Cultural Considerations in International Product Marketing

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CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS IN
INTERNATIONAL PRODUCT MARKETING

By

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Abstract

In an increasingly global business environment, multinational firms are attempting to become more profitable by expanding their marketing campaigns to other countries. Cultural differences between these countries drastically affect the outcome of such efforts. By identifying key cultural issues that relate to marketing success or failure and examining these issues within a traditional marketing framework, this paper attempts to demonstrate the extent to which cultural factors influence the success of a product marketed in another country. Evidence is drawn from past instances of success and failure in cross-cultural marketing. Methods of research that are currently applied to international marketing are discussed, and methods that are potentially more effective are suggested. Evidence suggests that ignoring cultural variables can have an adverse outcome on the success of a product in an international environment. Implications for the future of multinational corporations are discussed.
Cultural Considerations in International 
Product Marketing

I. Introduction

In today’s increasingly global environment, many businesses are abandoning a 
narrow domestic focus and seeking to expand beyond the confinement of their own 
geopolitical borders. McDonald’s has permeated Moscow, Levi’s jeans are status 
symbols throughout Western Europe, and a Starbucks coffee shop recently opened up in 
the imperial palace of the Forbidden City in Beijing. Companies such as Gillette and 
Ford Motor Company, just to name a few, receive approximately two-thirds of profits 
from their international operations. PepsiCo’s overseas snack business brings in more 
than $3.25 billion annually (Lamb et al. 96). Globalization has allowed multinational 
corporations such as these to gain worldwide recognition to the point that some social 
commentators believe we are heading towards an age of one homogenous consumer 
culture. However, although technology in the form of mass media and communications 
has opened up new doors between countries that were once isolated from one another, we 
are far from a state of uniculturalism. Companies continue to do business in foreign 
lands – merging and acquiring, investing, and marketing goods, services, and ideas. 
However, the way in which business is conducted, the way in which goods, services, and 
ideas are marketed, and the way consumers respond continues to differ from country to 
country and culture to culture. These countries and cultures maintain their individuality 
despite engaging in the global marketplace. Janeen Arnold Costa and Gary J. Bamossy 
write, “Being able to listen to Walkmans while eating Big Macs in Prague…and drinking
Coca-Cola in Beijing may be evidence of increasingly ‘common’ activities, but these observed commonalities remain superficial. However common or uniform these behaviors appear, there continues to be clear differences in what these behaviors mean to the individuals and groups of different cultures”(4). Failure to adapt to the local business and consumer environment often means failure as a company, and so culture must be given due consideration when conducting business overseas.

Culture has a significant impact on almost every aspect of international business, but nowhere is it more evident than in the realm of marketing. Paul Herbig writes, “Marketing in its simplest form attempts to understand customers in terms of what they buy, when they buy, why they buy, how much they buy, where they buy it, and with what they buy. The relationship with culture comes into play with the realization that each of the descriptors noted above varies from culture to culture”(1). The challenge to international marketers is to determine the exact nature of these cultural variations and their implications for producing a successful product or service. Too often cultural influences are overlooked in lieu of more tangible economic and logistical factors, resulting in a product that “mysteriously” fails to meet sales expectations. Increasingly, however, corporations are beginning to learn from past mistakes and the role of anthropology is becoming more prominent in an international business setting. Companies looking to market internationally must continue to consider the role of culture in consumer behavior and continue to develop methods by which to ensure product success in a cross-cultural environment.

The intent of this paper is to identify the key cultural concepts that are relevant to international marketing, determine the extent to which these cultural factors can affect the
success of a product, and determine whether an anthropological perspective is more
effective in ensuring this success. The first part of the paper will briefly discuss the basic
definition, goals, and traditional frameworks of marketing, and then discuss various
general principles that play a role in cross-cultural marketing. The second part of the
paper will use a marketing framework traditionally called the “marketing mix” to
demonstrate how cultural factors can affect specific aspects of product marketing. The
third part will examine current methods of international market research and the problems
associated with them, and offer possible solutions based on an anthropological
perspective. The fourth part will briefly discuss the role of marketing as an agent of
change and innovation in society, and the possible positive and negative outcomes of this
role. All arguments will be supported with examples of past product successes and
failures of multinational corporations.

In examining the relationship between culture and marketing, there are many
different facets that arise. Cultures vary from region to region within our own country as
well as between countries. Marketing itself can deal with products (both industrial and
consumer), services, or ideas. In order to narrow the scope of this paper, only product
marketing (mostly consumer products as opposed to industrial products) will be
discussed, in an international context. However, much can also be said about marketing
to different cultures within our own country, as many domestic marketing campaigns are
custom tailored to Hispanic or African American consumers, etc. Also, much can be said
about other types of marketing, such as service and idea marketing (e.g. financial services
firms or consultancies) or social marketing (e.g. anti-drug campaigns, etc.). By isolating
the international marketing of consumer products, however, the unique dynamics between product and culture can be more clearly examined.

II. Marketing and Culture

Brief Introduction to Marketing and Its Frameworks

Marketing is a term that can mean many things to many people. The American Marketing Association defines marketing as “the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion, and distribution of ideas, goods, and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational goals” (Lamb et al. 6). This definition contains one of the traditional frameworks of marketing called the “marketing mix”, otherwise know as the “four Ps”. The four Ps consist of product, place, promotion, and price. The product is obviously the starting point of any marketing endeavor. The product is technically a physical unit, including a product name and/or brand name, packaging, instructions, warranty, etc. More abstractly, the product also represents a concept, a value, and a company image. The place refers to the distribution of a product: where, when, and how it is available to the consumer. Promotion includes advertising, public relations, and sales promotions such as coupons, sampling, and in-store displays. Finally, price refers to what a consumer must give up to obtain a product. (Lamb et al. 44-45) These four elements of the marketing mix will be addressed later in terms of how cultural variables affect each one. First, however, the relationships between marketing and culture must be further elucidated.
Key Principles in Marketing and Culture

Marketing is based on satisfying the needs and wants of the consumer. Needs and wants are very much culturally based concepts. Therefore, a thorough understanding of the cultural mores and values of the consumers is crucial to fulfill those needs and wants. Philip Cateora suggests, “The basic motives for consumption which help define fundamental needs and the different forms of decision making have strong cultural underpinnings that are critical knowledge for the marketer” (33).

