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# **CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN BUSINESS: THE IMPACT OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION FROM A MARKETING AND ADVERTISING PERSPECTIVE**

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## **Abstract**

In a world so diverse and culturally rich as the one we live in today; it would be a pity to waste the possibility to broaden our horizons and understand a little of what is distant from our everyday lives. Communication is the most powerful tool we have to connect with other human beings, not only to fulfil our social needs but also for business purposes.

To be effective communicators, one is not only required to speak several languages: there is so much more than words can describe. Managers need to learn about other cultures' traditions, body language, values, customs, and many more cultural aspects that deeply influence the way business is conducted around the world. This is why cross-cultural communication is such an important topic for business studies and has long been rightfully studied. The analysis of the concepts of culture and communication are the key to understanding such a complex theme.

## **Keywords**

Culture, Communication, Marketing, Advertising, Flops

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## **Introduction**

A good marketing strategy is the key to successful business deals: each of its elements needs to be perfectly aligned with the chosen plan of action to ensure great results. Of the four Ps in the marketing mix, promotion is the object of this analysis, one which focuses both on the role of communication when dealing with a foreign business partner as well as on the importance of cross-cultural communication when advertising a product to clients from different cultural backgrounds.

Cross-cultural communication refers to the way people belonging to different cultures communicate with each other. It is crucial when building a solid marketing campaign as diverse cultural environments also have an impact on how business is done in different countries.

In international business environments, all employees are exposed to various cultural norms, including business etiquette, verbal and nonverbal communication, languages, and unfamiliar business practices. The marketing department is especially affected by these factors since a lot of research needs to be done before even planning to launch a product or a service internationally: they not only have to be crafted to fit the needs of a potential foreign clientele, they also need to be marketed as appealing and necessary as possible in order to be sold. To create a successful international advertising campaign, knowledge about the deepest layers of a range of cultures is mandatory, not only to achieve great results but also to avoid the risk of unintentionally insulting a country's entire heritage due to a lack of understanding of its traditions. The importance of cross-cultural communication in this field will be better explained throughout the following article, starting with key definitions and ending with the understanding of the cultural elements affecting international business practices and the ways in which communication reflects culture in advertising campaigns. A few massive marketing flops and their unfortunate outcomes will also be analyzed to better understand the risks and consequences that result from poor cross-cultural communication.

## What is communication?

Communication has always been studied from many disciplinary perspectives and it is often viewed as a discipline in its own right since it is central to many fields such as sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, anthropology, linguistics information theory and many others. Since the last century, also thanks to globalization, business people began to show an interest in cross-cultural communication and applied the various theories to business.

This communication is a vital aspect of human life and society, and the development of its skills has become not only essential for education purposes and building relationships but it is also a highly requested asset by companies' HR departments.

The concept of communication is complementary to the notion of culture since no individual can correctly communicate with other human beings without knowing their cultural background. Culture surely affects communication because it incorporates the bond between what is said and what is meant. It also determines the timing of interpersonal events, the appropriate places in which individuals discuss certain topics and the proper tone of voice to use depending on the subject of conversation, influencing many other communicative factors.

As often happens when analyzing such multi-layered concepts, there are many definitions and interpretations of the notion of communication.

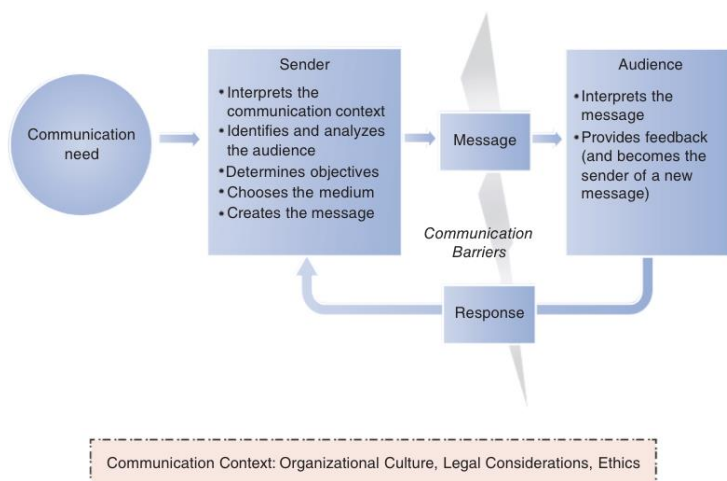
For instance, Andrew Bailey, author of *"TalkWorks: how to get more out of life through better conversations"*, has defined communication as the way "...we plan and organize our lives, how we build friendships and get close to people, how we get to understand how other people feel and sometimes discover important things about ourselves, how we influence people and allow them to influence us, how we sort problems, cooperate with each other and create new opportunities"<sup>1</sup>, highlighting the communicating process' social function. On the other hand, The Oxford English Dictionary has provided us with a much more technical definition of the concept of communication, describing it as "the transmission or exchange of information, knowledge, or ideas, by means of speech, writing, mechanical or electronic media"<sup>2</sup>.

Finally, according to Peter Andersen, author of *"Nonverbal Communication: Forms and Functions"*, communication is the tool which allows individuals to create and share information, reaching mutual understanding. This perspective focuses on the role of shared meaning implied by the act of communicating.

### The components of communication

To better understand how the process of communication works, both generally and from a company's perspective, it is crucial to introduce the so-called 'Communication Model' and each of its components: communication need, sender, message, audience and response.

The Communication Model



Source: A. Newman *"Business Communication"*, p.6, 2016.

The communication need, either from the sender's mind or from an organizational situation, refers to the underlying purpose for initiating the whole process of communication. The reasons behind the necessity to communicate may vary based upon the specific context and situation, sometimes people just want to share information or express thoughts and emotions, at other times the communication aims at influencing and persuading interlocutor support.

The sender is another crucial component of this model and it refers to the entity that has a communication need and is willing to express it by creating and delivering a message to its target audience. The sender's main goal is to ensure that its message is received as intended by properly interpreting

the communication context, identifying and analyzing the audience, determining objectives, choosing the best medium and, of course, creating the message.

Whether the communication process is successful or not mainly depends on how well the sender constructs its message, as in the information to be communicated. Choosing the right medium is also a crucial step for the communication's success and effectiveness, for example, companies can transmit oral messages through staff or

<sup>1</sup> A. Bailey, *"TalkWorks: how to get more out of life through better conversations"*, British Telecom, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, 2019.

individual meetings while written messages might be transmitted through emails or even using a newsletter. Although the purpose and the content of the message may be clear to the sender, they might be obstructed by verbal and nonverbal barriers.

