

# Communication issues in international marketing



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Marketing communications refers to the presentation and exchange of information with various stakeholders and organization to arrive at specific results. Not only is the purpose of marketing communications that the information is understood accurately but it also extends to include persuasion so that the marketing process functions more effectively and efficiently. In marketing communications, we are mainly concerned with the conveyance of information about a firm's products and services. That is, it refers to the promotional mix used by the firm in order to communicate its products to its customers. Kotler uses the terms promotional mix and communication mix interchangeably to refer to that element of the marketing mix concerned with promotional activities. Communication of information in international marketing is a good term to be used as it implies a two-way process between the organization and its stakeholders which may help to reduce misunderstandings.

And that is exactly what this paper will address; the problem of misunderstanding marketing messages or information in an international context. The process of accurately communicating a message is already difficult in a domestic environment. However, the "management of international marketing communications is made particularly challenging by a number of factors including the complexity of different market conditions, differences in media availability, languages, cultural sensitivities, regulations controlling advertising and sales promotions and the challenge of providing adequate resource levels" (Doole and Lowe, 2008). Furthermore, effective and efficient communication in international marketing is important because

of the geographic and psychological distances between the organization and its stakeholders.

In this paper, we provide an overview of the communication barriers that international marketers have to deal with when communicating their products and services to global markets.

## **Why Failures of Communications Occur**

International marketing communications have two main purposes. First, is to ensure that the intended message is accurately communicated between the sender and the receiver. Second, is to keep the impact of unintended messages at a minimum since these can have an adverse effect on the firm's market performance and reputation. Now, the question is what contributes to the creation of unintended messages communicated in international marketing? What are the reasons for miscommunication of marketing messages in the international market arena? Consider Cadbury who "caused an offence in India and Pakistan with an advertisement to promote Temptations chocolate. It showed Kashmir with the strapline "Too good to share". In this example, mistakes in the use of language or messages that can easily be lost in translation as well as lack of cultural sensitivity can put international marketing communicators at a disadvantage.

Of course many of the failures of communications are unintentional on the part of the international marketer even though they occur. Below are a number of reasons for international marketing communications failures as suggested by Doole and Lowe (2008):

Inconsistency of the message conveyed to customers by staff at different levels and from different countries and cultures.

Different styles of presentation of corporate identity, brand and product image from different departments and country business units which can leave customers confused.

A lack of coordination of messages, such as press releases, advertising campaigns and changes in product specification or pricing across the various country markets.

Failure to appreciate the differences in the fields of perception (the way the message is understood) of the sender and the receiver. The field of perception tends to be affected significantly by the self reference criteria of both parties. This is, perhaps, where the greatest problems arise because avoiding this requires knowledge of different market environments, cultural empathy and the willingness to adapt the communications programs and processes to local requirements.

We add to the above list the following, which will be discussed in greater detail in the coming sections of this paper.

A lack of understanding of the marketing communication process and its elements - the sender, the message, the receiver - in an international marketing context.

Ignoring legal, linguistic, cultural, media, production, and cost considerations which act as barriers to effective communication.

It is argued that most of marketing communications failures is within the control of the company, there are cases where failures happen due to external factors. No communication can take place with zero failures. However, since “ the effectiveness of promotional strategy can be jeopardized by so many factors that a marketer must be certain that no controllable influences are overlooked”.

## **The Marketing Communications Process**

As we have just mentioned, international marketing communications may fail for a variety of reasons. One of these reasons is a lack of understanding the marketing communications process in an international marketing context. In fact, “ those international executives who understand the communications process are better equipped to manage the diversity they face in developing an international promotional program” (Cateora and Graham, 2008).

We adopt the marketing communications model suggested by Cateora and Graham (2008) to explain the international communications process. The process consists of the following elements: 1. An information source (sender), 2. Encoding, 3. A message channel, 4. Decoding, 5. Receiver, 6. Feedback, 7. Noise. In this section, we will be looking at each one of these elements and the factors that influence them as they relate to the international context.

The significance of discussing this model lies in the fact that most promotional or communication mistakes in international marketing are attributed to “ one or several of these steps not properly reflecting cultural influences or to a general lack knowledge about the target market” (Cateora

and Graham, 2008). Furthermore, “ the model’s significance is that one or all steps in the process, cultural factors, or the marketer’s self-reference criterion can affect the ultimate success of the communication” (Cateora and Graham, 2008). Thus, you will notice that much of the discussion of this model requires cultural considerations. The first and most obvious evidence of that is that, according to the model, each one of the sender and the receiver is locate in a different cultural context. This means that the message is encoded in one culture and decoded in another. Failure to consider cultural differences at this level can increase the probability of misunderstandings and an ineffective communication process.