History has proved that marketers do not always heed such advice, and this critical knowledge is left untapped. Several social and psychological principles can be used to explain the cultural ignorance of many marketers. The foremost is the concept of ethnocentrism, in this context a feeling of superiority about one’s own self or culture. Often marketers are under the false impression that other cultures will conform to the marketer’s own culture, and that what works at home will work abroad. Herbig warns never to assume transferability of cultural concepts: “One cannot gauge another’s wants and needs by one’s own standards. The poorest slums of Calcutta are home to 70,000 VCRs. In Mexico, homes with color television outnumber those with running water” (2). In another example, he cites the fact that Americans think it is odd that Chinese eat dog for dinner, and Chinese think it is odd that Americans buy packaged, processed dog food and keep dogs as pets (2). Ethnocentrism is not necessarily a conscious feeling of hubris that instills a superior attitude. Often it is an unconscious ignorance of one’s own culture, leading to an ignorance of another’s. Herbig makes the analogy of a fish in water: “The fish is at home in, and comfortably unconscious of, its environment, the water. It
becomes uncomfortable and aware of its environment only when it is out of the water and exposed to air” (14). Marketers may ignore the importance of tailoring their efforts toward another culture because they forget about the importance of their own culture.

A similar, related concept that acts as a stumbling block to cultural adaptation is that of the self-reference criterion (SRC). The SRC can be explained as the tendency to use one’s own values as the measure for understanding and response to unique situations (Jain 236). The concept is attributed to James Lee, who also proposes a systematic four-step framework for overcoming this form of cultural myopia:

1. Define the problem or goal in terms of home-country cultural traits, habits, and norms.

2. Define the problems or goals in terms of the foreign cultural traits, habits, and norms.

3. Isolate the SRC influence in the problem and examine it carefully to see how it complicates the problem.

4. Redefine the problem without the SRC influence and solve for the foreign market situation. (Keegan 125)

In addition to these concepts that influence the marketer, there are several culturally based principles that can work with or against one another to influence the behavior of the consumer. One interesting concept is the country-of-origin effect. This is the influence that the country of manufacture has on a consumer’s perception of the product, be it positive or negative (Herbig 104). Research has shown that when in doubt

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which brand of a given product to buy, many consumers will be influenced by their ideas about the country of origin of the various brands (xii). Not surprisingly, more industrialized, developed countries have the highest quality image. This effect can be seen in both the products imported to and exported from the U.S. Americans often tend to perceive German-imported beer, Italian clothing and accessories, and Japanese electronics as being a higher quality than their American-made counterparts. Some domestic companies try to capitalize off this phenomenon by using positively perceived foreign imagery or branding in their products. Lexus recently produced a series of commercials aired in American but entirely in the French language, because of the association of French culture with style. Surely not many consumers would buy pasta with a distinctly American brand name, because an Italian brand name would be perceived as higher quality.

The country-of-origin effect can greatly increase the chances of success for a product manufactured in a highly industrialized society. Conversely, it can cause potentially fatal problems for local brands if they are seen as inferior. In China, American and European products became so popular that they have surpassed their Chinese counterparts in sales. In response, China has launched a “buy Chinese” campaign and is very cautious about what foreign brands can enter the market (Herbig 104).

Campaigns such as this are examples of another important concept in cross-cultural marketing, that of nationalism. Costa and Bannosy propose that while evolving global interdependencies as well as new communication and transportation technologies move the world towards an apparent homogeneity, identity on the basis of cultural
background is increasing as a strong countertendency. This self- and group identity is expressed as ethnicity and nationalism (vii). Cultural pride in the form of nationalism can often be a stumbling block to marketers. However, it is rare that all the members of a culture share such a sentiment. Although there may be a strong contingent of consumers whose pride in their own culture prevents them from buying goods from foreign manufacturers, there is most likely another segment of the population perfectly willing, if not demanding, to buy such products if they perceive the products to be of higher quality.

Another stumbling block for cross-cultural marketers is a concept that takes nationalism to an extreme, that of xenophobia. Although most countries are now open to foreign trade when they once shunned all outside influences, there is still resistance to globalization for fear of “contaminating” the host culture. Jeffrey Edmund Curry writes, “Developing economies suffer the greatest effect of this xenophobia as they become torn between advancing into the future (largely dictated by foreign technology,) and leaving behind a past that formed their present” (46). In many countries, such as China and Malaysia, citizenship is hardly ever granted for these reasons, and even naturalized citizens are often treated on par with foreigners. In developed countries as well, there is still fear of economic and cultural imperialism. These fears are not totally groundless, as the marketing of products and ideas in foreign cultures can often lead to a disruption of that culture, as this paper will discuss later on.

**International Marketing Strategy Decisions – Standardization vs. Adaptation**
When multinational corporations seek to market their products to another culture, or to introduce one product in several cultures simultaneously, they are faced with two options. They can standardize – either by marketing their existing product as is, but in a foreign environment, or by introducing a new product in the same form in all the markets they are targeting. Or they can adapt the features of their product to each local environment in which they market. Each option has its advantages and disadvantages, and each would probably function best in different situations. From an economic point of view, standardization would be much more preferred by a multinational corporation, as economies of scale dictate that it would cost less to manufacture many of the same product as it would to manufacture many different variations of the product. The same holds true for the advertising that goes along with the product. Standardization can also help to reinforce positive images of the brand across boundaries.