The audience refers to the receiver of the message: it filters the perceived information and then reacts to it based on its content. It interprets the message according to its knowledge and experience and, if the communication is successful, the intended meaning is effectively understood. The recipient finally provides a response, feedback becoming the new sender and restarting the whole cycle from the top. Newman's model reminds me of Jakobson's studies on communication. I suppose that Newman's model is probably taken and adapted for business communication from the theory of the famous linguist R. Jakobson (1896–1982). In his book *Fundamentals of Language* (1956), Jakobson proposed a model in which he describes six essential communicative elements (sender, receiver, message, code, channel and context) and he also individuates six functions of the language associated to the elements (emotive function, conative function, poetic function, metalinguistic function, phatic function and referential function).

### Communication barriers



Source: J. Capper, “Overcoming Communication Barriers”, [Insight.Rwabusiness.Com](https://www.insight.rwabusiness.com), 2022.

Communication problems arise from the ways in which people talk or do not talk to one another, causing the sender's message to be perceived by the receiver as distorted. Communication barriers are commonly divided into two categories: verbal and nonverbal. The first group includes differences in language and interpretation, inappropriate use of expressions, over abstraction, ambiguity and polarization. As it may be that the same meaning is attributed to different words, different meanings can also be attributed to the same one: such differences in interpretation often lead to miscommunications between the sender and the receiver of the message. Every word has a denotative

and a connotative meaning: denotation refers to the literal meaning of a word while connotation refers to its subjective and emotional meaning. For instance, “the denotative meaning of the word plastic is “a synthetic material that can be easily molded into different forms”. For some people, the word also has a negative connotative meaning: “cheap or artificial substitute”, or they associate the term with its environmental impact”<sup>3</sup>.

Language differences can also cause big communication problems, causing companies to even hire translators and interpreters to ensure that the meaning of their intended message is not lost in translation. Such communication difficulties arise even among native English speakers: just consider how the English language is spoken and interpreted in the UK as opposed to Australia, the US, the Caribbean, and many other places. The inappropriate use of expressions can also trigger problems in the understanding of the sender's intended meaning. Examples of expressions include slang, jargon and euphemisms. Slang is an expression which is often short-lived and that identifies with a specific group of people. Business has its own slang, such as ‘24/7’ or ‘bottom line’. In order to effectively use slang, the sender needs to make sure its target audience is able to understand it, otherwise it will not serve as a communication shortcut and it will prevent the public from properly comprehending the message. On the other hand, jargon, also known as ‘the pros’ prose’ is the technical terminology which belongs to specialized groups. For instance, ‘FAQ’ and ‘retweet’ are examples of internet jargon. As opposed to slang, problems do not arise when simply using jargon but only when people use it to impress others as it can bore and alienate people. Finally, euphemisms are expressions used instead of words that might be considered as offensive or inappropriate. For example, ‘passed away’ is sometimes considered more appropriate than ‘died’. In order to avoid triggering miscommunications, all the previously mentioned types of expression should not be overused.

Being too ambiguous when speaking and using too many abstract terms can also affect the possibility of being properly understood. Abstract words such as ‘communication’ refer to ideas, feelings and beliefs instead of concrete objects, while concrete words like ‘house’ identify something that can be seen or touched. Abstract words are often necessary to explain certain concepts but their overuse can cause many difficulties in the process of understanding since the higher the level of abstraction, the more difficult it is for the receiver to visualize what the sender is trying to describe. Finally, polarization is another verbal barrier that can cause issues when communicating because it creates an ‘us vs them’ mentality between individuals with differing opinions or convictions. Polarization tends to reinforce existing beliefs and biases since people instinctively tend to seek out information that aligns with their vision while creating stereotypes and generalizations of complex issues, leading to prejudices and misunderstandings on many levels. On the other hand, nonverbal barriers, including inappropriate

<sup>3</sup> A. Newman, “*Business Communication*”, Cengage Learning EMEA, Boston, 2016, p.10

emotions, conflicting signals and differences in perception and distractions, are related to how the sender acts and are not about something that has been said or written. Both inappropriate and conflicting signals occur when verbal and nonverbal behaviors do not align. When this happens, people tend to believe the nonverbal messages because they are much more difficult to manipulate than the verbal ones. The perception of the same message can vary based on the experience, knowledge and point of view of all the individuals involved, sometimes causing misinterpretations and misaligned expectations between the parties and can be overcome through active listening and an awareness of the other's biases. Although a moderate level of emotion intensifies communication by making it more personal, too much emotional involvement can hinder it. Emotions such as anger, boredom and prejudice can indeed create obstacles to an effective exchange of ideas.

Finally, environmental and competing elements can harm communication because they disturb the parties' concentration and elaboration processes. An example of environmental noise is extreme temperature while having to deal with too many projects or emails are examples of competing noises. As Newman states in her book "*Business communication*", "competent communicators try to avoid verbal and nonverbal barriers that might cause misunderstandings. They also choose the best communication media for their messages"<sup>4</sup>.

The perception that poor communication is at the root of many problems prompts various interventions aimed at getting people to communicate better, such as encouraging active listening, being aware of nonverbal cues and giving constructive feedback.

### Communication styles

Although there are many points of view regarding what communicating translates to, in many modern cultural studies the main issue still remains how different cultures communicate. There are three main types of

Direct	Indirect
Details	Suggestions
What/why	Why/what
Formal	Informal
Emotional	Neutral
Fast	Slow

communication: verbal, nonverbal and written. In the last few years, a fourth category has also started to develop due to the increased use of the internet and technology in communication, significantly changing the way we use language.

In 2010, Tomalin and Nicks developed a matrix which includes all the key differentiating features of various communication styles. This study is the product of an attentive analysis of the theories of some of the world's leading anthropologists and cross-cultural communication scholars, such as the previously cited Edward Hall and Geert Hofstede. In this framework, the various traits are presented in opposition to each other, determining specular communicating patterns. Let's analyze a few of them.

Source: B. Hurn, B. Tomalin "*Cross-cultural communication*", 2013.

Firstly, there is the comparison between direct and indirect communicators. The former are inclined to saying what they are thinking without adjusting the message to their recipient. They usually appear transparent and honest, but not in every culture as they might be perceived as rude or excessively bold. North Americans and Germans are perfect examples of direct communicators.