Let us now consider each element of the model and how it should be considered in an international marketing context.

The information source (sender): is represented by a marketer who is trying to sell or promote a product/service to an international market. Due to cultural differences in perception, it is often the case that the actual international market’s needs and the marketer’s perception of them do not coincide. This is intensified when the marketer relies more on his/her self-reference criterion (SRC) than on effective research. SRC can be defined as “ an unconscious reference to one’s own cultural values, experiences, and knowledge as a basis for decisions” (Cateora and Graham, 2008). Therefore, the marketer should not assume that just because a product sells well in one country or culture, it will be equally successful in another. “ The sender needs to study receiver characteristics before encoding the message to be sent in order to achieve maximum impact.” (Czinkota and Ronakainen, 1995).

Encoding: is when the message to be communicated is converted into a symbolic form such that it can be properly understood by the receiver. Of course, this proper understanding does not always take place, not even in international marketing. This is because cultural perceptions of factors such as color, timing, values, beliefs, humor, tastes and appropriateness of spokesperson vary across countries. For instance, pertaining to the interpretation of colors “ white is the color of birth and in the West usually refers to happy event, whereas in China it symbolized mourning. Conversely, the color black symbolizes death in the West, perhaps because its darkness suggests fears that the sun will not return, whereas it is an everyday color in China” (Usunier and Anne Lee, 2009). There are also “ problems of literacy, media availability, and types of media” (Cateora and Graham, 2008) that create challenges for the international marketer at this encoding step.

Message channels: refer to the sales force and/or advertising media used by the marketer (the sender) to convey the encoded message to the receiver. Czinkota and Ronkainen (1995) argue that: Complications in international marketing may arise if a particular medium is not available for commercial purposes, such as radio in some of Northern European countries. Other examples of complications are the banning of advertising for certain product categories, such as cigarette advertising in most of Europe, and the fact that some marketing practices may not be allowed, such as door-to-door selling in France. International marketers should keep in mind the accessibility of the medium to the receiver. For example, using the internet as a medium in a certain country when only a small percentage of the target audience has access to the internet is not an efficient or effective decision.

Decoding: refers to the interpretation by the receiver of the symbolism transmitted through the message channel by the sender. It is argued that decoding errors are generally created by improper encoding.

The receiver: is represented by the customers in the international market who are targeted by the message and receive it. Here also it is argued that errors at the receiver end of the process are created by a combination of “an improper message resulting from incorrect knowledge of use patterns, poor encoding producing a meaningless message, poor media selection that does not get the message to the receiver, or inaccurate decoding by the receiver so that the message is garbled or incorrect” (Cateora and Graham, 2008). However, I also think the receiver’s cultural background intensified by the SRC can influence the way the message is interpreted.

Feedback: information about the effectiveness of the message which flows from the receiver back to the sender for the latter to evaluate the effectiveness of the communication process. Feedback highlights the importance of having a two-way communication process, especially in international marketing where it gives the marketer the opportunity to learn more about the receiver’s cultural background and perception. The challenge here, however, is to come up with a proper feedback systems where both the sender and the receiver can exchange information without being influenced by the factors affecting the initial communication process all over again.

Noise: extraneous and distracting stimuli that influence any of the six steps mentioned above. These are usually uncontrollable factors such as “



competitive advertising, other sales personnel, and confusion at the receiving end” that influence the effectiveness of the communication.

Furthermore, Czinkota and Ronkainen (1995) argue that:

In the international marketing context, noise might be a bad telephone connection, failure to express a quotation in the inquirer’s system of currency and measurement, or a highly cluttered medium such as Italian television, where all advertisements are aired in one half-hour period each night. A valid inquiry from overseas may not be considered seriously by an international marketer because of noise of consisting of low quality paper, grammatical errors, or a general appearance unlike domestic correspondence. The international marketer should be most alert to cultural noise. The lack of language skills may hinder successful negotiations, whereas translation errors may render a promotional campaign or brochure useless. Similarly, nonverbal language and its improper interpretation may cause problems. For example, in the United States, lack of eye contact is a signal that something is wrong. This is not necessarily so in Japan, where the cultural style of communication involves markedly less eye contact.

