

## ADVERTISING APPEALS: A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

by

Mohamad Md. Yusoff  
*BA(Malaya), MA (Michigan State)*  
*Cert. Exec. Dev. (ITM)*

### INTRODUCTION

There are few areas of human opinion in which there has been a more divergent expressions of views than the question of universal advertising themes/appeals vs. local appeals. By and large, international advertising and marketing have received increasing attention in recent years. The arguments for the internationalization of advertising vis a vis adapting to local needs and idiom often put forth the dangers and pitfalls of international advertising. Hence, toward this end, this paper attempts to look at the some of the problems confronting U.S. advertising overseas and to describe if not relate how cultural beliefs, languages, customs influence the perception of the foreign consumers toward American advertising messages and appeals.

Advertising men in the U.S. and in other countries have discussed widely the degree to which ideas and advertising materials created in one country can be used in another. In fact, to quote Eric Elinder head of a Swedish advertising agency, *"Why should three artists in three different countries sit drawing the same electric iron and three copywriters write about what after all is largely the same copy for the same iron?"* (1961, Ad. Age). Mr. Elinder and others believe that appeals, messages, illustrations or other features of advertisement need not be changed from market to market. They have rightly observed that in many respects, consumers in diverse markets are similar and that human nature is basically the same in most societies. Men everywhere require satisfaction of physiological and psychological needs.

However, on the other side of the coin, it

can be argued that there are indeed real differences that any modern advertising men cannot afford to ignore. The most obvious and least understood is that of language. Not only they speak another tongue, but also they adhere to other religions, philosophies and traditions, also in terms of family patterns, childhood training and the role of the members in the family. Thus to quote Dr. Miracle, *"While human nature and the motives of men are more or less universal, the ways in which men satisfy their needs are not. The nature of need satisfaction is determined by cultural and socio-economic conditions. Since such conditions are not the same in all countries, it may be argued that products or the appeals, illustrations and other advertising features used to sell them often must differ from market to market."* (MSU Business Topics, 1968).

### The Common Denominators

There are in fact, the same common denominators that link people together in this world. Because effective advertising, is an appeal to human fundamental needs, desires and motivations, it is an appeal to basic human nature. People, the world over have the same basic need for food, clothing and shelter, the same ambitions, the same egotism and the same temptations. The setting changes, the culture, the climate, the idioms, but basic human nature is the same everywhere. Hence, traditional advertising appeals of economy, comfort, love, advancement and social approval are equally applicable in all markets.

Furthermore, despite the resistance of nationalism and local pride, the world is indeed shrinking as the inter-change between people and culture grows. The jet-age has placed the centers of Europe, Asia, Africa a mere few hours away from the Western hemisphere and the economies of mass travel have put inter-continental tourism within the reach of more and more pocketbooks. The communication industries have helped close the gaps between cultures. Movies from Hollywood, England and Italy have covered the world. The TV serials, "Kojak", "Iron-side", "Six-million Dollar Man"

are coming through all the picture tubes, practically all places in the world. The efficient communication networks of TV, radio, newspapers, magazines has broadened our perspectives and understandings of the events in the world — be it human, political and moral. Thus, the common denominators are there and it is contended that the same fundamental appeals can effectively reach everyone.

### **Real Differences**

But, there are certainly real differences, the common one is language that cut across boundaries, culture. For example, there are a lot of differences between England and America although they speak the same language. It is not just the obvious difference between tongues, but that of idiomatic nuances that should concern the ad men and intelligent translators. Therefore, the real understanding of the idiom of a foreign culture should be one of the first consideration of the international marketer.

### **Symbol**

But, however, language and idiom are only part of the differences besides the tastes, environment, custom, religions and superstitious beliefs. For example, an American is immune to the persistent hard-sell and blunt and forceful promotional methods whereas the Europeans are better reached with the soft persuasion of indirection and subtly. Similarly, they will insist that advertising which essentially entertains, is the most effective approach in Europe, and that the best approach is that which is indirect and comes to its selling proposition only after the most devious build-up. In Europe, advertising will be effective if visual-poster-art techniques has been touted in order to reach French reader and Latin American advertising would favor line art as opposed to Italians obsession with cinematic spectacular entertainment commercials, while the use of colors has had a fundamental effect on advertising in many of the underdeveloped countries of Asia, Africa. All these verbal and visual symbols are axiomatic of the peculiarities prevalent in certain specific countries. In Asia, color gives a