Indirect communicators also exist. They primarily care about avoiding the risk of upsetting someone during a conversation, protecting personal dignity at all costs. Asians are a very good example of such communicators.

Secondly, some communicators go into great detail when talking, making sure that no misunderstanding can occur. For instance, Chinese and Japanese people are used to asking lots of questions to gain the clarification they need.

On the other hand, suggestions communicators tend to leave room for interpretation, explaining in a much more general and vague way their reasoning. These communicators usually make some suggestions, primarily to let their interlocutors freely interpret what has been said, assuming they will be able to understand the context in which they are speaking. This behavior can lead to misunderstandings due to a lack of clarification on the speaker's part, resulting in these communicators being perceived as shallow listeners.

Finally, there are fast and slow communicators. This communicating style does not just refer to the speaking rate, it also includes how much these speakers tolerate and are used to interrupting and being interrupted. Slow communicators are more relaxed, do not speak as fast and avoid interruptions whenever it is possible. The first communicating style has been associated to the so-called 'Ping Pong Cultures', in which conversations are fast-paced like a game of table tennis, while the second refers to 'Bowling Cultures', in which chats are characterized by many pauses to think about what has already been said and what is going to be said. For instance, German and English are pretty slow languages compared to Spanish or Hindi.

<sup>4</sup> A. Newman, "*Business Communication*", Cengage Learning EMEA, Boston, p.13, 2016.

## What is culture?

Culture is an extremely complex and multidimensional concept, drawing its many definitions from lots of different disciplines, such as anthropology, sociology, linguistics and management. With this expression, and in this specific context, we are not referring to what is commonly known as High Culture, which includes the arts, literature, architecture or theatre; instead, we refer to culture as something less tangible, but deeper and elaborate.

‘Culture’ is used to refer to an integrated system of values, beliefs and behaviors that are learned and shared by a group of people.

A group’s typical ways of thinking, believing, behaving and living are shaped by culture.

One of the most common definitions has been supplied by the Dutch anthropologist Geert Hofstede: “Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another”<sup>5</sup>.

The concept of cultural programming translates into various groups of people sharing the same beliefs, habits and values. For instance, Italians are internationally known for ‘talking with their hands’ and gesticulating a lot. Also, in many African countries, there are plenty of people who eat with their hands, simply because this behavior is deeply rooted in their culture.

Numerous scholars have researched this matter, providing many different definitions of culture. For instance, travelling quite far back in time, in 1871, the anthropologist Edward B. Tylor suggested that culture is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”<sup>6</sup>.

As previously stated, this concept has many layers, features and characteristics. Firstly, culture is learned. This means that people do not genetically inherit their culture because everybody learns it with time, growth and exposure. In fact, cultural heritage is passed down from generation to generation, not only from a multitude of people such as our parents, teachers and peers but even from the media. People start discovering their culture from very early childhood, therefore we learn more than we can tell.

Moreover, since our traditions are so deeply rooted in our education, we no longer notice their influence on our day-to-day life. In fact, culture is indeed unconscious.

Most of its aspects are outside our awareness: we tend to internalize our culture so completely, sharing it thoroughly with our group, that we forget it’s even there.

Culture is also dynamic. Culture is constantly changing and adapting. For example, acceptable roles for women, the responsibility of children towards the elderly, attitudes towards smoking, recycling practices and a corporation’s sense of social and environmental responsibility are all examples of changing cultural norms. What was acceptable and expected in our parents’ youth has now changed in many ways. The pace of cultural change, however, is often rather slow.

Culture is also emotionally binding since people identify in their traditions and heritage and become emotional if their culture is attacked or if they get caught in situations of being a minority in a bigger group. Displaying respect for other cultures, appreciating and valorizing the differences between them all and understanding that no culture is better than any other is not only a crucial part of creating a successful marketing and advertising campaign but it also makes us better human beings. Thus, people should not be ethnocentric and believe their culture is above everybody’s else, missing the opportunity to appreciate other traditions and heritages. Finally, culture is shared between members of the same group and, as stated before, other groups do not necessarily believe in it or even accept it.

### **Cultural models**

Among many scholars, Edward T. Hall and Richard D. Lewis have provided us with different cultural models coming from different points of view and interpretative orientations. Firstly, Lewis stated that companies that aim at being successful in foreign markets have to be aware of the ways in which culture affects business systems. The author has theorized three different categories of culture, such as linear-active, multi-active and reactive, according to three ‘poles’ representing different types of behavior. Britain, Germany, and the US are linear-active cultures, in which businesspeople are very organized and rational and prefer to act logically and plan in advance, completing one task at a time for efficiency’s sake. They strongly believe in rules, regulations and contracts and are firm individualists, securing themselves the ‘Universalists’ title. These businesspeople are not afraid of confrontation but are willing to compromise to achieve a business deal. On the other hand, multi-active cultures, which are located mainly in Southern Europe, Latin America and Africa, shape businesspeople who are much more attached to the

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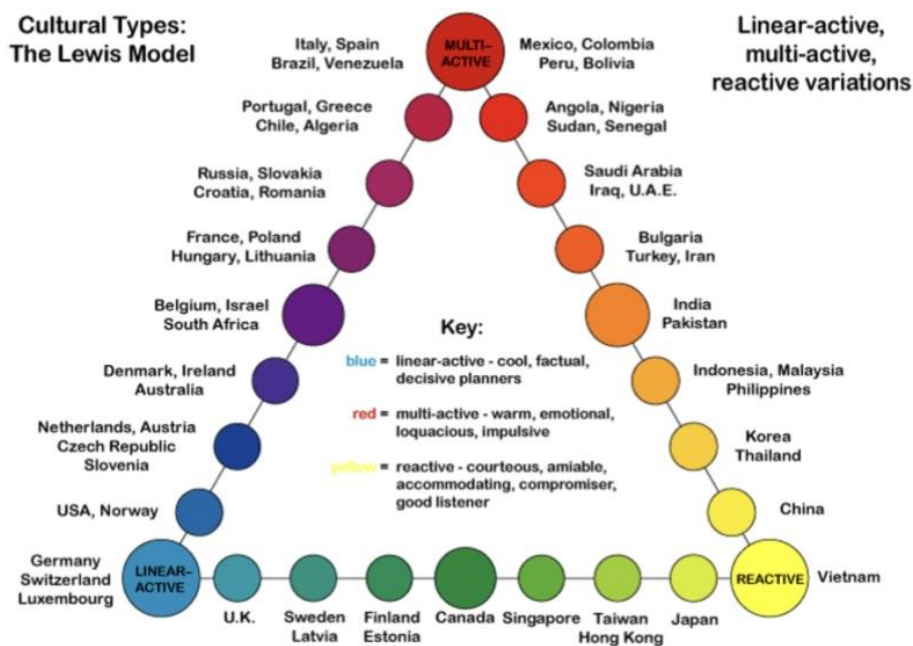
<sup>5</sup> G. Hofstede “*Culture’s Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*”, Sage Publications, London, 1984, p.21

