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Subject: Translation is More than Words: Cultural Context is a Necessary Component when Marketing to Multicultural Clients by Elisabete Miranda, Translation Plus, Inc.

Translation is More than Words: Cultural Context is a Necessary Component when Marketing to Multicultural Clients

by Elisabete Miranda, Translation Plus, Inc.



*Translation Plus, Inc. is the sponsor of the **Culturally Competent Translations** section of our 2009/2010 Source Book of Multicultural Experts. The Source Book is now available!*

Communicating with clients and customers is the most important job for any marketing professional. Clear, precise communication skills are an integral part of connecting with any audience. When the contact is from a different culture than the marketer, communications can get tricky. But understanding how to convey a message appropriately to a multicultural audience in the global economy is critical.

In the past, companies and marketers have relied on simple translation into several languages, calling that multicultural marketing. Yet research shows that this is an ineffective way to communicate; sloppy translations may in fact damage relationships in different ethnic markets. Slang, idioms and some descriptive terminology may not translate well, or there may not be an appropriate choice in the language into which the message is being translated. Additionally, imagery that does not reflect the diversity of your audience may be seen as a poor choice.

Creating strategies for translation that are both effective and respectful does not need to be difficult, but it should consider the cultural implications of the content. The cultural context should be understood and considered when creating any multicultural marketing program. Differences between cultures can be subtle or dramatic, the details can be hard to spot or blatantly obvious. Take the concept of personal space, for example. Americans tend to prefer a wide area of space around them, even in conversations with friends—elbow room, as it is called. Some cultures are much more comfortable in close proximity with others, frequently touching companions and openly expressing physical affection. In another example, Americans rely on “please” and “thank you,” whereas other countries convey politeness with tone of voice, gestures or facial expression. Individualism-collectivism cultural dimension also plays a fundamental role in

communications. Additionally, it's important to consider each culture's "power distance" – the measurement of how far apart the most and least powerful people are within a culture. Generally speaking, democratic cultures, where opportunities are available for most people, have a low power distance; whereas authoritarian cultures have a very high power distance. Understanding the power distance of a culture you are trying to reach can even help determine how phrases are structured. A prime example is an Avianca airline accident caused by miscommunication due to power distance differences between non-native English speaking pilots and air traffic controllers in New York.

It does take some commitment and time to see both sides of the cultural mis-adventure. When working with clients or colleagues from an unfamiliar culture, take the time to do some homework. Read about social norms and cultural traditions, paying close attention to the details of how people interact with each other. Look at examples of locally produced marketing materials and notice any trends or frequently occurring attributes. Read market research reports on the culture if they are available, and don't be afraid to seek advice from experts.

A few more steps can make culturally competent marketing materials a cinch:

1. For language, don't rely on automated translation software which will not capture essential nuances - it will simply translate each word or phrase in order. Use a professional translator who is familiar with customs and cultural protocols of the intended audience.
2. Examine the imagery used in all materials. Do pictures reflect people of different races, cultures, classes, ages, abilities and genders? Is the imagery appropriate for the intended audience? Is it respectful of cultural norms?
3. Involve multicultural clients in the planning process if possible, and learn of cultural expectations and needs right from the source.
4. Pay attention to power distances in different countries and cultures. Review all materials and communications to ensure these power distances are considered.

Cultural differences should not be an issue—it's the lack of knowledge of the differences that is problematic. By taking some time to gain that knowledge, the marketer can communicate effectively to any culture.

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