However, standardized strategies are difficult to implement, and an unsuccessful strategy can be catastrophic. Cultural differences exist not only between countries, but often times in between regions of countries. Some companies employ adaptive strategies to overcome this point. Tyson Foods customizes more than 5,000 products to satisfy local preferences in 57 countries, while Nestle instant coffee is produced in 200 different blends globally. Coca-Cola, although one of the most recognizable brands in the world, cannot be promoted in the same way across the globe because it is perceived differently in various cultures. For example, in Spain Coke is seen as an excellent mixer, in Italy it replaces wine as a dinner drink, and in China Coke is viewed as a refined luxury drink for only the most fortunate (Herbig 36-37).
One example of the potential difference in standardization and adaptation strategies is the case of competing multinational razor manufacturers in Japan. Gillette had a 65 to 70 percent market share worldwide, but only 10 percent share in Japan. Schick, on the other hand, had a 62 percent share in Japan. Schick used an adaptation strategy while Gillette emphasized its American roots by airing the same ads it would in the U.S. Only the company slogan at the end of the commercial was translated into Japanese. Gillette also sold its Sensor razor in the same packages with the brand name in English letters and only a small Japanese translation in a corner of the package. Schick on the other hand, has not used a foreign actor in its ads for over a decade. Schick’s ad for the Tracer featured a Japanese actor shaving. The product was renamed FX because it would be easier to pronounce. (Herbig 40) It is clear from this example cases where cultural difference has an effect on consumer behavior, an adaptation strategy has a decided advantage over a standardization strategy. In another example, Parker pen company had traditionally employed a decentralized (adaptation) strategy, with marketing efforts in 154 different countries using 40 different ad agencies. However, during the 1980s the company decided to centralize its efforts, standardizing all aspects of the marketing mix from Parker’s headquarters. The company chose a single ad agency and used the motto “Make your mark with a Parker” in all their ads across the globe, and kept ad layout and photography identical. The campaign was a disaster, resulting in the resignation of the CEO and a restoration of Parker’s original adaptive approach. (Herbig 41)

Clearly marketing efforts must take cultural variation into consideration. However, there is a middle ground between standardization and adaptation, a concept that
Herbig calls “glocalization” (43). This involves keeping overall marketing strategies in alignment across the globe, but changing tactics as needed on a local basis. For example, Coca-Cola created an award-winning commercial featuring an American football player giving his jersey to a young boy who had offered him a Coke after the game. This ad could not be used outside the U.S. because neither the identity of the football player, nor the concept of the game itself would be understood by other cultures. However, the ad was recreated in many other countries with the same theme, only in different languages and using different local sports celebrities (Herbig 44).

The Campbell Soup Company can be used as a benchmark for adaptation or “glocalization” strategy. One of the most variable aspects of culture from place to place is taste, and Campbell’s strategy accurately reflects this fact. The company caters to many different tastes in many different cultures, many of which may seem odd or unappetizing to American consumers. Irish and Italians prefer creamy tomato soup, Germans want rice, and Columbians prefer spice. Australians prefer cream of pumpkin soup. In Poland, the company introduced eight varieties of condensed zupa and flaki, a peppery tripe soup. In Mexico, Campbell’s sells Crema de Chile Pablano; in China it sells watercress and duck gizzard soup, scallop broth, radish and carrot soup, and pork, fig, and date soups (Herbig 45).

Strategies like these are necessary to maintain a competitive global advantage. From the previous example, it is clear that marketing the same varieties of soups across cultures would not be profitable in the least. However, many companies do in fact employ a strategy of standardization without considering the cultural implications. In the following section, more analysis will be done on product successes and failures within
the specific context of the marketing mix to determine exactly what factors need close cultural consideration in international product marketing.

III. Cultural Considerations in the Marketing Mix

Product

The product is certainly the most important part of the marketing process, though some marketers might claim that with the right advertising a company can sell anything. The physical product must conform to consumers’ expectations and appeal to their sense of taste, aesthetics, and/or values. First however, the concept of the product itself must be applicable to the culture to which it is marketed.

Product Concept

Marketing managers are often ethnocentric in assuming that another culture has any use for a product, or that they will use it in the same way as Americans. The idea of breakfast cereal in Japan has had difficulty in the past because milk is not a large part of their culture due to biological considerations. McDonald’s hamburgers do not meet with success in India due to religious restrictions on eating beef. Countless other examples abound of companies marketing products whose uses were unknown, unnecessary, and/or unfathomable to a foreign culture. Success comes when the company realizes that there is a need that can be fulfilled with their product that still conforms to local culture. For example, camera sales in Saudi Arabia have been limited because of restrictions caused by Islamic traditions. The Polaroid instant camera became greatly successful because it allowed Arab men to photograph their wives and daughters in the privacy of their own homes without the need for strangers to process the film (Herbig 20).
A successful marketer’s job is often not as easy as just promoting a product’s attributes, if in fact they must promote the idea behind the product first. For example, Gillette often has to sell the idea of shaving before it can sell its razors. In some countries, facial hair is removed with a machete or a sharp edge of glass. To persuade these people that shaving can be easier and more comfortable, but without losing masculine qualities, Gillette sends a van from village to village carrying its salesmen (Herbig 90). Introducing products that are not a necessity to a society is often a way to affect change in that society, for better or for worse. Unfortunately, as many businesses seek to increase profits by any means necessary, the effects of introducing a product on a given culture is not a strong consideration. This topic will be discussed more thoroughly in the last part of the paper.

In some cases, sales figures might not be indicative of the way a product is or is not fulfilling its intended need. Rather, the product’s use is being interpreted differently by the local culture. This phenomenon can result in either great success or colossal failure. In Brazil, a certain brand of floor wax dropped in sales mysteriously. The manufacturer realized that many Brazilians had been using it as a lighter fluid to ignite their Sunday barbecues. When the company added more water to the solvent base, the floor wax became less flammable and hence useless for this purpose.

**Product Attributes**

When marketers have enough foreknowledge to ensure that there is a potential market for their product, and that the correct product use is communicated effectively, there is a better chance of success. The next step is to create a physical product that will appeal to local consumers. Here many marketers fail to recognize influential cultural
factors, and the product fails to reach its sales potential. One popular example is the case of global brand Nike, Inc. On a new line of Nike Air shoes, the company used what resembled Arabic script. According to Arab consumers, the script resembled the word “Allah” and was highly offensive to the Islamic religion, particularly since the name was used on shoes that were most likely going to be covered in dirt and eventually thrown away. Nike was forced to apologize for the logo (Ricks 57). A remarkably similar case led to more extreme results. In Bangladesh, the introduction of Bata sandals resulted in a riot leaving fifty people wounded. Again, the logo on the sandals, this time intended to be a stylish drawing of three bells, resembled the word “Allah”, and was protested by fundamentalist Muslims. The government subsequently banned the sale of the sandals (Herbig 2).

