Lost in Translation: Designing Across Cultures
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PDD spoke at the PACE (Packaging and Converting Executive Forum) conference on the importance of understanding the multi-cultural nuances of different markets when designing packaging.

This book presents the content from that talk in a more reader-friendly format. If you’re interested in designing packaging for different cultures, you’ll find some examples (good and bad packaging) and tips on taking culture into consideration. But even if you’re not particularly interested in packaging, the core ideas are still relevant if you’re researching or designing products, experiences, or services for cultures other than your own.

PDD is constantly generating strategy, concepts and designs relevant to particular markets and regions, or across a number of different geographies. Since understanding the nuances of culture is a challenge that many of our multi-national clients in different sectors (Consumer, FMCG, Medical, Industrial and Service) are facing, we thought it would be helpful to share some of our experience and top tips.

From a brief exploration of the wider issues surrounding cross-cultural design, to some information on how to tackle it and inspiration from how others have done it well and badly, we hope you’ll be able to take something useful from this book to apply to your role, category or sector.
The power of emerging markets

The world is changing. So is the way we think about its geographies and commercial players. According to research conducted by UK Trade & Investment and The Economist Intelligence Unit, by 2030 93% of the world’s middle class will be from today’s emerging markets. That’s a huge shift in terms of consumer spending power.

Furthermore, the emerging world’s share of global GDP is set to grow to 51% in 2014, from the 45% it was in 2008. These shifts in political and economic power have not gone unnoticed by multinational organisations. Indeed in many cases revenues from the emerging markets have kept companies afloat throughout the recession.
Global consumerism

These macro changes have affected things at a consumer level. Consumers have more choice and access to more products from around the world than ever before, increasing competition and consumer expectations and challenging long-standing brand loyalties.

In the face of global consumerism, there is a growing need for people to feel more locally connected to the brands they engage with to hold on to a sense of individuality and local identity.

This local connection is not just an emotional purchase driver to support local producers since the global recession, there is also a tangible environmental benefit to investing in local products, awareness of which is growing, particularly in developed Western markets.

There’s an important difference to note between the developing parts of the world where some people have no choice but to eat and buy locally and seasonally due to limited access to produce and the mature Western markets where buying locally is often charged at a premium.
The challenges of competing in a global marketplace

How to compete with local brands?

A market researcher in Poland, who specialises in conducting research in Central and Eastern Europe, articulates the resurgence of local brands and the tangible benefits they can offer consumers over multi-national, global brands:

“Always include local brands as important potential competitors. They are quick to follow market trends and explore local tastes. Local manufacturers have mastered the art of marketing and we see local brands and products coming back.”

Agnieszka Górnicka, Inquiry Market Research, Poland¹.

For global companies to compete with local brands it’s important to make locality a more important part of the offering. However, it’s crucially important to find the balance between what can be kept global – what can be streamlined and centralised – and what can be adapted to suit the specific needs and cultural perceptions of local markets.

Finding this balance is one of the biggest challenges, and one that we regularly come up against when working with clients. Obviously, companies want to keep costs down by streamlining manufacturing and distribution processes, but these efforts make it more difficult than ever to deliver meaningful products to the increasingly varied consumer groups they want to target.
Conducting cultural research to understand key local issues

To be able to compete with local brands that already understand the culture inside-out, it’s important to conduct research to make informed decisions about how best to design for and communicate to these markets. Understanding the national culture and local market needs will arm you with the information to decide on how to be relevant to potential consumers in different markets.
Before focusing on some of the methods and tools that we’ve found useful when building up knowledge and gathering cultural data as part of our projects, here are a few examples of where key cultural differences have and haven’t been heeded and the commercial effect.

Language & symbols

One of the most obvious cultural differences is language, but language issues go far beyond simple translation errors.

The deadly number 4

A major golf ball manufacturer targeted Japan as a strategic growth market due to the rise in popularity of golf among the growing middle classes. Special packaging was developed for export to Japan with sets of four golf balls. However, when this was launched sales were well below what they’d anticipated. Research eventually showed that this was largely down to the packets of four golf balls. In Japan four is pronounced “shi” which is the same pronunciation as death.
Spending time in Japan, immersing in the culture and observing daily practices would have demonstrated this. Floor and room numbers in public buildings often skip any number containing 4. In cities the houses and flats containing the number four are almost always occupied by foreigners, as the Japanese consider it bad luck.