<sup>6</sup> E. B. Tylor “*Primitive culture: researches into the development of mythology, philosophy, religion, art and custom*”, Dover Publications, Mineola, New York, 2016, p.1

importance of feelings, emotions, and personal connections. They value and respect people's status and give much importance to social and company hierarchy. These people are flexible and not afraid to improvise or suddenly change plans, so they are also very efficient multi-taskers. These features earn them the titles of collectivists or 'Particularists' since they firmly believe that relationships and friendships should come before rules and even regulations.

Finally, reactive cultures are mainly located in Asia and their people are excellent listeners since they prefer to first establish their interlocutor's position and then react to it. They also try to avoid confrontation, when possible, rarely interrupting speakers and abstaining from making eye contact. Asian children are taught since early childhood to not look their teachers and their elders in the eyes as, in some cultures, it is considered offensive. In many other cultures it is completely the opposite since not making eye contact while having a conversation might be interpreted as a disrespectful gesture or a sign of disinterest towards the subject.

All the many unmentioned countries have cultures characterized by different combinations of the previously mentioned categories so they can be considered hybrids<sup>7</sup>.



Source: R. D. Lewis "The Cultural Imperative: Global Trends in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century", 2003

Edward T. Hall, an anthropologist, expert in cross-cultural communication and author of "Beyond Culture", provides us with a different interpretation based on what features people can observe when being presented with a new culture. As he says "Culture hides more than what it reveals and strangely enough what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants"<sup>8</sup>. This concept perfectly summarizes Hall's model of the Cultural Iceberg. The iceberg, showing just its tip above the sea surface but hiding a much larger mass underwater, symbolizes culture. Every culture has both a more observable and a less observable side. The first, also known as "Surface Culture", coincides with the iceberg's tip and includes the most surface-level aspects of culture such as behaviors and practices, which people get to know through superficial experiences like vacations as tourists. For this reason, by getting acquainted with just this part of culture, the whole heritage is just perceived and not fully understood.

Its less observable side, called "Deep Culture", involves deeper matters such as perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and values, which are not understandable or even noticeable by interacting with the locals for such short periods of time: in order to understand a new culture, people need to stay in a specific location for a much longer time span, for instance by living there or by travelling and visiting often for work. In conclusion, Deep Culture is considered crucial to be able to do business successfully worldwide, since its understanding allows managers to establish true and respectful relationships with their business partners and foreign audience, increasing their ability to adapt to new economic contexts and needs.

<sup>7</sup> R. D. Lewis "The Cultural Imperative: Global Trends in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century", Intercultural Press, Yarmouth, Maine, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> E. T. Hall "Beyond Culture", Anchor Books/Doubleday, New York, 1976.

## What is cross-cultural communication?

In today's multicultural society, it is essential to understand and respect cultural differences to avoid misunderstandings, conflicts, and stereotypes.

Also, doing business is not just an economic activity, it also draws its fundamental principles from social sciences such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, linguistics and communication. To put it in another way, the act of doing business implies interacting with people and also managing them, so the understanding of human nature and behaviors to communicate effectively become essential. The manager's position is especially tied to this kind of knowledge and skills, as the role requires the constant building of relationships with foreign partners and clients.

In the book *“Intercultural Communication for Global Business”*, Elizabeth Tuleja highlights the difference between intercultural, cross-cultural and international communication, each bearing distinct meanings. Having said that, the terms ‘intercultural’ and ‘cross-cultural’ are often used interchangeably, blending their slightly different points of focus.

Firstly, intercultural communication is defined as “...the (...) exchange between two people who are different culturally”<sup>9</sup>. Its role is to examine how the interactions in which people engage are affected and influenced by cultural differences, since communication strategies vary based upon a person's cultural background.

Secondly, international communication is very similar to the previous one, but it prioritizes the analysis of macro issues such as the government's political influence on the process of communication among people from different countries.

Finally, cross-cultural communication does not focus on the interaction between people but on the comparison of cultural differences: for instance, the level of economic development, the form of government or the local language.

## Cultural elements affecting international business practices

In today's global marketplace, since every marketing strategy is built on the satisfaction of the needs and wants of a business' customers, which are very much culturally based, understanding cultural dynamics has never been more important. This is not only to establish solid business deals but also to help employers and human resources managers avoid taking adverse action against individuals based on cultural misunderstandings.

Many studies have shown the capacity of cultural values to predict consumer behaviors based on the tendencies of individuals to consume luxury goods, switch between brands, use word of mouth communication, buy impulsively, and so on. Each culture perceives advertising and marketing campaigns differently according to its principles, so managers need to properly research their target before even discussing a strategy.

Each culture is defined by many elements that have a direct impact on the way business is done in a specific geographic area, causing issues to marketers when trying to launch a product overseas. These elements include language, colors, customs and manners, religious beliefs, time and space, business norms, nonverbal behaviors and even food preferences.

A country's language is the key to its culture because it expresses its thinking patterns.

Language differences have caused many problems in marketing and advertising history resulting from mistranslation, lack of slang understanding and use of the wrong dialect, since only their understanding can lead to proper communication and avoid unnecessary misunderstandings.

For instance, in 1987 the well-known brand KFC was working on expanding its market towards China, so the ‘Finger Lickin’ Good’ campaign was exported to the Chinese market as a part of the brand's multilingual marketing strategy. What the marketing team did not consider was that their slogan's literal translation from English to Chinese carried a very different meaning: ‘Eat Your Fingers Off’. Not only was the message far from appealing, but KFC's marketing department did not properly research Chinese manners, since cultural studies clearly show that the Chinese do not lick their fingers as a sign of appreciation of tasty food. This example is meant to draw



Source: J. Makinen “In U.S.-China game of chicken over South China Sea, KFC feels the heat.”, Los Angeles Times, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> E. A. Tuleja, *“Intercultural Communication for Global Business”*, Routledge, New York and London, 2016, p. 20

attention to the importance of needing accurate translations that fit the target culture and norms<sup>10</sup>.