lot of meanings and implications. For example, in China, light and bright are only used by the young while plainer and deeper colors by elders. Yellow has always been the imperial color though it means/symbolizes cowardice to American. To Chinese, it is suggestive of being grandeur and mystery. So, as a large percentage of population is illiterate, symbols play a very important role in relaying and advertising message. Often times, messages get distorted and misconstrued as wrong color is used that means bad luck, or death. Thus, it is vital that an advertiser understand the superstitions, religious beliefs of the country though they vary greatly from country to country.

For example, in India, there are deep-seated differences in caste, creed, language and custom. And differences arise in the very concept of competition. US marketers are consumer-oriented while Indian business is largely production-oriented and many times this leads to positive denial of advertising and public relations. Moreover, there is a peculiar semantic and economic view point attached to many aspects of business life in India which are governed by and large by beliefs that may on the surface appear far-fetched to the Western businessman. For examples, contracts and legal documents many times depend upon celestial and astrological considerations such as the position of the moon and stars. This symbolic behavior is related to the belief that the success of a given venture depends upon forces beyond human control.

As a matter of fact, India is divided into many religious orders, about 85% are Hindu and Muslim and 5% Christian, Buddhist, Sikh and Jain. This variety of religions poses potential problems to advertisers in the use of symbols in a cross-the-board national promotion. Symbolism in copy writing should be identified with regional Indian cultural values. The Indian superstitious belief, in so far as business is concerned, is that the first day of the new moon is considered a very bad day as it connotes bad luck. Also, it would be considered very poor planning to advertise a product in a birthday or wedding setting with the models wearing black

dresses or suits. It is simply not considered auspicious to display black at such pleasant occasions.

The Hindu New Year, Deepavali is considered an excellent time to do business and the Hindus make it a specific point to transact a piece of business on that particular day for good luck to open the way for good tie-in promotions and a receptiveness to forceful promotions at that time.

While English is widely used throughout India, for vernacular authenticity, it is best to tailor the approach. For example, an advertiser could generally use Tamil dialect in South India, Hindi in North India and Gujarati around Bombay (Printers Ink: 1969).

The cow is a sacred animal to the Hindu in India. It would be extremely unwise for a food-product manufacturer to extol the joys of a beef sandwich or hamburger. Similarly, Muslim beliefs preclude promotions in settings where ham or bacon are shown. To Buddhists who believe in reincarnation, utilizing animals in cartoon advertisements to portray human beings may be quite unacceptable and offending.

On the other hand, an advertisement comparing people to animals also run the risk of being offensive to an Arab (a beast is a beast, and a man is a man). Thus, the use of animals as symbols to illustrate human behavior may not be attractive even though understandable. Furthermore, it would be a mistake to show a Hindu God in any kind of deodorant promotion, this would be the equivalent of running an ad in Western media for boot polish with the trade name of Jesus Christ.

As mentioned, color is critical factor in Asia especially Japan, Malaysia, Thailand. In Japan, the combination of red and white is widely regarded as appropriate to happy and pleasant occasions. But the combinations of black and white is reserved largely for funerals except in apparel promotions. In fact, the trademark of J.A.L. is a crane that symbolises longevity, "live a thousand years" and is revered as being very lucky. The 'Tai' fish or sea-

breem, a large, pink colored fish, also is regarded as lucky in Japan. The use of the number four in advertisement in Japan should be avoided, the word for four, "Shi" is also a word for death. In addition, an interesting thing about Japanese advertising is that appeals could be more effective if an indirect copy approach is utilized. In fact, Japanese disapprove of a direct command or authoritative statements such as, "Do it now!" or "Buy now!" but prefer a rather humble approach signifying politeness that is welcomed among traditionalists. Husbands and wives still lead relatively separate lives in Japan and are seldom seen out together. This social structure involves a rigid set of rules of etiquette covering human relationships down to the minutest detail. Advertising stressing "togetherness" in a public setting could be injurious to an advertiser in such a climate of traditional values.

