S FIVE CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

Hofstede's is perhaps the best-known model for analysing the impact of national cultures on organizational behaviour. He talks about five cultural dimensions:

- » **Individualism -vs- collectivism (IDV)** – this relates to the relative importance of individual rights over the wellbeing of the group or community. The countries that score highest on the IDV are the US, Australia and UK.
- » **Uncertainty avoidance (UAI)** – the extent to which a culture values uncertainty or lack of structure. Countries with a high UAI deal with uncertainty by creating strict laws, rules and procedures. Greece scores highest here, followed by Portugal and Guatemala.
- » **Power distance (PDI)** – this relates to equality and how well the less powerful accept that power is distributed unequally. Malaysia scores the highest in PDI, while Australia scores among the lowest.
- » **Masculinity -vs- femininity (MAS)** – 'masculine' cultures are considered assertive and aggressive, whereas 'feminine' cultures are modest and caring. Japan leads this list while Netherlands is towards the lowest.
- » **Long-term orientation (LTO)** – refers to how time is perceived and what extent the group invests in the future or can patiently wait for long-term results. China scores the highest here, followed by Hong Kong and Taiwan.

FURTHER READING:

- Hofstede, Geert. *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and Organizations Across Nations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001.
- Trompenaars, Fons and Hampden-Turner, Charles. *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Diversity in Global Business*. Nicholas Brearley Publishing: London, 1997