Colors also have different meanings depending on the target culture.

There are many examples of how different colors are interpreted in different cultures: for instance, goods in Japan cannot have black or white packaging because they are the colors of mourning. Also, in Hispanic nations, purple packages are banned since that color is associated with death. Furthermore, blue represents masculinity in many countries like the US, but in other places such as France and Britain, red takes its place instead.

Every culture has distinct customs and behaviors that are deeply rooted in its traditions.

For instance, Japan has a unique eating etiquette that includes specific seating arrangements that are considered not only important but also symbolic: never raising food above the mouth, never use hands to catch falling food and slurping as a sign of appreciation.

What is really curious is that what are considered good manners in some places may be considered the opposite elsewhere. As previously said, slurping in Japan is considered as a token of appreciation for good food, but in Italy it is perceived being as very rude.

Societal values also arise from religious and moral beliefs that people learn through life experiences. For example, the Hindu religion forbids the consumption of beef, causing a major problem to fast food chains such as McDonald's or Burger King, since they would not be able to sell their products without modifying their recipes. In response, McDonald's introduced a new product called 'vegeburger', made of soybeans and lamb.

Similarly, in Egypt, pork and alcohol are prohibited since it is a predominantly Muslim country.

Time is another crucial aspect characterizing every culture and affecting people's work and lives in different ways. As Kaynak and Herbig state in their book "*Handbook of Cross-Cultural Marketing*", a culture's attitude towards time also expresses how much the development of personal relationships in business is considered important. In many cultures it seems like there is no time to get things done and people are always very busy, so they do not spend time building long-lasting and valuable relationships, especially between work colleagues or partners. For instance, American businessmen are deadline oriented and expect meetings to respect the stated timetable since everything has been previously organized, while Latins usually show up later than the time previously established and are willing to keep the meeting going beyond its end-time, even if it is only to chat about non-related work topics. A similar concept is deep-rooted in Indonesia, where there is the so-called 'rubber time', meaning that time is elastic and if something considered more important than business comes up, such as a wedding or work, meetings easily get postponed.

Another time distinction is related to temporal perspective: some cultures are future-oriented and give much importance to planning for future advancements and progressive development; others are present-oriented and are inclined to living in the moment and taking personal and work life one day at a time. Finally, past-oriented societies believe that everything can be referred to past experiences, giving past knowledge a crucial role in strategic planning.

The concept of space is also differently interpreted in each culture. For example, during a conversation, Italians, Latins and Arabs are comfortable with being physically close to their interlocutors, while Japanese people maintain greater distances.

Furthermore, French supervisors have a central allocation while monitoring their subordinates' performances, while in Japan they sit at the end of the room where they can hear and see everything.

Business norms also vary from one country to another. For instance, French "...wholesalers do not like to promote products. They are mainly interested in supplying retailers with the products they need"<sup>11</sup>.

Japanese businessmen stay silent during negotiations to comprehend their counterparts' position and to project a favorable impression, making their American partners panic because they think something is wrong. As a result, Americans start becoming impatient and push to close the deal, regretting the business concessions they end up making in the process.

Every culture also has a defined way of communicating without speaking. Managers need to understand how to correctly interpret other countries' nonverbal communication patterns and behaviors not only to understand how their foreign partners feel about their transactions but also not to appear rude or disrespectful.

Nonverbal behaviors include facial expressions, gestures and body movements, eye contact, posture and touch and they are also used independent of verbal communication.

The nonverbal portion of a message is indeed the most important and in case of discrepancy between a person's body language and verbal expression, nonverbal behavior always prevails.

Some gestures and body postures have different meanings depending on the cultural environment in which they are interpreted. For example, Arabs use the right hand to eat while the left is reserved for toilet functions, so using the wrong hand while handling business matters can cost naïve businesspeople the opportunity to close a deal.

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<sup>10</sup> P. Kong "*Translation Marketing Errors That Cost Millions*", 2022.

<sup>11</sup> B. J. Mariadoss, "*Core principles of international marketing*", section 3.2, 2022.



French people are used to direct and intense eye contact and lack thereof may be interpreted as a sign of weakness and even casualness or insincerity. Americans, on the other hand, consider such body language as aggressive.

Even food preferences play a crucial role in the categorization of cultures since food and drinks are one of the most culturally sensitive topics.

The famous brand Kellogg's once botched the launch of their cereal in India due to a lack of observation of the culture's eating habits. Indian people usually do not drink milk for breakfast, and if they do so it is heated at very high temperatures of around 280°C in order to kill bacteria. Putting cereals into very hot milk makes them melt and ruins the whole breakfast experience. If Kellogg's marketing team had done proper research, they would have known not to waste time, money, and resources in exporting their product to a country that has different habits than many Western countries.

### ***Cross-cultural dynamics in advertising***

Since advertising is the number one tool marketers use to promote a brand's products, many big companies invest a big percentage of their revenues in it, especially mass media advertising. Advertisers must know their customers' preferences to develop a winning advertising campaign, including proper communication channels and an effective message. Advertising is just one of the elements of the marketing mix, but it is also the most culture-bound functions of a firm, together with promotion.

Culturally different audiences tend to react differently to advertising and marketing campaigns based on the message they convey. Success lies in the advertisers' ability to predict their reaction to the same campaign, possibly adapting its key concepts to fit different cultural norms.

For instance, Koreans value a review from word-of-mouth advertising much more than one from a typical television ad, since they deeply treasure their friends and family's testimonies.

The content of an ad also differs based on the features of the recipient society. Some cultures are group-oriented and some are more individualistic. For instance, if an advert is meant to be viewed in a high collectivism country, it will reflect this trait by portraying social situations which people can relate to.

Furthermore, advertising especially made for high-context cultures, such as many Asian ones, are rich in context and details that may confuse and overwhelm low-context audiences.

Nonverbal and visual advertising seem to have the qualities to be understood globally, breaking the language barriers since no talking is involved. However, body language and motions are interpreted differently among cultures, causing many situations to be misunderstood due to cultural discrepancies. For instance, in Japan pointing to one's chest indicates that the person wants a bath, while in Italy this gesture is mainly used to just indicate someone in particular. Also, snakes symbolize danger in Sweden and wisdom in Korea. That is to say that advertisers need to be very careful about the symbols and situations they choose for their campaigns, not only because the interpretation range is very wide and contrasting, but especially because advertisers who understand and adapt to cultural nuances have a greater chance of creating impactful campaigns that resonate with their target audience.

