WHEN IN ROME...

What do the international PR practitioners charged with creating and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships with international consumers need to do? First they need to recognize the cultural differences and adapt to local culture and business practices.

This article gives an overview of some of the communication differences across cultures. The understanding of cultural patterns and local peculiarities will help you succeed in the intricacies of international PR practice.

Public and Business Communication

Speaking styles that may be effective at home may spell disaster abroad. It is important to study the public speaking style of each culture. North Americans emphasize the spoken word, and the message is usually clearly articulated through words. Ambiguity is avoided and the communication is explicit. For the most part, spoken words have literal meaning.

Many cultures, particularly in non-Western nations, have been called "high-context communication societies." In these societies, the meaning of the spoken word is sometimes implicit. The message receivers are more likely to make meaning out of the message from their relationship to the speaker -- physical context, non-verbal cues, or the perceived social status and credibility of the speaker. Statements may not be explicit and categorical. Blanks have to be filled in mentally by the message receivers. Spoken words may not have literal meaning. Very little meaning is in the coded, explicit and transmitted message.

In North America, communicators often are told to get to the point and not beat around the bush. The case may be different in other societies where there is a tendency to use metaphors, aphorisms and anecdotes. Many adjectives may be used to qualify single noun to stress a point.

Corporate speakers also need to be careful to localize the content and style of their speech delivery. Anecdotes,
testimonies and examples to illustrate a certain point, or witty statements that may be appropriate in North America may be unsettling across the border. Using unfamiliar abstractions, references and mental images may confuse or create discomfort and diminish the quality of communication. Cultural sensitivity and the understanding of a group's communication nuances are needed to communicate adequately and effectively.

In the United States, people tend to separate religion from other aspects of life. In a serious business negotiation or other interaction, some societies, such as many Arab and African ones, may start and end the transaction by seeking God's will, guidance and protection. This formula is often used to seek common ground and affirm the universal and omnipotent power of God among the communication participants. To most Western corporate communicators, business and religion may be seen to be mutually exclusive. In many societies, they are intertwined.

*Culture* affects the dynamics of press conferences. Freedom of speech and the press is a mantra in the United States. Debates and exchange of ideas are welcomed in a democratic system. Event makers and reporters expect business leaders. There is an open market of ideas.

It is not uncommon for press conferences to be combative in the West.

In some societies, aggressive solicitation of information may create ill feeling. Direct confrontation is discouraged in public communication.

**Mass Media Writing**

The writing, production and distribution of news releases may differ from country to country. History and tradition affect media writing style, news value and delivery systems. In many developing societies, government owns and controls the mass media. The media may be used more for propaganda and a development tool than for entertainment and objective news dissemination.

In the U.S., news reporters are expected to report straight facts devoid of emotional overtones. If a story stretches beyond simple reporting, the reader is usually told that it is news with background analysis. Active voice is often preferred to passive voice, and complex sentences are to be avoided.

The opposite may be the case in other places. Writings, including news reports, are meant to be colorful, inspirational and insightful. A written message may contain ambiguous ideas to create certain effects. Metaphors, indirectness, long sentences, vagueness and exaggerations are all legitimate forms of communicating.

The inverted pyramid style of writing, which describes a story written first in order of importance, may not be applicable outside the U.S. Straight news, opinion and interpretation may not be separated. Even in England, where the mass media are highly developed, subjective beliefs and preferences of an individual writer are allowed in a news story.

Corporate communicators working outside their country must be culturally sensitive when interacting with the local media because the professional standards and ethics may be different. In the U.S. journalism considers itself a watchdog, but some countries view it as a lapdog.

Laws governing libel, slander, privacy, copyright and trademarks are not universal. In some societies, religious sources of law may be the ones recognized, and not the socially created statutes and laws.

**Channels of Communication Influence**

PR practitioners always seek appropriate channels to reach and communicate with their publics. The communication channels and methods need to be carefully identified and segmented. Media channel options may be few. Print media may be useless in a society that does not have access to them or cannot read.
In some societies, communication through third parties, such as opinion leaders and molders, elite groups and others may be more practical and productive. Opinion leaders and elite groups may be schoolteachers, traditional chiefs, nongovernmental organizations and political and religious leaders. Information emanating from these people may be perceived to be more credible and truthful than news from outsiders, the mass media, and foreign corporations.

**PR Publicity Materials**

The production of publicity materials such as logos, designs and pictures also needs to be culturally sensitive. For example, color has no universal meaning. Each culture qualitatively communicate in the West may produce opposite results in other societies. The color yellow, for instance, may conjure up mystical overtones in one society and represent pornography in another.

*Cultures* also give meanings to illustrations and pictures. In a monocultural and ethnocentric society, multiracial or multicultural pictures or illustrations may produce unintended results. Publicity materials should accentuate the local culture. Otherwise they may be perceived as radical measures with malicious intentions.

**Language and Culture**

To be effective abroad, the international PR practitioner must be familiar with the local language and culture. Knowledge of a language alone is inadequate to communicate effectively. For example, an English speaker who is not familiar with the American culture cannot claim to know the American people.

Although the English language may be commonly spoken in many countries, national and regional differences still exist in the attribution of meaning to English words. The language as spoken and understood by a people have to be recognized to communicate effectively.

Translation of documents has to be carefully considered. Better results are often produced by employing a native speaker to translate English into the local language. The native translator is more likely to recognize all the linguistic and cultural nuances in a document.

**Cultural Orientation Time**

Each culture has its own definition and meaning of time. In the West, time (like money) is precious and has to be saved, because once it is lost it cannot be regained. Business goals, objectives and tactics are all timed.

All PR activities are planned and carried out around the time clock. There are media deadlines. The production and distribution of news releases and the organizing of press conferences have to follow strict timelines. The clock is a Western invention.

Welcome to the new world of (dis)order. In many societies, the opposite is the case. Human activities do not revolve around time. Corporations operating in some societies have to be ready to wait patiently to see a government official even though they made an appointment. In some cultures, strict obedience to the time may be perceived as rudeness because they think human activities should not be tied to the rigidities of the time clock. Above all, time belongs to God, they assert. In Arab, African and some Caribbean countries, communication is sometimes prefaced with "If it is the Will of God."

**Acceptance is the Best Policy**

It is easy to see "faults" in others through the prism of one's own culture, values and experience. Recognition of one's own culture is the best place to start communicating with the various global constituencies. Acceptance of other people's culture, rather than judgment and comparison, is the best approach in understanding and relating
to the new global audience.

The new global market opportunities and the need to communicate differently should be seen as a challenge rather than an obstacle. In the emerging global economic and market convergence, the corporate communicator has no option but to confront the new realities of doing business optimistically. It will demand hard work, the eagerness to know others, and the ability to see others the way they see themselves and not the way others want them to be. After all, what are corporate communicators paid to do?

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