#### Malaysian Case

In Malaysia, where it is segmented by different race, culture, religion and language, the colour green is considered as unacceptable color, as it connotes illness and jungle. Combinations of green and purple are quite acceptable. Dark blue combined with black is an unfortunate selection for the East, white signifies death cleanliness, while Black symbolises death to the Chinese. To the Chinese, red is a lucky color although to Hong Kong Chinese, red is acceptable. Yellow, reds and oranges however connote a fusion of religious beliefs for Thailand in the former and India in the latter.

The advertising tests done in Malaysia showed that among other things, the consumer is likely to be confused by the puns, innuendos and subtle terms of phrase in English commercials, like; "Volkswagen, does it again", the headline for British cigarettes, Dunhill, Benson and Hedges and also Carlsberg that play on sex, prestige, status, for which Malaysians consumers largely are not easily persuaded by that kind of appeals. Obviously, therefore it is one thing to use local models but quite a different thing to capture the 'flavor' of local cultures and yet it is important to bear in mind that communica-

tion is best effected when the advertiser can speak to Malaysians consumer in a local language they can understand. Wilbur Schramm, speaking about the efficient use of the mass media in accomplishing social change, remarks "*Campaign after campaign has failed in developing countries because the campaigns misjudged or misunderstood the local situations*" (Setwam) 1964, p. 123).

When pictures and language are not in harmony, the effect can be incongruous. This could be seen in Volkswagen ads, Opel ads. and Peugeot ads that play on status symbol par excellence, social sophistication or styles. In fact, car advertisements in Malaysia seem to be selling luxury, comfort, fashion, with perhaps least emphasis on the cars themselves. This run counter to basic Malaysian motorists attitudes when purchasing a car, in which convenience was the strongest motivating factor influencing the purchase of the first car. This convenience factor was viewed specially with a personal pleasure. In fact, the phrase used was, "Have car will travel" to describe the pleasure derived for having a car. In saying this, they reveal a basic fundamental aspect of Malaysian cultural life today, i.e., the combinations of gregariousness and mobility which draws people to travel long distances to see family, friends and places at regular intervals. In Malaysian society, the ties uniting kin in every ethnic group are so binding that to own a car for travelling around is ranked as of foremost importance. So, the prestige, status is only secondary in some cases. In other words, buying a car in Malaysia is not prestigious, status, glamorous as portrayed in the Western ads but an obsession with utilization considerations. Since government legislators are against imported commercials it has provoked some advertisers merely to substitute local models for foreign models. The characters are local but the advertisement tends to highlight and glamorize the values and ideals of Western European society. The information gleaned from these advertisement, serves to bolster the impression gained from observation of the lives of white people in Malaysia that life in such countries is indeed luxurious, (Peter

Wilson, 1967). Thus, in most cases the images created have often very little relation to Malaysian environment or what is expected in the society to satisfy the demands and awareness of local realities.

According to Kenneth Boulding, "*The cross and the crescent, the flags and the books, the bears, lions and eagles, goddesses of liberty, and justice and freedom, symbols of race, class, religions, ideology; ideas like surplus value or the Hidden, all these struggle in the cloudy content of the human imagination,*" (Sandage and Fryburger, 1960). Advertiser's represent one group of communicators that have capitalized on man's nature, preoccupation with signs and symbols. Every culture has its symbols, some are drawn from mythology the winged feet of Mercury symbolises speed, while others may be of national significance (W. Gentry, 1958). Symbols are however, like hieroglyphics conveying nothing unless the public can identify with or meaningfully relate to them. The more the audience or viewers can refer the symbols to their own experience, the more likely the copy is to communicate, (Dunn, p. 50).

This could be seen in the Malaysian Airline System (MAS) logo that relates a traditional image to modern living. The Kelantan kite, a beautiful Malaysian artifact was adopted as Malaysia's symbol of controlled flight. Graphic designers have planned the fundamental shape of the Kelantan kite (known to many as "Wau bulan"), to create the symbol which is featured on the tail-end of "MAS" aircraft. The choice of the kite as symbol is appropriate, being experientially meaningful to Malaysian because kite-flying is a popular amusement. There is also rational behind the colors used. The colors — red, white, blue, suggestive of livery, is nationally significant as these are also the colors of the Malaysia flag. Hence, the advertisers is seeking to blend nationalism and independence with the national airline in the public consciousness.