### ***Cross-cultural communication as an effective marketing tool***

Upon listing the many ways in which cross-cultural communication has an impact on business practices all over the world, it is possible nowadays to consider it an effective marketing and advertising tool for several reasons. Firstly, cross-cultural communication allows companies to engage with diverse audiences through tailored messages for specific cultural preferences and values. Secondly, it helps with the process of building trust and credibility based on how much a company can show respect and understanding for a target culture, spreading trust and credibility throughout its community and establishing a positive brand image among customers. Thirdly, cross-cultural communication also stimulates the overcoming of language barriers: as previously stated, language is a crucial aspect of culture, so to effectively communicate across cultures not only are accurate translations of the marketing messages fundamental but also peculiar communication techniques are needed to resonate with specific cultures. Furthermore, cross-cultural communication allows enterprises to adapt to local preferences since each culture has unique preferences and consumption patterns. Marketers are indeed called to create strategies which align with local preferences to make a product as appealing and relevant as possible in the eyes of the target audience. This adaptability enhances the likelihood of success in international markets. An implemented knowledge of cross-cultural communication also helps companies avoid one of the riskiest mistakes which are made in this field: creating cultural misunderstandings. As will be thoroughly explained in the next chapter, marketers who do not research their topics enough often end up offending their audience. Crafting messages that are culturally sensitive is a key step in the process of building an effective campaign while ensuring that the company's intentions are effectively communicated and perceived. Finally, this type of communication not only benefits the marketing team, thanks to its role in gaining insights from different cultural perspectives that are very valuable during the study of consumers' needs, preferences and trends, it also allows brands to stay competitive in a such globalized

marketplace. By embracing cultural diversity and tailoring their messages accordingly, companies can maximize not only their reach, but also their impact and success in international markets.

### *The ethics of multicultural advertising*

The importance of building a trusting audience by maintaining good brand image and identity has been a recurrent theme throughout this research. Some companies are able to sustainably gain such great status only by being ethical in the way they do business, especially marketing. Ethical advertising not only shows a company's respect and sensitivity towards other cultures, but also its understanding of the importance of cultural differences. Ethical marketers must avoid stereotypes and misrepresentations which could offend specific cultural groups by thoroughly researching other groups' values, norms and beliefs beforehand. Such authenticity helps the process of building credibility among consumers and the establishment of a company's positive reputation. Offensive advertisements can indeed cause reputational damage and legal issues, also resulting in public backlash and boycotts: this is why ethical advertising ensures compliance not only with local laws and regulations, but also with industry standards. Being ethical in business also fosters an enterprise's long-term business sustainability by attracting new customers and promoting positive recommendations. Finally, ethical advertising reflects a company's degree of interest in its



**Source: 'Share a Coke campaign post-analysis', marketingmag.com.au, 2012**

social responsibility: enterprises can positively contribute to society, for instance by promoting cultural understanding and openness. A great example is the 'Share a Coke' campaign by the Coca-Cola company, one which aimed to connect with costumers from all around the globe by personalizing Coca-Cola bottles with popular names and terms in many different languages.

The campaign was culturally sensitive, inclusive and authentic: by associating the act of sharing a Coke with meaningful connections, it conveyed a sense of togetherness and goodwill across different cultural boundaries. The company's ethical approach to marketing also resulted in great economic results, such as the 7% increase of young-adults' Coke consumption and a 3% rise in overall sales.

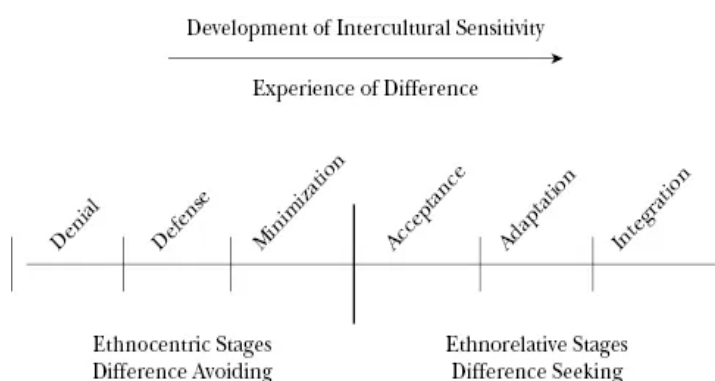
### *Benefitting from workplace cultural diversity*

As will become clearer throughout this research, companies that value cultural diversity in the work environment hold a strong competitive advantage. Diversity is indeed a fact of life in work groups and organizations, and creating work contexts in which people are valued and included is the first step to benefiting from it. Diversity is surely not just about superficial demographic facts or labels, but mainly about identities, cultures and all the ways of thinking that these represent. Historically speaking, organizations have come a long way: from mono-cultural exclusionary organizations to multicultural companies that deeply value all differences and develop practices aimed at allowing every group to succeed and fully contribute. Not only is such inclusion fundamental to eliminating unfair and undesirable bias and discriminations, it can also improve a company's economic performance in several ways. Companies eventually realized that these differences needed to be viewed and managed as potential assets in order to obtain substantial value from them.

Cultural diversity in the workplace offers several benefits, such as an increase in creativity and innovation that results from individuals with different cultural backgrounds, experiences and perspectives working together and generating new solutions. Such diversity also provides a broader range of skills and expertise to companies because each employee may possess peculiar qualifications and talents which effectively contribute to organizational success. A culturally diverse workforce has enhanced adaptability towards change and higher tolerance and open-mindedness, making it more resilient in an ever-changing global marketplace. Diversity in the workplace can also lead to better decision-making processes because of the many different insights and approaches to problem-solving that come from a heterogeneous group. Working in a culturally varied context fuels employees' cultural competence and global awareness, allowing them to understand customs and traditions different from their own. Companies that cherish cultural diversity in the working area expand their market reach easier since their workforce is better equipped to understand the needs of diverse consumers. Finally, inclusive workplaces can increase their employee engagement and retention, fostering a sense of belonging among the staff and creating a positive work culture.



Source: “How to Manage Cultural Diversity in the Workplace”, yoursapp.com, 2022



Source: B. M Ferdman “Diversity at Work”, 2013

positions. This study also supports a developmental design for training, education and coaching, allowing the creation of specific and targeted inventions and many important initiatives.