The case of Mattel’s popular Barbie doll is an excellent example of how cultural factors can require a change in product attributes. Barbie was marketed in Japan with little success. Mattel later licensed a Japanese company, Takara, whose survey revealed that the Japanese thought that Barbie’s breasts were too big and her legs unrealistically long. Japanese Barbie was made over to include brown hair and eyes, and sold 2 million within two years. According to an executive at Takara, dolls in Japan are a reflection of what girls want to be, and so the doll had to look more Japanese than the original version. When Barbie was introduced in India, the idea of a boyfriend for Barbie was unacceptable, so Ken did not accompany her. However, since brothers and sisters in India are a more important concept then in some Western societies, Mattel created Mark as Barbie’s brother for the Indian market (Jain 228).
A quick look at the sale of American board games cross-culturally also illustrates the variability that marketers must account for. Trivial Pursuit failed in Japan because participants felt that getting the answers wrong was a loss of “face”, a highly valued concept in that culture. War games do poorly in Germany. Successful games in Germany are usually relatively complex with thick rulebooks. Monopoly seems to overcome most cultural barriers; the game is available in twenty-five languages including Russian, Croatian, and Hebrew (Lamb 122).

Proctor and Gamble (P&G) is one of the world’s largest international manufacturers of consumer products, and invests time and effort into uncovering cultural factors to maximize product success. In efforts to increase sales of their Pampers diapers in Japan, P&G spent years researching Japanese diaper usage habits. They discovered that Japanese parents are very concerned with keeping their babies clean, and they change their children’s diapers far more often than Americans do. In response, P&G devised Ultra Pampers, a more absorbent diaper that keeps the child drier and makes frequent changing a less messy task. They also discovered that in Japan, shelf and closet space is precious to housewives, so the company made the diapers thinner so the same number of diapers would fit into a much smaller box. Today Ultra Pampers is the market leader in Japan (Jain 227).

Out of the many variables that marketers must deal with, taste is perhaps the one that varies the most across cultures, as the earlier example of Campbell Soup illustrates. Food manufacturers must be especially aware of this variation and develop a suitable adaptive strategy. In Rio de Janeiro, consumers are used to butter that is slightly rancid from the tropical heat. Manufacturers Unilever and Anderson-Clayton learned that to sell
margarine successfully in Rio, it should have a slightly rancid taste (Jain 224). PepsiCo, who owns the Frito-Lays snack division, caters to local tastes in many different countries and regions. They have a shrimp chip venture in Korea and a squid/peanut snack for Southeast Asia. PepsiCo also introduced cheeseless Cheetos in China because the Chinese do not like cheese; instead a seafood-flavored variety was introduced with great success (Herbig 46).

One cultural factor that is often overlooked but surprisingly influential on consumer behavior is color. American society does not place much emphasis on product color in terms of symbolic meanings, but definite associations exist. For example, American men often view pink as representing femininity, and marketers generally would not market a pink product towards a male segment. However, consideration such as this is rarely given to international products, although many cultures place a much higher emphasis on color symbolism than do Americans. In China, the most popular color is red, denoting happiness. Black also elicits a positive response, denoting power and trustworthiness. Green denotes adventurousness in Japan, but in Taiwan a man wears green to signify that his wife has been unfaithful. In France, red is thought of as the most masculine color, as opposed to the blue Americans associate with masculinity. In China and Japan, gray is associated with inexpensive products. In many parts of Asia, white represents death, mourning, or sorrow, a much different view than Americans have of the color. Vendors in Hong Kong dip white eggs in tea to change the color to brown. New England brown eggs, which are produced by Rhode Island Red hens, have a natural advantage in Hong Kong, and sold $25 million in 1994 (Herbig 26).

Packaging
Color also plays a role in another very important marketing aspect, that of packaging. In terms of the marketing mix, packaging is grouped together with the product. In practical terms however, the packaging is a separate entity, in need of its own tactical strategies and also in need of cultural adaptation.

As mentioned already, color can have the same effect on packaging as it does on the product itself. Other similar symbolism must also be used with caution. A purple flower symbolizes death to a Brazilian while yellow flowers represent death or disrespect in Mexico (Ricks 33). The feminine products brand Always features a dove, which symbolizes peace and serenity in American culture. In Japan, the dove is a symbol of death (Herbig 102). An analogous example would be a product featuring a skull and cross-bones marketed to Americans. An Indian company, M.P. Been Products, Ltd., has been using the swastika symbol as a company logo on many of its products. It is a sign of good luck and is perfectly acceptable to have on packaging in many Asian societies. However, its manager decided to launch a new beer called “German Pilsner”, which was not met with much approval in combination with the packaging (Ricks 30). Similarly, the use of a six-pointed star on a certain soft drink packaging offended Arabic consumers who mistook the decoration for pro-Israeli sentiment.

The last example featured the unintentional use of another country’s national symbol. However, marketers may often employ such symbols to gain the trust of a local culture. This tactic has backfired many times when marketers fail to consider how the symbol is viewed in the culture. Putting the national flag on a product package may be one tactic marketers use to gain credibility in a foreign country. However, some countries have such pride in their national symbol that they will not buy a product with
the flag featured on it if they know that product will eventually be thrown in the garbage or otherwise misused.

Numerology and superstition also plays a part in many cultures. This is a concept generally not used in American product marketing, but that can be seen in the absence of the thirteenth floor in many American buildings. Similarly, the number four is bad luck in China and Japan, because it has a similar pronunciation as the word for death. A U.S. golf ball manufacturer met with limited success selling golf balls in Japan packaged in groups of four (Ricks 32).

In a very interesting and well-known example, the idea of education and literacy rate in a culture has a startling effect on consumption. In areas of high illiteracy, often the product has a picture of its contents on the packaging. Baby food manufacturer Gerber introduced its product in Africa with its existing packaging, featuring the trademark picture of a baby on the label (Herbig 102). African consumers were confused, if not horrified.

Packaging serves two main purposes: to promote and to protect the product. The preceding examples have all been associated with promoting the product aesthetic attributes of the packaging. However, functional aspects of packaging are also a major concern to international marketers. Packaging size, weight, shape, and material are all important factors to consider, and many of these are influenced by local culture. Coca-Cola introduced 2-liter bottles in Spain without much prior research. They discovered that Spanish refrigerators happened to be smaller than those of other countries, and 2-liter bottles could not fit (Herbig 36). Whereas Americans prefer to buy mayonnaise and mustard in glass containers, consumers in Germany and Switzerland prefer tubes (101).
The Japanese do not like items packaged in cans, because many consumers walk to the market and so do not want to carry heavy items home (45).