### **Other Kinds of Barriers to Effective Communication**

In this section we explore further barriers that make effective communication in international markets challenging. It is true that several communications tools exist in the promotional mix of international marketing such as sales promotions, public relations, business and trade journals, direct mail and personal selling, however you will notice that the barriers below are more related to international advertising than any of the tools just mentioned. We

briefly describe five main barriers as discussed by Cateora and Graham (2007):

**Legal Constraints:** these include laws that relate to controlling comparative advertising. The international marketer needs to bear in mind that these laws vary across cultures. For instance, while comparative advertising is illegal in Germany, it is authorized in other European countries such as the United Kingdom, Ireland, Spain and Portugal. Legal constraints also include restrictions on the advertising of specific products such as cigarettes, pharmaceuticals, toys and liquors. Furthermore, there are several restrictions with regard to advertising on TV such as length and the number of television commercials allowed. For instance, “ In Kuwait, the government-controlled TV network allows only 32 minutes of advertising per day, in the evening” (Cateora and Graham, 2008). Some countries have also placed taxes on advertising in such a way that different broadcast media charge different tax ratios. This may rob international marketers of their creative freedom in advertising. New laws and regulations are also being introduced in the EU with regard to restricting advertising on the internet. However, given the nature of the internet, this seems to be a challenging task for legal authorities.

**Linguistic Limitations:** “ Language is one of the major barriers to effective communication through advertising” (Cateora and Graham, 2008). This does not only involve the problem of different languages across different countries, but it also involves the existence of various dialects, accents, colloquial language, idioms and metaphors which usually are usually lost in translation and may lead to miscommunication. Even pronunciation, words,  
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single sentences and simple concepts may be misinterpreted when translated from one language to another because of cultural heritage and education factors. For example, “ a company marketing tomato paste in the Middle East found that in Arabic the phrase tomato paste translates as tomato glue” (Cateora and Graham, 2008). Another issue that relates to linguistic limitations is that of low literacy in some countries as well as the existence of multiple languages in a country such as Switzerland; small but has four different languages.

Cultural Diversity: “ The problems associated with communicating to people in diverse cultures present one of the great creative challenges in advertising” (Cateora and Graham, 2008). This is largely due to the fact that cultural factors affect one’s perception of various phenomena, or marketing messages in our case. Much of perception is shaped by one’s cultural values, beliefs, heritage and traditions, and are hard to overcome. Once in another culture, the perceptual framework is different and the perception of the message itself differs. Take the example of General Mills when it first introduced instant cake mixes. While customers in the United States and England perceived the product as keeping them away from genuine baking and thus started having guilt feelings, customers in Japan perceived the product’s ad on TV as an insult when it advertised that making a cakes is as easy as making rice. For your information, the Japanese are not known for baking and they perceive making rice as a skill. International marketers should also consider the existence of subcultures when advertising in a certain culture or a geographical area with many subcultures. Furthermore, they should note that though people tend to cling to their heritages, they

also undergo the process of changing traditions. This can actually create an opportunity for international marketers to introduce new products when communicated carefully.

**Media Limitations:** these manifest themselves in availability, cost and coverage problems associated with advertising in international markets. This is why other communications tools exist as the ones mentioned earlier. “ A marketer’s creativity is certainly challenged when a television commercial is limited to 10 showings a year with no two exposures closer than 10 days, as is the case in Italy” (Cateora and Graham, 2008).

**Production and Cost Limitations:** these limitations deal with such issues as poor production or the necessity for low-cost reproduction of advertisements in certain countries. For example, “ newsprint is of such low quality in China that a color ad used by Kodak in the West an option. Kodak’s solution has been to print a single-sheet color insert as a newspaper supplement” (Cateora and Graham, 2008).

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper was to give an overview of the barriers to effective communication in the international marketing arena. By communication we meant the promotional mix that marketers might follow in the international marketing arena. Instead of exploring the tools used in international marketing communications, we focused on the factors that might hinder effective and efficient delivery of the marketing message intended to be send through these tools. These factors included, to a large extent, cultural variables. In addition, there are factors such as legal constraints, language,

media restrictions and cost and production limitations. In my opinion, the most influential of these factors are the cultural factors as they affect the perceptual model of each individual and thus affect the actions and decision taken by that individual. We also emphasized on the marketing communications model and how international issues arise at each element in that model.

The limitations of this paper lie in the fact that it is not exhaustive of the topic and merely provides an idea of some of the problems that marketer have to face in communicating messages about their firms and market offerings and efforts across international markets.