**Reading in opposite directions**

A well-known pharmaceutical company launched a medicine to settle a bad stomach in the Middle-Eastern markets. They tried to keep their messaging as simple as possible by having a cartoon showing what the medicine did. With no words they didn’t have to worry about text translation. This cartoon consisted of 3 simple panels. The first one showed someone feeling ill, the next showed them taking the medication, and the third showed them feeling better.

However, Arabic cultures read from right to left, making the meaning: feel good, take medicine, feel sick.
Religion and belief systems

Perhaps less obvious than language, but no less important, are differences in belief systems.

**McDonald’s in India: Where’s the beef?**

India is the world's vegetarian paradise. Of the one billion people living there, few eat meat occasionally and most not at all. On top of that, India is home to Hinduism, which preaches non-violence and sees cows as sacred, and certainly not something to be served for dinner.

In this cultural context how does a mega-chain like McDonald’s, known for how many billions of beef burgers it sells, position itself in India?
Well, with a menu that’s over 50% vegetarian, it doesn’t offer pork or beef-based products. It even has separate production lines and processes for its vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes, and emphasizes the role that local suppliers have in the supply chain by labelling in-store graphics and menus, reassuring customers about the content and origins of the meals and ingredients. This great example shows how a level of sensitivity and flexibility in light of the culture can really enhance the brand’s reputation and the consumer’s experience.

Customs & habits

Cross-cultural customs and habits are equally important in terms of how people view certain things.

Black is the new white

Pepsodent’s teeth-whitening toothpaste didn’t fare well in Southeast Asia where many cultures practice the custom of chewing Betel Nuts to darken the teeth. It’s alleged to strengthen teeth with its anti-bacterial qualities and is associated with various rituals and ceremonies, including the coming of age of women. Not a custom that’s compatible with the main benefit Pepsodent was trying to sell.

Betel nuts
Another example of infrastructure getting in the way is when Coca-Cola tried marketing its two-litre bottle in Spain. Despite being successful in the US, it finally withdrew the bottle from the Spanish market when it discovered that the refrigerator compartments were too small to hold it.

Infrastructure

The practicalities of infrastructure are incredibly important when it comes to heeding differences in cultures and markets.

Size matters, in pharmacies and fridges

When out in the field in Europe and the US, working on a packaging innovation project for one of our pharmaceutical clients, we looked into pharmacy storage systems in various countries. We found that in the US and the UK medicines are stored in large shelving units, whereas in Spain and Switzerland smaller drawer-systems are used.

This had a huge impact on the packaging concepts we created for the project as the pack-size had to be small enough to fit in the shallow drawers of Spain and Switzerland. But it wasn’t just size that was the issue. The information design on the outer pack was also affected, as we had to make sure that the essential information was on all sides of the pack. Pharmacists in Spain and Switzerland have to be creative with space, fitting the packs in where they can. It was essential for them to be able to see all the important information without removing the pack from drawer.
Then there are smartphone apps such as Culture GPS 5 that can give a foundational understanding of a culture.

This tool uses Geert Hofstede’s 5-dimension model of cultural differences to measure the predominant attitudes and practices within a country and allows you to get a top-level understanding of how key inter-cultural dimensions compare between countries. These are macro dimensions that don’t change quickly, but rather evolve slowly over generations.

One such dimension is Individualism (IDV), which is the degree to which society is ‘I’ focused vs ‘we’ focused. Then there’s Masculinity (MAS), which is the degree to which the dominant values in a society are oriented around achievement and success (masculinity) or caring for others and quality of life (femininity). The Power Distance Index (PDI), is the extent to which the less powerful members of society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally.

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Research and analysis tools

There are a number of tools that we use to help us uncover the cultural characteristics we need to be aware of for any given research or design challenge.

Basic research tools

The research tools that we use to learn and stay informed about cultures and cultural differences include specialist blogs and newsletters. For instance, we receive a weekly market research newsletter on Central & Eastern Europe 1, which gives helpful insights into that market.

There are also various books such as the ‘Culture Shock’ series 2, which can be very edifying.
So if we compare the United States and China on this 5D model we can see from this graphic that China scores quite highly on the Power Distance Index, whereas the US scores moderately to low. This suggests that in China inequality is accepted and expected by the less powerful members of society, that hierarchy is needed, superiors are often inaccessible, power holders have privileges and change usually happens by revolution.

This contrasts with the US moderate PDI score, suggesting that in the US it is more the case that inequality is minimized, hierarchy is more for convenience than necessity, its superiors are more accessible, it’s more widely believed that all should have equal rights and change is more evolutionary than revolutionary.