#### Appeals

Although appeals are universally acceptable in some cultures, but yet it is still fraught with

discrepancies and incongruities. In Belgium, for example, the use of certain brand of lipstick or toothpaste by a well-known fashion model does not enhance product's appeals in the eyes of a working girl. This is because models are scarce and their trade is hardly considered honorable. The Belgians being hard working, appreciate good things in life even to the extent of buying beer, products because of its taste, even though it is bad for the health. Likewise, in France, the suggestion that the use of a certain toothpaste will help prevent dental cavities is likely to be less effective than the same appeal in U.S. since Frenchmen are not inclined as Americans to be concerned about the number of cavities in their teeth. However, to the Dutch, vitamin content and energy value of some foods are more important than taste.

Despite that, "Coke adds life" has a universal appeal acceptable in most countries-transcending all sectional barriers. This is because it satisfied the thirst-quenching appeal that appeal to basic human needs. Therefore, Coca-Cola strives to achieve a similarity of messages, visual appearance good taste and major media selection. (Miracle, 1970).

Nevertheless, despite, its successful campaign in Europe, Esso's universal appeal, "Put a tiger in your tank", did not work in Thailand as the tiger is not a symbol of strength and power and the campaign consequently was not understood, let alone failed. Another example is breakfast cereals that were marketed in Italy than ran into a head-on and expensive collision with tradition. This is because, cooking is done at home not in a factory as Italians are noted for being the world's best cooks, as well as the world's best lovers. Hence, it is axiomatic that products must be suited to the local market, and appeals.

In Thailand, black shampoo is much preferred because it makes Thai women feel their hair look glossier. On the other hand, deodorants which have saturated the market in America do not sell in Mediterranean and Asia because there is no problem of body odor and where men and women tend to think a certain

amount of natural odor is desirable. In Holland, blue is considered feminine and warm, while Swedes associate it with masculinity and coldness. In German field tests, consumers said that a new menthol cigarettes that came in a brown package tasted much better than the same one in a blue package. General Foods Corporation entered British market with its standard powdered Jell-O, only to find that British housewives prefer solid-wafer or cake form, even if it takes more time to prepare. In Italy, corn-processing plant floundered because Italians think of corn as pig food. Some products do not sell, Jell-O in Quebec because the English may be almost unpronounceable to a French speaker, or the name of the product may be meaningless even when translated idiomatically. Though, blue is the color for mourning in Iran, it is not likely to be received on a commercial product. Green is the nationalist color of Egypt and Syria and is frowned on for use in packages. Showing of pairs of anything on the Gold Coast of Africa is disapproved. Brown and grey are disapproved colors in Nicaragua. Purple is generally disapproved in Latin American markets because of an association with death. Feet are regarded as despicable in Thailand where any object and package showing feet is likely to be unfavorably received. While Americans would find most valuable claims that feature opportunities for success, prestige, or personal recognition, Australians and Canadians would find these somewhat less plausible and British would see the least amount of relevance in them. Claims dealing with newness, better performance and materials are most plausible to American less so to Canadians, Australians and least so for British. In Thailand, the Warner-Lambert Listerine failed because Thais regarded as too risqué the presentation of a boy-girl relationship in which one gives the word to the other about bad breath. Dialogue should be between girls instead. General Motors made an embarrassing mistake when in Flemish, "Body by Fisher" translated as "Corpse by Fisher", (Mazze, 1964). In a similar case, Schweppes Tonic Water was rapidly delay-drated to Schweppes Tonica. In Italy, where ill-water is idiomatic

expression for a bathroom. An American airline operating in Brazil proudly advertised plush rendezvous lounges on its jets, only belatedly discovering that "rendezvous" in Portuguese meant a room hired for a love-making. Pepsi's ad, "Come alive with Pepsi", had problems in Germany because the translation of "Come alive" meant "come alive out of the grave", (Ad. Age, 1966).

Colgate-Palmolive made an expensive mistake when it introduced its 'Cue' toothpaste in French-speaking countries. Colgate maintained its trademark without knowing that "Cue" was a phonographic word in French (Martyn, 1964).