In fact, the Japanese consumer offers an interesting illustration of culture's effect on packing strategy. The Japanese object to spending money of superfluous packaging, although the strategy can actually greatly increase sales in America. When Lego introduced a “Bunny Set” promotion, in which the toys resided in a bunny-shaped storage case, the Japanese viewed it as a waste (101). Herbig points out other examples of the Japanese emphasis on packaging and appearance of products:

The product must be wrapped and tied in the right way. Specific kinds of strings must be used for specific items; the presentation is as important as the product itself. The typical Japanese consumer will not purchase a product that is not well wrapped; a poorly packaged product conveys an impression of poor quality. Packaging...is expected to be aesthetically pleasing as well as functional. Lever Brothers sells Lux soap in stylish boxes because more than half of all sop bar purchases in Japan are made during the two gift-giving seasons (winter and summer). The packaging, how a company gives the message, and the execution cannot be overemphasized. The Japanese feel that if a company does not go to the trouble of presenting its ideas properly, then how can its products be any good? (103).

Using this example, it is clear to see that cultural values and sense of aesthetics can greatly influence the purchase behavior in a given society.

Product and Brand Name
Perhaps the most prominent feature of product packaging, or in some cases the product itself, has not yet been mentioned, and deserves a thorough analysis. This is the product or brand name, and brings into question for the first time the idea of linguistic variation. Two famous examples of linguistic blunders can be found in virtually every international marketing textbook, and whether they are entirely accurate or they are marketing myths, they still effectively communicate the importance of linguistic consideration. One is the case of Chevy introducing the Nova in South America. “No
va” in Spanish means “doesn’t go.” The other case involves global brand Coca-Cola. When Coke first introduced its product in China, promoters of the brand frantically tried to come up with a string of Chinese characters that could reproduce the sounds of the brand name. The words they came up with translated literally into “bite the wax
tadpole.” However, Coke was able to alter the pronunciation slightly to form the phrase roughly meaning, “may the mouth rejoice.” (Figure 1)

= K'ou = Mouth, hole, pass, harbor
= K'o = (as above)
= Lè = Joy, to rejoice, to laugh, to be happy

Figure 1. Chinese characters used to represent the name Coca-Cola. (“Bite the Wax Tadpole”)
Linguistic areas of consideration in international marketing fall under several different categories. One is simple translation or misinterpretation oversight. These types of mistakes are easily prevented with proper research, however there is an extensive list of companies who failed to properly assess the meaning of their product’s name in a given culture. Olympia reportedly tried to introduce a photocopier in Chile with the name ROTO. In Spanish, “roto” means “broken”, and in Chile specifically “roto” is the word used to delineate the lowest social class (Ricks 39). Puffs introduced its line of facial tissues in Germany only to learn afterwards that “puff” in German is a colloquialism for whorehouse (41). Ford, one of the biggest multinational corporations, failed to do proper research before introducing a low-cost truck named “Fiero” into South America. The name in Spanish means “ugly old woman” (40). To put these mistakes into a domestic perspective, a Chinese company marketed playing cards in the U.S. with the name “Maxipuke”. “Pu” and “ke” are the two Chinese syllables that make up the word “poker”, however the negative English connotations are understandable (Ricks 42).

Another linguistic aspect of product or brand naming that marketers must be aware of is pronunciation. Although humans across cultures are born with the same innate ability to produce sounds, some languages utilize specific sounds that never developed in the speech set of another language. For example, there is no “L” in the Japanese alphabet, and so brand names like Nestle are difficult to pronounce (Hendon 134). In Brazil, where Portuguese is the most commonly spoken language, Mountain Dew is difficult to pronounce. Since its introduction in southern Brazil at the end of 1981, the beverage has been working on the pronunciation problem with a mnemonic

Finally, marketers must consider the cultural values and meaning associated with a word, beyond its mere literal or colloquial translation. For example, a joint venture between the state-controlled tobacco monopolies of five countries to market a new brand of cigarettes with the name “Champagne” enraged French champagne producers. They greatly value the name “champagne” and the cultural meaning attached to it, and were concerned with the integrity of the name when associated with health risks such as those caused by smoking (Ricks 45). Another example is the marketing of Diet Coke abroad. In France, Diet Coke is called Coke Lite because the term “diet” is restricted due to medical connotations and suggests poor health. Similarly, Coca-Cola changed Diet Coke to Coke Light in Japan because Japanese women do not like to admit to dieting and in Japan the idea of diet implies sickness or medicine (Herbig 98). The country-of-origin effect also comes into play here. Simply having a product name imply a foreign origin can have an effect on its appeal. In the U.S., France is often associated with elegance and style; China and Japan are often associated with mystery, etc. These associations can have a positive effect when used for the right products or brand names. Likewise, in some foreign countries an American brand name or product name is likely to increase sales, due to perceived associations with quality, modernity, and progress.
The channels of distribution are of great importance to international marketing. Deciding where to sell and how to get the product there in an efficient manner are difficult decisions for the marketing manager. Most of these decisions are based on logistic and economic factors. However, there are still opportunities for culture to come into play.

Burkhalter makes an interesting point about the relationship between local culture and the decision where to sell the product: "If the relations between seller and buyer exclusive of the act of purchasing are more important than product attributes, then it might be wiser to retail one's product in a greater number of smaller stores than in fewer larger stores, where prices may be lower but customer-merchant relations more attenuated" (116). A related example is that of perfume in France. A U.S. cosmetics manufacturer tried to sell its product in France solely through a chain store, in order to achieve maximum market exposure while holding down marketing and distribution costs. However, in France "parfumers", small local retailers specializing in cosmetics, are the opinion makers and most manufacturers give exclusive franchise to two or three local parfumers. Word of mouth promotion is vital, and consumers rely heavily on the opinions of these parfumers. When the company angered the parfumers by bypassing them, the parfumers discredited the U.S. product and damaged the manufacturer's reputation in France (Ricks 125). The idea of shopping at local, more specialized stores is a common concept and must be taken into consideration. Although supermarkets have become more common in France, the traditional method of shopping at several different specialty stores still appeals to many consumers.
Channels must differ by country and culture because where consumers buy certain goods also differs. For example, contact lens solutions can only be found in stores that sell eyeglasses in Germany, but can be found in most drugstores in France. Baby foods are predominately distributed through pharmacies in Italy, but Germans can buy them in grocery stores (Herbig 186). Sometimes marketing managers might not have to only decide which type of retail outlet to sell the product in, but whether to sell it in a retail outlet at all. In the U.S., Avon uses door-to-door and other direct selling approaches to enable men and women to make buying decisions in the privacy of their own homes and workplaces. However, in Europe women considered calls by Avon representatives as intrusions on their privacy, and the representatives felt uncomfortable selling to friends in their homes for a profit (Jain 229).