If we look at the Individualism score, the US score is very high compared to China. This is not a huge surprise given the fundamental political and societal differences, but it tells us that society in the US is very ‘I’ focussed, there are loosely-knit social frameworks and that individuals are expected to look after themselves and their immediate family. In contrast China has a much more ‘we’ focussed society where the tightly-knit frameworks and belonging to in-groups (such as extended families, clans and organisations) offer people loyalty and support.

http://www.culturegps.com
Although this tool only provides a cursory glance at how key intercultural dimensions compare across countries, we find it a good way to understand the broad social and cultural characteristics before going into a market to conduct research. However, it doesn’t provide deep understanding of national cultural systems, which are very complex.

While it’s important to understand the macro cultural dynamics that a tool like Culture GPS can shed light on, it’s also necessary to understand how more micro-cultural dimensions can impact on how products, services and brands are perceived.
Semiotic analysis

Semiotic analysis is an approach that PDD uses as part of the design process to understand the cultural significance of specific products or messages.

Everything is made up of signs and symbols, all of which create meaning. Semiotic analysis seeks to understand what that meaning is, how it is communicated through various signs, symbols and codes and why it conveys a specific message.

To give an example, take a look at these chairs.

Having looked at these four chairs we are all able to make assumptions about what kind of house and room they sit in, who would own a chair like that, what time of day these chairs might be used and what the user might be doing while they sit in them. These assumptions are made simply by looking at them and ‘reading’ the codes within their visual design: the colour, form, material, details, etc.

All meaning exists within a cultural context, therefore as we are all from different places and bring with us different associations, this affects how we each read the codes and understand the meaning.

HSBC uses this premise in its global ad campaign by showing how the same thing can mean something different within different cultural contexts. You may recognise it from airports; it’s clever in the way it plays on the viewer’s perceptions and associations and yet forces you to think about how those inherent perceptions may be completely different depending on who’s viewing the advertisement.

Semiotic analysis is an approach we use as part of the design process to uncover the signs, symbols and meaning specific to a culture. We usually look into the meaning around a particular product, service or brand category, depending on the project. This helps us understand the visual and cultural codes so that we can understand how to achieve true differentiation for our clients and to check whether the design is communicating the correct brand and product message in the product/packaging codes.
Trends analysis

With forecasting specialists in-house, trends analysis is one of the methodologies PDD uses to track the changes that are emerging in different cultures and how these are being expressed within the context of cultural idiosyncrasies.

We often use this method after we’ve conducted semiotic analysis to identify the cultural meaning, complementing this with an understanding of how the future landscape is shaping up, whether we’re looking at consumer behaviour and attitudes, packaging design and innovation or product design directions. It’s an important technique that helps us connect the dots between cultural fundamentals, that are often slower-changing, and emerging consumer and market expressions that are representative of wider changes.

The following pages identify some top-level global packaging trends that we’ve picked up on recently and show how these are manifesting differently depending on the cultural context.
A notable example of this local approach to product and packaging is the range of regional Kit Kats launched last year by Nestlé in Japan. There are 19 new Kit Kat flavours that reflect food specialities of specific Japanese districts. Each flavour is sold exclusively in the region for which it was created, making the limited edition Kit Kats popular souvenirs for travellers. These uniquely Japanese Kit Kat varieties include some crazy flavours like yubari melon and baked corn from Hokkaido Island, strawberry cheesecake from Yokohama and sweet potato, blueberry and soybean from the Kanto region. This is tapping into the current trend for Japanese localism, as people in Japan lose interest in the national identity as dictated by Tokyo, preferring to relate to their local/regional identity.

Nestlé further innovated its packaging by tapping into the Japanese tradition of sending students good luck wishes before their exams and launched a marketing campaign with Japan’s postal service to create ‘Kit Kat Mail’, a product with postcard-like packaging sold only at the post office. The sender can personalise the packaging by writing a message of good luck to the receiver. Developing an intimate understanding of the local market and responding to it creatively has earned Kit Kat the position of number one confectionery brand in Japan.

Tailor-made

Personalisation and customisation has been a key consumer trend for a few years now and it is continuing to rise. As consumers become more informed they expect more value and personal relevance from the products they buy. Packaging as the first interaction is an increasingly powerful touchpoint of the product experience and is therefore becoming an important part of delivering a tailor-made, personalised experience.