The DMIS consists in six stages through which people may progress in the process of developing their intercultural competence. The stage of Denial happens when people live in blissful ignorance of the existence of cultural differences, being quite ethnocentric. In the workplace, this approach leaves the organization vulnerable to constant conflict and unproductive teams. The developmental task consists in introducing the team to the existence of such differences and their importance to the whole organization. People in the Defense stage acknowledge the existence of other cultures but feel threatened by them, also displaying stereotypical behaviors. Then there is the phase of *minimization*, where individuals recognize that people are essentially the same and emphasize their similarities as opposed to their differences. In this stage, the impact of cultural diversity is also ignored. Acceptance sparks when people begin to develop a more open attitude toward cultural differences. They finally start to appreciate different cultural perspectives, wanting to learn from them and becoming more flexible towards intercultural situations.

The final phase of this model consists in the stage of Integration, when individuals develop a high level of intercultural competence, becoming more ethno-relative and able to successfully integrate diverse perspectives into their worldview.

**Risks and barriers**

Operating a business in a culturally distant country is not only complicated but also quite expensive. As often happens, interpreters are hired to guarantee proper and accurate translations to avoid difficulties caused by major language barriers.

Also, when a company is so culturally distant from a potential partner, the risk of incompatibility between their respective practices, policies and procedures increases, making the coordination process much more challenging.

Intercultural competence is a multilayered concept that stems from cultural diversity in the workplace and it is considered a critical skill to have effective interaction in various cultural contexts. This topic has also been studied across many disciplines such as sociology, business, linguistics, cross-cultural communication, and anthropology. This kind of expertise has been proved to affect not only the business world by facilitating global leadership, but also education by improving culturally responsive teaching and learning and even customer service by promoting a culturally sensitive approach. The development of such soft skills has been studied by many scholars and summarized through various models such as Bennet’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS).

This model analyzes the individual’s response to the experience of difference. For instance, how does a Boomer manager react to meeting a Generation X employee with such a different work ethic? Also, how does an American IT director react when confronting a customer service representative from India? In both these cases there is the opportunity to communicate effectively or destructively, cross-culturally. The DMIS suggests a predictable pattern of responses based on the effect the view people have of the world has on the encounters with others. Individuals who tend to avoid difference are considered ethnocentric, while those who embrace it hold ethno-relative

Furthermore, expatriate managers carrying out assignments in other countries are constantly at risk of disrespecting and contravening their partner's communicative norms and expectations, building shaky relationships with colleagues and employees due to frequent misunderstandings and misinterpretations.

Mishearing and mispronunciations are just a few of the typical problems that occur when people with different cultural backgrounds communicate. Also, not being familiar with a country's communicative conventions can cause issues, such as the speaker being perceived as rude. Barry Maude, in his book *"Managing Cross-Cultural Communication"*, provides us with a very good example of such tricky situations: "...English-speaking Indian and Pakistani women working in a cafeteria in Britain who were perceived as surly and uncooperative by their English customers. They had a good grasp of English grammar and vocabulary but were not familiar with English communicative conventions governing the pronunciation of common English words. For instance, they said 'gravy' with a falling intonation. That sounded rude to English ears"<sup>12</sup>.

For these reasons and many more, assessing cultural distance is the first step companies need to take to understand if engaging with a potential foreign partner is sustainable in the long run. This process involves comparing the most important aspects of the culture of each country, including the dominant language, the dominant religion, the form of government, the level of economic development and the ethnic composition. Surface-level differences may include dietary habits and leisure possibilities, while deep-level differences include political and religious beliefs and values, key elements to create formidable cultural barriers.

## Multicultural Marketing Gone Wrong

### D&G "Eating with Chopsticks" campaign

In November 2018, the Italian fashion house Dolce & Gabbana launched three ads on the Chinese social media Weibo to promote its upcoming runway show. These videos feature an Asian woman dressed in D&G couture trying to eat some of the most popular Italian foods such as pizza, cannoli and spaghetti using chopsticks. A male voice in Mandarin introduces the content of the videos by saying "Welcome to the first episode of 'Eating with Chopsticks' by Dolce & Gabbana", while the model awkwardly stabs at the food, struggling to pick it up. The male voice proceeds to explain how to properly eat the dishes, and when she successfully completes the challenge, the narrator then mocks her by saying: "Bravissimo!".



Source: Dolce & Gabbana's Instagram account @dolcegabbana, 2018

These ads were perceived not only as disrespectful, but also as racist and stereotypical. They resulted in a swift backlash from Chinese consumers and media, including many celebrities and even the government, while several retailers decided to cut ties with the brand. Although the videos were removed within 24 hours, the company's Chinese business lost over \$1 billion USD in that timespan, followed by a continuous drop in sales. After all the accusations, the stylists and founders of the brand, Stefano Gabbana and Domenico Dolce, released a video on Weibo to apologize to their Chinese customers, hoping they would be forgiven and promising to try to better understand and respect Chinese culture.

<sup>12</sup> B. Maude, *"Managing Cross-Cultural Communication"*, Bloomsbury, 2017, p. 107

### ***Pepsi commercial featuring Kendall Jenner***



**Source: A. Smith “Pepsi Pulls Controversial Kendall Jenner Ad After Outcry”, nbcnews.com, 2017**

bolder, live louder, live for now”, the ad concludes.

As PepsiCo stated, the ad’s real purpose was to communicate a message of unity, peace and understanding, but many people criticized it both because of its insensitive and shallow approach and its improper execution of the intended message. Entertainment Weekly even called it a tone-deaf attempt to co-opt a movement of political resistance to increase sales. The main reason of people’s concerns came from the trivialization of real-life protests, in which thousands of individuals have lost their lives fighting for important causes such as the Black Lives Matter movement. Some people commented on the choice of using a thin, rich, white, and privileged young woman to be the face of such a campaign and also criticized the way in which the advertisement made it look like a can of Pepsi could cure all social problems and discriminations. Although the ad was promptly removed, it still caused the company a massive hit to its reputation, causing it to drop 14% of positive net sentiment, from 2% to -12%.

Even Bernice King, the youngest daughter of Martin Luther King Jr., posted on Twitter about this matter with an image of her father during a peaceful protest to ridicule the commercial.