Adaption to local values and environments is not always easy but it crucial to getting the product to the consumer.

**Promotion**

The goal of promotion is to inform, educate, persuade, and remind target markets about the benefits of a product. Many forms of promotion exist, although the one that comes to mind first and foremost is advertising.

Advertising can run into much of the same cultural roadblocks as the product name and packaging. Imagery and copy (the text of an ad) must conform to local norms for the ads to accomplish their objective. The various connotations of colors and symbols must be considered and the ad text must avoid any embarrassing translation errors. When
the popular Dairy Association "Got Milk?" campaign expanded to Mexico, the Spanish translation was equivalent to "Are you lactating?" (Ricks 86). Also in Mexico, a Braniff Airlines campaign advertised that passengers could sit in comfortable leather seats. However, "sentando en cuero" translates to "sit naked" (Sandhusen 101).

Visual imagery in advertising can sometimes draw on local culture to a greater extent than does packaging imagery. Advertisements often depict situations or conversations that the consumers can hopefully relate to. Often times, however these situations are not culturally appropriate. When advertising a U.S. cologne in North Africa, a man and his dog were used in the ad, but Muslims consider dogs to be either signs of bad luck or symbols of uncleanness (Ricks 49). A P&G ad for Camay soap in Japan featured a woman bathing when her husband enters the bathroom and touches her. This was seen as a distasteful invasion of privacy (Herbig 114). A Johnson & Johnson ad in Poland featured a woman in a hospital who just had a baby. However, Polish women only have babies in a hospital if they or their babies are seriously ill (115).

Another interesting example of a company's ignorance of the culture to which they are marketing is that of a laundry detergent company in the Middle East. Their advertisement featured soiled clothes on the left, the box of detergent in the middle, and clean clothes on the right. This ad would be perfectly comprehensible in our society, but in that area of the world, people read from right to left. Therefore the ad confused many consumers (Ricks 58).

While considering the values of a target market, it is also important for marketers to remember who makes the purchasing decisions in the household. This power dimension varies across cultures. In patriarchal societies, men control the money
regardless of who makes it. Men will make virtually all purchasing decisions beyond
basic household foodstuffs (Curry 43). The company Singer, a manufacturer of sewing
machines, learned that in the Middle East the husbands were the buyers and they were not
interested in saving their wives' personal effort. Singer changed its message to Arab men
that sewing machines would make their wives more useful and better able to attend to a
husband's needs (Herbig 85). In matriarchal societies, consumer goods advertisements
should be directed at women, but big ticket items (cars, etc.) will be male-oriented (Curry
43).

Another consideration is where and how to advertise. The preferred and most
effective forms of media also vary cross-culturally. In some rural parts of India,
ambulant theaters that show movies from village to village are the only form of
advertising. Southern and Western Europeans like to watch TV while in Northern and
Central Europe, radio is the most important medium (Herbig 124). In Mexico, billboards
are effective because Mexicans enjoy being outside, and also problematic traffic provides
a more captive audience to billboards (125).

Finally, cross-cultural differences are evident simply in the style and tactics that
advertisements employ from country to country. French advertisements use more
emotional appeals than do American advertisements, but American ads contain more
information cues. Sexual appeals are more frequently found in French ads then in
American ones; likewise with humor. Puns and jokes predominate in French advertising.
French and Taiwanese ads are more likely to make explicit promises that are beyond he
product's realistic capabilities. American commercials are more information-laden than
British, which tend to be more entertaining, have understated humor, and rely heavily on
visual cues. The Germans tend to applaud technical perfection rather than a sense of fun. In Japan, self-assertive communication style, e.g. the “hard” sell is often seen as arrogant and embarrassing for the company. Their ads are designed to appeal to emotions, produce good feeling, and create a happy atmosphere. (Herbig 116-117).

These vast differences in style and taste make it clear that different cultures require different advertising strategies to effectively persuade consumers.

Price

Pricing is traditionally the most flexible of the four Ps, and usually the first to change if a product is meeting with difficulty. Pricing seeks to put a value on a product, and as values change across cultures, so must pricing strategies. What is perceived as valuable in one culture may not be valuable in another. Many companies have attempted a standardized pricing strategy, only to have it break down due to country-to-country differences.

The country-of-origin effect once again plays an important role in international product pricing. An American product in Europe may be perceived as equivalent to local products and thus must be priced similarly. In developing countries, however, it could be perceived as a premium product with higher quality and could therefore demand a higher price.

Consumer reaction to product pricing differs across cultures, and is an extremely interesting phenomenon. In the United States, many products are priced at numbers ending in .99. This is a common pricing strategy that assumes consumers will
underestimate the actual price because of the slightly lower number. This strategy has not been thoroughly proven to work, but some research does seem to indicate that consumers are more likely to buy a product that is, for example, $9.99 instead of $10. Additionally, consumers are more likely to perceive an odd numbered item ($9.99) as on sale and perceive an even numbered item ($10) as higher quality (Lamb 642). These perceptions are psychologically and culturally based, and so the same strategy might not be effective in another culture. Another psychological and cultural factor that can pertain to price is the idea of a "just noticeable difference". The just noticeable difference is the minimum amount of change in a stimulus that can be perceived by an individual. In terms of pricing, the just noticeable difference is the amount of change required in a price before it affects the consumer's perception of the product or intent to buy. Again, this amount can vary from individual to individual, let alone culture to culture.

Consumer response to price change (beyond the just noticeable difference) can be positive or negative. Price reductions are a way to increase sales in our culture by making the product more affordable. However, in other cultures a price reduction is viewed with skepticism as to the quality of the product. When P&G introduced Cheer detergent in Japan, they discounted their initial price, a common practice in the U.S. This only lowered its reputation in Japan. P&G also discovered that once it discounted its price, it very hard to return to original retail price (Herbig 207). Initial pricing is extremely important in Japan, and Japanese marketers spend as much time discussing the right price for an item as they do discussing the product or promotion. The price must be what the consumer expects to pay, and once a price is established, it is considerably
difficult to raise it. The company must expect the price to be bound for several years (205).