Indeed, linguistic anomalies are but one class of blunders in advertising. In cautious handling of language has caused problems for all kinds of companies in nearly every country. For example, Chrysler Corporation was nearly laughed out of Spain when it copied the U.S. theme advertising, "Dart is power". To the Spanish, the phrase implied that buyers lack but are seeking sexual vigor. Ford floundered on the linguistic problems of number; in many languages, the word Company is plural rather than singular, as in English, "Ford has something for it", trumpeted one headline in English. Ford goofed again when it named its low-cost, "Third world" truck "Fiera" which means "ugly old woman" in Spanish. American Motors has had its problems too. Market research showed that AMC's "Matador" name meant virility and excitement, but when the car was introduced in Puerto Rico it was discovered that the word meant, "Killer" an unfortunate choice for Puerto Rico which has an unusually high traffic fatality rate.

Advertisements that fail to reflect the local lifestyle would prove futile. For example, General Mills promotion of breakfast cereal package showed a freckled, red-haired, crew-cut grinning kid saying, "See kids, it's great!" a promotional package that could not be more typically American (Mc Creary, 1964). But General Mills failed to recognize that British family is not as child-centered as the U.S.; the stereotype U.S. boy and near banal expression

had no appeal to the more formal and aristocratic ideal of the child upheld by the English. As a result, the cereal package repelled the British housewife and evidently, the campaign was a total failure.

Similarly, a certain American manufacturer of beauty products decided to court French consumers by using some of the lustrous and arresting advertisements that so successfully captured the American audience, (Lenormard, 1964). Unfortunately the advertising missed its audience. The French women did not identify themselves with the exceptionally attractive models because the advertising had been too exaggerated and lacked sufficient realism to elicit the audience's self-identification with the models. The beauty products did not cause Paris to rave and rant, and French women did not choose them.

Another cosmetic firm tried unsuccessfully toward the Japanese with a lipstick ad campaign that had quite an appeal in Italy, (Business Abroad, 1967). The ad featured a statue of Nero coming to life with a freakish grin as he saw a girl wearing their particular brand of lipstick. The result was that the advertisement struck no accord with the Japanese consumers. Nero was alien to them, the grin was grotesque and the ad simply had no trace of those characteristics that appealed to the Japanese women. Also, Japanese consumers responded best to ads that emphasized the product's practical advantages.

Ad men have encountered other unusual situations unique to Thailand. A well-known marketer of eye-glasses initiated a campaign to promote its spectacles (Carson, 1967). To attract attention, ads and billboards showing with a picture of animals wearing eye glasses were used. Despite the apparent charm of the portrayals, sales failed to materialize. The marketers only belatedly discovered that Thais regarded animals as a lower level of creation and were unattracted to advertising using animal themes. Another blunder of U.S. advertising is the Pepsodent's promise of white teeth that was especially inappropriate in many regions of

South East Asia, where betel nut chewing was an elite habit and black teeth a symbol of prestige, (Martyn, 1964). Thus, the "wonder where the yellow went" slogan didn't materialize.

In Hong Kong cheese is associated with Yeung – Yen (foreigners) and was rejected outrightly by the Chinese. The concept of cooling and heating of the body are important in Chinese thinking; malted milk is considered heating, while fresh milk is cooling. Brandy is sustaining, whisky harmful. In addition, there are ten different kinds of breakfast eating patterns that exist in Hong Kong.

### Conclusions

Overcoming the problems of communicating to people in diverse cultures is one of the great creative challenges in international advertising. It is axiomatic that as messages move from one culture to another, communication is more difficult, this is so, partly because cultural factors largely determine the ways various phenomena will be perceived. If the perceptual framework is different, perception of the message itself obviously will differ. Edward T. Hall says, in *Silent Language*, 'Culture is communication and communication is culture'. Robert T. Oliver reiterated when he says in "Culture and Communication."

*"We've been slow to listen to the lesson of the cultural anthropologist that the very thought – culture – the basic value systems, the fundamental manner of perceiving reality all differ from culture to culture. As marketers, we have to be concerned not only with differences between culture but also with subcultures within a given country. We must also be aware that the cultural environments in which we are sending our messages are changing, and changing at an uneven rate."*

Thus, culture influences on one's perception, is a reality if not true in a lot of instances and preceding examples described that (See Appendix I). Human behavior is essentially a function of the interrelations of personality, the social system, and culture is then validated.

As John S. Wright and Daniel S. Warner say that *"Marketing and advertising are inextricably involved with human behavior in the market place. But behavior in the market place cannot be separated from behavior in other places at other times,"* (Advertising, 1962).