In a globalised world, local or regional relevance is becoming more important and the trend of tailor-made is set to increase in influence as consumers expect to connect with their products on a more intimate and personal level.
Today, consumers all over are struggling to distinguish quality, genuine products from the huge array of choice before them.

**Authenticity**

Authenticity as a lifestyle aspiration and a desire for quality, genuine products, has been growing in influence as Western middle classes favour a back-to-basics mentality. But today consumers all over are struggling to distinguish quality, genuine products from the huge array of choice before them.

Packaging is the in-store interface between the consumer and the product and has a huge role to play in communicating the authenticity of a product.

Perceptions of authenticity and the signs and symbols that connote them are very market-specific, dependent as they are on cultural associations and social practices. These complexities lead to differing perceptions of what role packaging should play in reassuring the consumer of the authenticity and genuineness of the product.
Since the start of free market economics in 1991, Russia’s market has been entered by private, commercial products to the point where today the Russian consumer is completely overloaded with choice. In Russia you can buy a huge range of beer, far exceeding the choice available to developed beer markets, such as the UK and Germany.

While this is very positive if you’re a beer connoisseur, it does create the problem of how to decide between what’s on offer. To help consumers make this decision, gold medals are embossed on beer labelling by manufacturers: the more gold medals, the better. These symbols distinguish between the quality, genuine products and those that are misleading.

This context has engendered quite a sceptical mindset among Russian consumers, who not only have to rely on visual packaging features to identify quality and truthful claims, but who must be careful also to choose a product that’s the genuine article for health reasons. Counterfeit alcohol is a problem in Russia and consumers seek reassurance that the product they consume is genuine and has not been tampered with, something which the medals on the labelling go some way to communicate.
Another example of the importance of cultural characteristics when it comes to communicating quality is Alpenlibe, the sweet manufacturer who uses the same size, design and colours on the packages sold both in the West and China. But, in the latter case, it wraps its sweets in two thick layers of paper as in China strong packaging is generally associated with higher quality products.

Packaging designers and developers also have a hurdle to overcome in terms of authenticity when it comes to the battle on the shelf between branded and private label goods. This is especially true in the UK and US where there have been a number of instances and legal disputes where private labels have used the same visual cues as their branded competitors to allegedly trick consumers into thinking that it is the branded product: something that’s easier to do today with more time-poor consumers who want to get the supermarket shopping done as quickly as possible. However despite consumers becoming savvier to these design tricks, with further difficult economic times ahead, perhaps the lower price tag of the private label products will turn out to be enough of a purchase driver.
Calls for completely plain cigarette packaging by anti-smoking lobbies and the World Health Organisation have penetrated smoking debates in many countries, as campaigners hope to make smoking less attractive with no design or brand on the packaging at all. Australia is the only country so far that has set out plans to enforce this from July 2012, the UK has similar plans. We’re yet to see how the tobacco industry will respond to no adornment or design at all on the packaging, or ‘the silent salesman’ as it is currently known in the industry.

Regulations

A trend we’ve noticed recently is the proliferation of government regulations, as consumer culture is monitored and controlled more and more. The impact of increasing regulations on packaging is huge and is only set to increase, especially as health concerns and environmental implications become salient. Different cultures and markets respond to this in very different ways.

Health regulations are one of the fastest growing areas of this trend with requirements to put more health warnings on packaging proliferating. Alcohol labelling for example is starting to feature more than just the recommended daily units, which is currently the requirement across Europe. For instance, featuring the symbol of the pregnant woman drinking is something that’s currently only required in France with manufacturers Europe-wide resisting the obligation.
One of our clients at Kimberley Clark Europe talked to us about the impact packaging regulations are having on its products:

““There’s a definite trend towards governments imposing more labelling regulations on manufacturers. We prefer to have one packaging format for multiple countries, but that makes it difficult to include region-specific information, such as the Nordic Eco-labelling (swan) because it doesn’t mean anything to the rest of Europe. At the same time, you have to include more on the packaging rather than less to satisfy all national laws and conventions - for example consumers in some markets understand the “period-after-opening” symbol whilst others understand the “best before” label. Another strategy we try to use to ensure that the messages on our packaging translate is to be as "language-independent" as possible, using simple graphics, pictures and icons rather than text.”

Research and analysis tools | Trends analysis
Changing formats

New packaging formats are increasingly being tested with consumers, driven by manufacturing cost-effectiveness, eco-friendliness and more convenience for the consumer. However, packaging format solutions are highly dependent on consumer practices and perceptions in different markets.

