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International trade and investment operations are fraught with risk and uncertainty. In fact, the problems encountered by managers of foreign operations are often more difficult than those encountered in domestic operations, and in many instances they have threatened the very survival of the firm.

Many managers fail to realize this, and investors frequently underestimate the difficulties associated with overseas operations. Domestic success is no guarantee of predictable performance in a different environment. Many successful domestic firms have made plans for foreign investments that have missed their mark so widely that these companies have been unable to take advantage of opportunities in even the most promising markets.

When actual results differ widely from planned results, it is often difficult to judge whether the cause was an initial conceptualization error or one of failing to adapt adequately to the environment. Whatever the timing of the decision, however, the basic root of the troublesome uncertainty is most likely the presence of an additional culture in the decision making framework. Different customs, attitudes, and needs render many of a firm's normal procedures inapplicable or untransferable. Awareness of and sensitivity to these often subtle cultural differences may be the major determinant in the success of an international business venture.

Research in this area can identify critical factors in the environment which have caused problems for outsiders in the past so that others can avoid making similar mistakes. This particular research reports investigations and analyses of actual blunders made by executives in advertising and other aspects of international business. All blunders are publicly documented as having been made by real companies in real countries. Taken as a group, they offer some important lessons for international business in the future.

Essentially, a blunder was judged to have occurred if the problem was foreseeable, but a solution was either poorly prepared or entirely overlooked and a significant negative result occurred. Thus, the incorrect translation of an ad into embarrassing wording which would cause adverse reaction would qualify as a blunder, but it would not if the ad had poked fun at a public figure who died shortly after the ad's release. The question of foreseeability is admittedly a crucial one. Every attempt was made to include only examples where the negative result could have been avoided with reasonable foresight and effort.

Findings

Advertising blunders are the most varied and colorful. From the seemingly minute errors of a faulty word in advertising copy, to major problems arising

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from failing to conduct a thorough market study before committing hundreds of thousands of dollars to a multinational promotional campaign, these blunders have been extremely damaging to the erring firm. Although the circumstances surrounding each situation differ, the core of the problems are primarily due to these few factors: a tremendous optimism about a particular product or product line, vast confidence in business know-how and past success formulas, and failure to fully understand and appreciate the foreign environment.

To illustrate, some advertising blunders are presented which, although somewhat humorous, were often critically injurious to the firms involved.

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 dehydrated to "Schweppes Tonica" in Italy, where "il water" is the 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 love-making. Pepsi's familiar ad, "Come Alive with Pepsi" had problems in Germany because the translation of "come alive" meant "come alive out of the grave." Obviously, the ad had to be reworded (*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 pornographic work in French (Martyn, 1964).

Faulty laundry soap advertising can clean out sales, as one company discovered in French-speaking Quebec. The firm had come up with numerous new point-of-sale material describing the fantastic cleansing powers of its detergent, boasting that it was particularly suited for the really dirty parts of the wash—"les partes de sale." Sales rapidly declined and the firm later found out to its chagrin that the phrase was comparable to the American idiom "private parts" (Winick, 1961).

Linguistic anomalies are but one class of blunders in advertising. One of Unilever's highly popular detergents was sold under the trademark Radion in Germany, but the product in nearby Austria sold under a different brand name. Although Germany and Austria are independent and distinct in national characteristics, their physical closeness and language similarity permit the use of communications media—such as magazines, television, and radio—common to both nations' audiences. In particular, German media hold a substantial geographical spread in Austria, and the great majority of Austrian housewives are exposed to German advertising in magazines and on television. However, the Austrian exposure to Radion proved a waste since boxes of Radion could not be found on the shelves of Austrian retailers—and its Austrian counterpart could not be immediately recognized by the consumers (Elindor, 1965).

Lack of Cultural Awareness

Although the preceding examples are actual cases of management errors in advertising, they are not the most typical. In fact, most international advertising

blunders occur because of a failure to fully understand the foreign culture and its social norms. This can take many forms, ranging from blatant rejection of existing customs and tastes to innocent insensitivity to the environment. One well-intended company, for example, brought upon itself the indignation of foreign participants of its promotional campaign when it elected to use for favors simulated old coins with "\$1 billion" engraved on them (*Business Abroad*, 1966). The participants resented the omnipresence of the dollar sign. Germans preferred to see DM, the French the franc, etc. What began as an innocent but well-intended promotional gadget became interpreted as a reflection of the pompous U.S. superiority and all but nullified the efficacy of the promotional campaign.

Advertisements that somehow fail to reflect the local lifestyle often wind up as wasted effort. When General Mills made its attempt to capture the English market, its 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 (McCreary, 1964). General Mills failed to recognize that the British family is not as child-centered as the United States; 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 wound up untouched on retail shelves.

