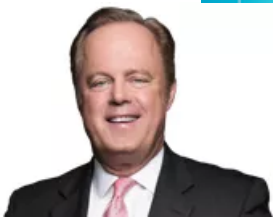




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Don't Get Lost in Translation When Doing Business Overseas

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By Deborah Daily, Co-Owner, Buckaroo Marketing/New Media,

As the world becomes smaller, the opportunities for companies to do business overseas get bigger. But accessing other markets demands more than a perfunctory knowledge of geography and a phrase book. Cutting corners can trip up the most well-intentioned efforts.

Our marketing agency has helped clients do business globally for years, and we've learned many lessons along the way. Some were a matter of common sense, some fell under cultural awareness, and others were just surprises that opened our eyes.

As you'd expect, the biggest single factor in doing business in another country is language. If you're planning to market your products to customers in another country, you'll probably develop a website and some type of sales literature aimed at your prospects. If you think that's as simple as handing your current materials over to a translator or using a translation app to do the heavy lifting, think again.

Languages vary dramatically from country to country. There are even marked differences within nations. Imagine a conversation between a salesperson from deepest Dixie and a prospect from Down East Maine. Both speak English, but their accents, inflections, and idioms will be so different that they may struggle to connect. Americans use "love" in many ways, but in other languages, different types of love call for different words. You wouldn't use the same word to describe your relationship with your wife and your support of your favorite team.

Think expanding into Latin America will be an easy choice, because everyone speaks Spanish? Not quite. First, the official language of one of the region's largest economies, Brazil, is Portuguese. And while Spanish dominates the rest, dialects vary widely. Put a Cuban, a Mexican, and an Argentine together, and you'll hear what sounds like three different languages. They'll be able to communicate, but they won't use the same expressions and colloquialisms. If you try to sell to Argentines using Mexican Spanish, you may come across as a potentially confusing outsider.

We've dealt with that issue by using our clients' contacts within the countries as a sounding board. We'll evaluate potential translators by giving them identical copy to translate. Then we share the results with that in-country contact to see which is most accurate for the local market. Sometimes, we'll draw upon native speakers who work for our clients to help us ensure that we've translated accurately.

If you don't have access to native speakers, find an ally who knows the local language and culture. When one of our clients began operations in Thailand, one of the American employees who worked in the office there had lived in the country long enough to have a solid working knowledge of Thai.

One rule of thumb when you're planning to translate marketing materials from English is that sentences and paragraphs are usually longer in other languages. When we plan to translate something for a client from English into Spanish, we assume that the finished result will be 20 percent longer, so if we're designing a brochure for both languages, we'll allow extra space to accommodate the translated version.

Speaking of culture, what's expected and acceptable in other countries may be surprising. It's been decades since it was appropriate for scantily clad models to grace trade show booths in the U.S., but in many countries, local prospects still expect to be greeted at shows by lovely young ladies dressed in something less than business casual.

Social media has become more common around the world, but don't assume that your overseas prospects are following the same channels where you do most of your marketing. When working with one client in some of the world's more remote regions, we found that the primary channel for communications was Facebook. Companies in those countries aren't likely to send emails or fill out website contact forms. They prefer to connect through Facebook, so it's important for the sales team to check the company's page frequently and respond that way.

Finally, we've learned that software isn't universal. While we use leading-edge software to design materials for our clients, we've discovered local media or ad agencies in other countries still use programs most Americans have long forgotten. For example, in much of South America, CorelDraw is the go-to page design program.

It's a great time to pursue the opportunities available in global markets. Just be sure you have a solid understanding of what you need to do to fit in there, or find an experienced partner who can offer the wisdom to help you succeed.

Deborah Daily is co-owner of Buckaroo Marketing | New Media

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