For instance in emerging markets like Brazil and India, the low income of many consumers means that shampoos are often sold in sachets, making it more affordable.
Map it out

We feel it’s important to plan effectively to ensure any research you do is focussed in the right places from the outset. Think about which markets to involve in the research. If it’s a global study that focuses on specific regions and markets, ensure that the stakeholder markets are chosen for the right reasons (because they are representative of the whole region, as well as being interested in the initiative and open to incorporating the new product/packaging innovations that come out of the project).

It’s not just the practicalities of the research that should be planned carefully. It’s useful to start forming hypotheses around the area of interest before going into the field. Cultural immersion in the field can be overwhelming when the differences are large and the culture shocks are extreme. This can paralyse the mind, not allowing it to be the cultural sponge it needs to be to form a full picture.

Tips on what we think works

When it comes to researching and designing across different cultures, here are a few of the approaches that we think work.

- Map it out
- Get local
- Test the waters
It’s true that there’s nothing like full cultural immersion to gain a deep understanding of a market and its people. Nokia is a well-known example of a company that puts deep consumer understanding and ethnographic methods at the centre of its business strategy. One nice example of this resulting in a product innovation is having carried out research in rural India, Nokia learned that people were sharing phones because not everyone within a family or community could afford one. Having understood the problems this caused, Nokia developed a multiple phone books feature so that when people share a phone they can easily bring up their own contacts.

Entering a new culture or market with pre-formed hypotheses to test, whether by conducting desk research, expert interviews or by talking to cultural commentators, can help to focus on the key insights to the specific project/challenge. For instance in a project on fridge-freezers we were looking to uncover the cultural codes in and around fridge-freezers in the UK and Spain. Before visiting Spain we spent time conducting desk research into the cultural meaning of fridge-freezers, forming hypotheses about the cultural codes in the UK and researching into how these may differ in Spain.

Armed with these when out in the field we were able to observe where the same codes existed, but in a slightly different form, where they didn’t exist at all or where new codes were uncovered.
But getting out into the field is not always possible if budgets and time don’t allow it. We’ve learned some workarounds when having to overcome this for our clients and have built ways to gain cultural insights from an ‘inside-perspective’ without actually going out to the market.

Building up a network of trusted partners in the field can be a valuable way of conducting research and gaining understanding without having to travel there yourself. It requires a lot of trust in the research partners and planning as multi-market studies do need to be standardised to some extent to make the analysis efficient and meaningful, but it is a method that has worked for us.

It’s also worth thinking about ways of engaging people from the country or culture you want to learn more about by recruiting respondents from diasporic communities local to you to give you an insight into their native country. Obviously, this requires a certain variety of communities from different cultures, but if possible this method can be a great way of building up understanding from an insider-perspective, while also talking to respondents who are able to draw on reference points and comparisons with their current country of residence, helping you understand how the cultures compare.

Test the waters

During the analysis stage, it’s important to revisit some of those initial hunches and hypotheses to validate or challenge. This might involve going back to initial research or re-engaging experts or cultural commentators to ensure the insight is truly representative and not just a UK or Western-centric interpretation. Taking some time to reflect and sense-check the findings can help to refine how you understand and communicate the insights. Building this into the process is also part of accepting that research and design are iterative processes so don’t be afraid of going backwards before moving forwards.
Once the insights have been defined and articulated, it’s important to ask ‘so what?’ What does all of this cultural understanding gained actually mean for the project, brand and product/packaging innovation? It’s important to identify what the insights mean for the strategy. Our projects span from the very front-end to market launch, so the application and translation of insights into strategic outputs, whether it’s a design, conceptual or branding exercise, is an essential part of how we approach innovation.

Part of this translation process where we ask ‘so what?’ is making connections between insights and identifying the common threads between the different markets/cultures and how these can be incorporated into an overall product/packaging strategy, versus what are the distinct differences that cannot be ignored.

For many of the multi-national clients we work for on global innovation projects, understanding the relationship between what can be kept global and consistent across markets and what has to be made specifically relevant for a particular region/market is very important as the realities of innovation often mean that resources need to be economised where possible, i.e. not everything can be adapted at a local level. Knowing what’s a ‘must’ and what’s a ‘nice to have’ is key.

References
To write this ebook we have relied on our experience consulting to a wide variety of clients and desk research conducted in this area. We found the following websites helpful:

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Culture%20shock&page=1
We hope this has been useful, or at least interesting, to you. If you’d like to discuss this further, or if you have a particular cultural or regional challenge, please get in touch.

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