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 (Lenormand, 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 cosmetics firm tried unsuccessfully to woo 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 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. Sham Law, president of the New York consulting firm S. Lall and Associates, had this comment: "The success of an ad in Japan depends largely on the use of a proper appeal. The hard sell is considered extremely impolite. Japanese consumers respond best to ads that emphasize the product's practical advantages."

Warner Lambert's Listerine has also had its share of advertising problems (Diamond, 1969). In Thailand, Warner Lambert filmed commercials about Listerine fashioned after the well-known U.S. TV commercials showing a boy and girl, overtly fond of each other, one advising the other to use Listerine for curing bad breath. Sales remained minimal and company executives were

puzzled by the turn of events. Finally, Charlie Tse, Warner Lambert's Southeast Asia area manager noted the catch: such public portrayal of boy-girl relationships was objectionable to the Thai people. The Thai commercial was carefully and quickly adjusted—this time to show two girls discussing Listerine. The ad caught on and increased sales confirmed the effectiveness of the modifications.

Admen 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 cute pictures of animals wearing eye glasses were used. Despite the apparent charm of the portrayals, sales failed to materialize. The marketer only belatedly discovered that Thais regarded animals as a lower level of creation and were unattracted to advertising using animal themes. Similarly, the widely acclaimed Exxon ad, "Put a tiger in your tank," failed to elicit favorable reaction in Thailand (Miracle, 1968). Tigers were simply not symbols of power and strength there.

Additional examples further illustrate the need for careful examination and analysis of marketing labels and advertisements before using them in foreign markets.

A prominent international manufacturer of water recreation products was perplexed when its Malaysian distributors requested that they stop shipment of its products (Carson, 1967). It turned out that in this area where a large number of the people are illiterate, color and shapes served as an important communication medium for the illiterate. Green, to these people, was the symbol of the jungle with its dangers and diseases. Unfortunately for the manufacturer, its international emblem, prominently displayed on its products, was green and people shied away from products stamped with such a fearful omen.

Pepsodent's promise of white teeth was especially inappropriate in many regions of Southeast Asia where betel-nut chewing was an elite habit and black teeth a symbol of prestige. (Martyn, 1964). The "wonder where the yellow went" slogan didn't help out either.

As another example of what can be done incorrectly in advertisements, consider the following advertisement which had prominently appeared in magazines and newsmagazines of Quebec, Canada (Winick, 1961). A woman, comfortably dressed in shorts, could be seen playing golf with her husband. The caption boldly indicated that the housewife could carefreely enjoy a day on the golf course and still quickly prepare a delicious evening meal for the family by serving the advertised canned fish. Literally everything turned out wrong in this ad. Anthropologists strongly recommended changes because every element shown represented a violation of some aspect of French-Canadian life: Wives were not likely to be golfing with their husbands; women seen in shorts, especially on a high-class golf course, were socially unacceptable, and to top it all, French-Canadians simply did not serve that particular kind of fish as the main course for the evening meal!

It's possible to export what's a good thing in one country to a totally

different environment and wind up with no gain. In the following case, the mistake was one of overdoing a good thing in a different situation.

Dow Breweries introduced a new beer, Kebec, in 1963. To highlight the French-Canadian national overtones for the beer, an advertising campaign was especially planned for such emphasis. But in its broad and liberal use of French-Canadian symbols, certain nationalistic emblems were inappropriately included. Loud protests from the public denouncing the company's "profane" use of "sacred" symbols forced Dow to withdraw the campaign within 15 days. The error was unintentional, yet the drastic consumer reaction proved very dear to Dow (Elkin, 1969).

BiNoca similarly offended the Indian public with a seemingly innocuous ad (*The New York Times*, 1967). The ad, placed in certain leading local newspapers, showed an attractive though apparently nude young woman lavishly dousing herself with BiNoca's talcum powder. The following caption was placed on the layout, casually covering strategic portions of her body: "Don't go wild—just enough is all you need of BiNoca talc." The public, accustomed to conservative traditional standards of morality, found the ad indecent, publicly distasteful, and offensive.

Implications

The importance of having an adequate "cultural sensitivity" on the part of decision-makers involved in international operations is well borne out by the findings of this study. Unicultural managements making all the decisions regarding advertising in different cultures seems a high risk strategy. Multi-cultural participation in the planning, decision making, execution, and evaluation stages of an advertising program appears to be a better procedure. Effective use of local foreign nationals would have prevented many, if not all, of the blunders reported in this study—especially those done because the advertisement was translated too literally.

Those knowledgeable in the field of international advertising have advised that the need is to translate basic appeals, not necessarily the literal. No matter how different people are in different countries, one fact remains: there are certain basic appeals that are common to all people, although they may not always be expressed in the same words. The key is to identify and respect the differences in point of view and sensitivities to nuances. Basic appeals can be successfully employed everywhere.

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