This negative view of price reduction combined with the country-of-origin effect make the case of Johnnie Walker whiskey in Japan an interesting one. Johnnie Walker Black and Red and Chivas whiskies all had high status image in Japan. They were expensive in bars and clubs, prized as gifts, etc. In an attempt to take market share away from Chivas, Johnnie Walker dropped the price on its Black label brand. Sales dropped drastically – Japanese consumers saw the price reduction as related to quality problems with the product, and so the whiskey suffered a drop in status. Black label brand fell out of favor and is still today on the cheaper end of the drink menus. Red label maintained its high-end status symbol (Herbig 206).

IV. Ensuring Cultural Sensitivity: Market Research

Tailoring the above marketing tactics to foreign consumers and avoiding cultural blunders cannot be done without proper research. However, international market research is costly, in terms of financial support as well as time and effort spent. Many companies bypass this extra effort in order to streamline their costs and minimize the time it takes to bring the product to market. There are more often than not the same companies who make the marketing errors mentioned in the previous section. However, even companies who conduct preliminary market research are not guaranteed a culturally sensitive product. International market research itself can bear many cultural biases, both in the methods by which it is conducted and the interpretation of results.
Primary data collecting could prove the most useful in assessing cultural variables. However, several cultural pitfalls can have an adverse effect on the research itself. One type of primary research is interviewing, which can gauge cultural values and consumer needs and preferences if conducted properly. When in person, these interviews can suffer from communication barriers in which the respondent doesn’t understand the questions asked, either because of translation error or foreign concepts. Also the respondents may not feel comfortable answering questions to strangers. Herbig writes, “Respondents may be unwilling to share information because they feel the interviewer may be a government agent, a state of affairs most often found in newly freed countries in areas such as Eastern Europe or any states of the former Soviet Union” (72). Certain cultures put a heavy emphasis on privacy, and so interview questions are often deemed inappropriate. On the other extreme, in some cultures respondents will give responses that he or she thinks will please the interviewer, rather than the candid response needed. This is referred to as the “courtesy effect”, or hospitality bias (73). Another roadblock in interviewing and conducting surveys, especially by mail or telephone, is infrastructure. Often the mail system or telephone system of developing countries is inadequate to obtain the desired sample number of respondents.

Another popular form of primary research is focus groups, which are used extensively in the United States as a way to determine the potential success of a product or service. Even in the United States, however, numerous studies have pointed out response biases in focus group research. Often group members are hesitant to disagree with other group members or vocalize their opinions. In many other cultures, this
phenomenon is magnified to the point where focus groups must consist of a group of family and friends who are willing to voice their opinions in each other's presence.

In one example of successful primary research, Campbell Soup conducted a study of Italian food preparation. They discovered that Italian homemakers were spending approximately 4.5 hours per day in food preparation in contrast to the less than 60 minutes a day spent on food preparation by U.S. homemakers. This difference reflects a cultural pattern. To assess the potential for prepared soups in Italy, but in such a way as to reduce response bias and bring any cultural variables to the surface, the study asked a random sample of Italian homemakers the question, "Would you want your son to marry a canned soup user?" 99.6% of the respondents answered "no" (Keegan 139). Campbell's certainly avoided a disaster by identifying the cultural factors working against their product.

Secondary data may be easier to obtain, but tends to be less culturally sensitive. Quantitative data can be useful in terms of segmenting the market based on demographics, or possibly psychographics, a combination of values, personality, and lifestyles that marketers use to predict buying behavior (Hoyer and MacInnis 416). The concept of culture, however, is a very intangible one and is not easily quantified. Some secondary data does exist that may be useful to marketers in terms of cultural aspects of international marketing. Most of these data, however, are the tools of anthropologists rather than marketers. An example is ethnography. Burkhalter writes, "Much information is readily available in extent ethnographies and awaits only the application of cross-cultural comparisons to make it applicable to marketing problems" (114). These ethnographies can be found, for example, in the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF).
“Content analysis of buyer behavior in different cultures can be done on data drawn from these files, and this can be used, for example, to test assumptions concerning the extent to which companies marketing their products internationally should tailor their advertising to particular cultural areas” (117).

This raises the idea that normal marketing research techniques may be inadequate for cross-cultural studies, and that the techniques used by cultural anthropologists may be more effective. Costa and Bamossy discuss the lack of cultural focus of marketing researchers: “Developing taxonomies, describing institutional frameworks, and working with aggregated data, investigators ignored a dimension that is at the heart of all enterprises and that makes all economic activity possible: human relationships” (viii). Burkhalter offers a solution that makes a compromise between anthropological and marketing research: “Often a combination of approaches is the most rewarding. An ethnographic study involving participant-observation, depth interviews, and questionnaire surveys could be coupled with social psychological experimentation using participants drawn from the same group already studied. This would allow a more comprehensive view of the factors influencing purchasing decisions” (116). Methods as extensive as these, however, are rarely appealing to marketers who are looking to enter their product in the market as quickly and inexpensively as possible. To conduct research such as this costs time, money, and manpower; to not do so can cost much more if cultural factors are in direct opposition to the product in question. This is the decision that managers must make when looking to enter a foreign market.

V. Marketing as Agent of Cultural Change
In recent years, aided with availability of mass media, marketing has transcended a mere process for fulfilling consumer wants and needs, and has instead become a reflection of culture. Our material culture consists of new and past marketing innovations, and subsequent innovations therefore change our existing culture. Terpstra and Sarathy write, “Perhaps the most subtle role of international marketing is that of agent of cultural change. When the firm introduces its new products into the market, it is, in effect, seeking to change the country’s material culture” (101).

An excellent example of how marketing can change our own culture is that of Perrier. Until recently, the culture of the U.S. did not include drinking bottled water. The relative cleanliness of tap water made paying for water an unnecessary expenditure. Perrier, the French bottled water firm, decided to reposition its product from an expensive imported bottled water to a lower priced, healthy alternative to soft drinks. Behind a large-scale marketing campaign, the product became a success, prompting other companies to join in on the bottled water market (Keegan 142). Today bottled water is a part of U.S. material culture. Another good example is that of the “pet rock”, a fad that is often considered a part of the material culture of 1970s America. Marketing was almost 100% responsible for this modification to the culture, as the product filled no need whatsoever. One of the greatest challenges in successful marketing is making the consumer want something that they do not need.