Thus, in order to communicate effectively in foreign markets one must fully understand the foreign culture and its social norms and to be sensitized and sensitive to the environment, let alone its languages and customs. Hence, the key to successful effective campaigns is to identify and respect the differences in point of view and sensitivities to nuances. Only then, some of the pitfalls in advertising overseas by U.S. companies could be reduced let alone eliminated.

---

**SURVEY DONE AT OWEN-GRADUATE-FOREIGN STUDENTS'**

**APPENDIX I**

American Themes	Meaning Given by Foreign Students	
	Meaning	Nationality
1) Coke adds life	Give more strength Give freshness Give the vitality Quench the thirst Give the freshness Give the freshness Brighten the day Does not mean anything	Arabs Greek Nepal Japan Nigeria Thailand Hong Kong French
2) Volkswagen does it again	It is a good car VW is better than others VW is superior Copy the Japanese model VW is #1 VW is superior VW is a good car VW is for everybody	Arabs Greek Nepal Japan Nigeria Thailand Hong Kong French
3) Ford has a better idea	Trying to prove something Ford is better than others Ford is trying harder Ford is innovative Ford is innovative Ford is superior Ford solves the problems	Latin America Greek Malaysia Nigeria Japan French Thailand



## REFERENCES

- 1) *Advertising Age*, May 9, 1966, p. 75.
- 2) Cunningham and Green, "The Effectiveness of Standardized Global Advertising", *Journal of Advertising*, 1975.
- 3) Carson, Margaret, "Admen in Thailand, Spare Find Unusual problems, Novel Solutions", *Advertising Age*, Nov. 27, 1967 p. 3.
- 4) C. Fatt, Arthur, "The Danger of Local International Advertising", *Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 31, Jan. 1967.
- 5) Dunn, Samuel Watson, "*Advertising Copy and Communication*", New York, 1956.
- 6) Dunn, Samuel Watson, "*International Handbook of Advertising*" New York, McGraw Hill, 1964.
- 7) E.T. Hall, "*The Silent Language*", Doubleday and Co., 1959
- 8) Eric Elinder, International Advertiser must Devise Universal Ads, Dump Separate National ones, Swedish Adman Avers." *Advertising Age*, Nov. 27, 1961, p. 91.
- 9) Hudson, W. "The Study of Perception – The Pictorial Perception's Problem among Unacculturated Groups," *International Journal of Psychology*, 1967.
- 10) Lenormand, J.M., "Is Europe Ripe for Integration of Advertising?" *International Advertising*, March, 1964, p. 14.
- 11) Miracle and Aibaum, "*International Marketing Management*" Richard Irwin, 1970, Chapter 20, pp. 476-478.
- 12) Mazze, Edward, M. "How to Push a Body Abroad Without Making it a Corpse", *Business Abroad*, Aug. 10, 1964, p. 15.
- 13) Martyn, Howe, "*International Business Principles and Problems* New York, Collier-Mac-Millan, 1964.
- 14) McCreary, Edward, A., "*The Americanization of Europe*," New York, Doubleday and Co., 1964.
- 15) O 'Conner, James, "International Advertising, *Journal of Advertising*, 1973.
- 16) Oliver T. Robert, "*Culture and Communication*", Springfield, Illinois, 1962, p. 155.
- 17) *Printers Ink*, Feb. 21, 1964, p. 47.
- 18) *Printers Ink*, Feb. 21, 1964, p. 53.
- 19) Sandage, C.H., and Vernon, Fryburger, "*The Role of Advertising a Book of Reading*, (Illinois, 1960)
- 20) Sanchargin, Ted, "International Advertising on the Move," *Printers Ink*, May 13, 66.
- 21) Tal, Eliyahu, "Advertising in Developing Countries," *Journal of Advertising*, 1974.
- 22) Wilber, Schramm, "*Mass Media and National Development*", Stanford, 1964.
- 23) Wales, Hugh G, Dwight C. Gentry, and Max Wales, "*Advertising: Copy, Layout and Typography*" (New York, 1958)
- 24) Wilson, Peter, J., "*A Malay Village in Malaysia Social Values and Rural Development*, (N. Haven, 1967) FIRA Press.
- 25) Wright, John S., and Daniel S. Warner, "*Advertising*" (New York, 1962).