### ***Pampers packaging fail in Japan***

The American multinational Procter&Gamble has also paid the price of not doing enough research when launching a product overseas. In the mid-1970s, Pampers disposable diapers were launched in Japanese markets but failed for many reasons, including the overlooking of Japanese babies’ weight and size and the diapers’ quality being much inferior to the ones already on the market. In addition to this, P&G also made a cross-cultural mistake due to lack of research and understanding of Japanese folklore. The product’s packaging depicted a stork delivering diapers to a household which is presumably expecting a baby, recalling a common myth among Western countries and cultures. The company was right about Japanese consumers wanting disposable diapers, but not about the way diapers were ‘delivered’, making Japanese families very confused by what they perceived as a weird image. As Procter&Gamble eventually learned, the Western folklore of storks delivering newborns simply does not exist in Japan: in their culture babies are delivered by giant peaches floating down rivers. Still, nobody in P&G’s marketing team had bothered to check the facts, preventing the product from becoming an instant success. Although the campaign failed miserably, P&G ultimately found a path to profitability in Japan too.

On the 4 April 2017, PepsiCo released an advertisement which soon turned into a huge scandal because of its problematic elements, such as racial and cultural stereotypes and the trivialization of very serious social struggles.

The ad opens with the 21-year-old supermodel Kendall Jenner posing for a photoshoot while a dense crowd of millennials floods the street raising their fists in the air and holding signs reading ‘love’ and ‘join the conversation’. Firstly, a musician sipping a can of Pepsi stops playing his contrabass to participate in the protest, a photographer partakes next and finally Jenner herself removes her wig and fancy silver dress to join the protestors too. The ad culminates with the supermodel boldly stepping forward from the protest to offer a Pepsi to a police officer, who accepts it and starts sipping it, generating excitement among the crowd. ‘Live

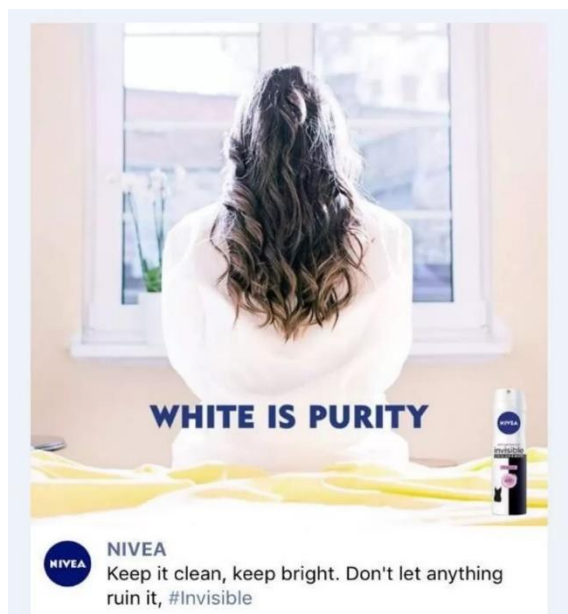


**Source: Bernice King’s Twitter account @BerniceKing, 2017.**



Source: M. A. Marino “Where Do Babies Come From?: a tale of misunderstandings and corporate negligence”, [muditaconsultancy.com](http://muditaconsultancy.com), 2019.

### Nivea “White is purity”



Source: ‘Nivea removes ‘White is purity’ deodorant advert branded ‘racist’’, [bbc.com](http://bbc.com), 2017.

German skincare company NIVEA also joins the list of enterprises that shallowly approached the aspect of culture in one of its marketing campaigns. On 2 April 2017, Nivea launched an advert for its ‘Invisible’ deodorant range, which stated ‘White is purity’ across the image of a woman. The main implication of such a statement is the claim of Caucasian superiority over black people. This concept, which was consciously proposed by NIVEA, serves not just to distinguish and separate blackness from whiteness, but to define whiteness itself by its purity, thereby directly categorizing blackness as impure. This imputation, among many others, led Nivea to withdraw the advertisement after only two days of it being released, but the company was still criticized widely by the public. The enterprise then released an official apology that reads as follows: “That image was inappropriate and not reflective of our values as a company. We deeply apologize for that and have removed the post. Diversity and inclusivity are crucial values of NIVEA. We take pride in creating products that promote beauty in all forms. Discrimination of any kind is simply not acceptable to us as a company, as employees, or as individuals”. However, as it was so recent, such a failure is still fresh in consumers’ minds.

### Practical takeaways

Cross-cultural marketing mistakes are a cruel but humorous means of understanding and highlighting the impact that poor cultural awareness and translations can have on a company when venturing abroad. Such flops do not only affect an enterprise’s sales and revenues, but also its image and brand identity. For this reason and many more, it is important to value cultural diversities also by employing people with different backgrounds who can help and guide the brand through the intricacies of ethnicity, religion, culture and other social complexities.

Understanding a culture from the outside is extremely complicated: it is not about knowing historical facts and everyday-life occurrences, but mainly about understanding the subtleties of language and visual culture that existed long before the brand even entered the market.

This knowledge can come from an individual who is not necessarily a businessperson but someone able to translate their cultural wisdom into effective business and marketing strategies, leading enterprises to better strive for diversity, which is essential and decisive, especially for those building their global presence.

What marketers need to take away from these failures is that campaigns must be carefully planned, ensuring that the intended message is both received and perceived clearly and with no misunderstandings.

## Conclusions

Over the past few years, cross-cultural communication has become an important part of communication studies across the world due to globalization. From companies to universities and schools, multiculturalism has become increasingly popular among people of different ages, cultural backgrounds and nationalities.

Upon exploring the topic from multiple perspectives, its role remains crucial in international marketing contexts.

In this paper, I want to underline what the benefits are that make cross-cultural communication an effective marketing tool. Firstly, it allows enterprises to further deepen their knowledge about consumers' needs and wants based on their cultural backgrounds, leading to more effective and targeted marketing and advertising campaigns. Secondly, it improves the communication between businesses and multicultural consumers: by considering various cultural differences, companies are capable to better communicate their message to foreign audiences.

It also provides companies with a greater potential for growth by giving them the opportunity to broaden their commercial horizons and reach new markets.

Furthermore, businesses with good cross-cultural communication skills can enhance their competitive advantage over their rivals. Finally, both owning the qualified knowledge to launch international advertising campaigns and knowing how to properly use it avoids insulting other cultures' heritages and harming the reputation and the dignity of a company that wants to grow and be respected internationally.

This study notes the importance for companies to keep improving their workplace cultural diversity for several reasons, such as the improvement of employees' productivity and creativity, the growth of the company's reputation and providing much better service for customers and partners, all benefitting any kind of business, including those in the marketing and advertising fields.

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