In the previous examples, the products introduced were not necessary, but by most people’s standards they did nothing to negatively affect American society. When marketing across cultures, however, companies must realize that introducing products can
possibly disrupt that culture in an unexpected way. Such disruptions range in the extent of their effect, but some can be fatal. When Nestle introduced infant formula in developing countries, it had already proven its product’s effectiveness in affluent industrialized countries. In some Third World countries, however, where technology and material culture differed greatly, the way the product was used or misused led to a number of infant deaths. The product was of just as high a quality as it was in the U.S. — rather it was the misapplication of the product by customers in a very different cultural setting that caused harm (Terpstra and Sarathy 101). This is obviously an extreme example, but illustrates the importance of considering the effect of a new product on another culture. Terpstra and Sarathy write, “The firm must consider carefully the legitimacy of its role as an agent of change. It must be sure that changes it introduces are in accordance with the interests of the host country. The people may resent the firm’s market penetration as a form of “Americanization” or imperialism” (101).

Ethnocentrism and the self-reference criterion play an important role once again. In American society, as in several other cultures, change is held identical with positive progress, and so marketers often fail to consider the implications of change in another culture. The words “New!” and “Improved!” appear prominently on many American products, whereas in other cultures these concepts might have negative associations.

Terpstra and David note that in a traditional society, many aspects of social life are closely interrelated, and that change in one aspect can affect many others. They use the following anecdote as an example:

To the Chinese, the introduction of power machinery meant that he had to throw over not only habits of work but a whole ideology; for dissatisfaction with the
ways of his fathers in one particular meant doubt of the father's way of life in all
its aspects. If the old loom must be discarded, then 100 other things must be
discarded with it, for there are somehow no adequate substitutes. (122)

Another case in which a new product might cause a social disruption is if it somehow
benefited a particular social class without benefiting another. This could lead to a shift in
the dynamics between social classes - an unintentional but profound outcome of a new
product innovation.

VI. Conclusions and Implications

This paper has attempted to determine and illustrate the extent to which culture
affects the success of international marketing endeavors. Above and beyond that, it has
shown that marketing and culture are two inextricably bound concepts; culture has an
enormous impact on the marketing of products internationally, and marketing can have a
profound effect on culture.

Social, psychological, and cultural impediments on the part of marketers, such as
ethnocentrism and the self-reference criterion must be analyzed and overcome before any
success can be achieved for their products. Cultural sensitivity training and/or the
utilization of marketers with an anthropology background as well as a business
background could prove very useful for multinational corporations.

Xenophobia and nationalism, often used as a backlash to increased globalization,
are cultural stumbling blocks that marketers must also overcome, or otherwise leave
alone. Cultural barriers to market entry may be in place to protect the country from the
sort of disruptions discussed above, and any attempt to circumvent them with clever or unscrupulous marketing may have adverse effects on the culture in question.

The debate between global standardization and local adaptation of a multinational marketing campaign is central to the ideas discussed in this paper. If culture played no part in the success or failure of marketing efforts, then standardization would be a common and successful practice. As examples have clearly illustrated, however, so many factors vary from culture to culture that developing one marketing effort that can conform to these different needs and wants is a virtual impossibility. A system of adaptation, or a compromise of "glocalization", must be utilized to ensure that the product is acceptable at each cultural venue.

The marketing mix is at the center of all marketing strategies. Each aspect of the marketing mix can be directly affected by cultural differences. The product itself is especially susceptible, as some product concepts are not applicable to certain cultures or are not valued in the same way. Problems also arise with the physical product, including product attributes, packaging, and naming. Methods and channels of distribution can be affected by local purchasing habits and customs. Where customers like to purchases goods and where these goods are typically sold can vary between cultures. Promotion, in the form of advertising, has the opportunity to persuade consumers to want or need a certain product, but also has the opportunity to be completely misunderstood or even offensive. Messages in an ad, whether in the form of visual imagery or words, can be easily misinterpreted based on local cultural values, language, and other factors. Different forms of media for advertising are effective in different cultures, as are different styles and appeals. Pricing is the easiest element of marketing to change, but only to a
certain extent. Change in pricing can have effects on foreign consumers that bargain-hunting Americans would never expect. Some American companies have found that what constitutes a low price in America may account for a large part of the income of a family in a developing country. In an excellent illustration of how pricing and other marketing elements combine with cultural norms, McDonald's set its prices in Beijing relatively low, even compared to its own prices in other countries. However, a meal still cost a sizeable portion of a Chinese family's weekly income. As a result, the Chinese wanted to savor and prolong the experience of eating at McDonald's. Consequently, the intended fast-food experience was abandoned for longer dinner affairs, and McDonald's limited seating capacity was no longer profitable (Herbig 216).

The only way to ensure that a product and its related elements of the marketing mix conform to local wants, needs, and tastes is to conduct preliminary market research. Interviews, focus groups, and product sampling are all possible ways to determine if a product will be well received by the local culture. However, as noted these methods themselves can have biases attached to them, and the most effective way to ensure proper results is to employ anthropological techniques such as ethnographic observation and other fieldwork or secondary data gathering. Using local intermediary companies to aid in distributing, advertising, and research is a good way to ensure that local values are considered in the marketing process. Testing product names and advertising messages to prevent mistranslation or other linguistic errors should be relatively easy with the help of native speakers. Using a technique called "backtranslation", one party translates a message into the desired foreign language, and another party translates the message back into the original language, checking for any incongruities (Ricks 155).
Research methods such as these are crucial to the continued success of multinational corporations. As globalization increases and more companies seek to enter the foreign market, the competitive advantage goes to those companies that take cultural differences into consideration and can introduce products that most closely align with local consumer’s needs. In order to gain this advantage, international firms must take an anthropological perspective. Companies are learning from their past mistakes, but rather than doing a post-mortem analysis on a culturally based marketing blunder, they should attempt to proactively conform their products to the local environment. Until they do so, the Chevy Novas and “wax tadpoles” of the marketing world will continue to haunt them.
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“Bite the Wax Tadpole.” <www.snopes2.com/cokelore/tadpole.htm>