

HOW TO COMMUNICATE YOUR BRAND ON THE WEB: STANDARDISE OR LOCALISE?

Brand Strategy (2004) Feb 52-53 under the title:
“Chinese Web Whispers”

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How To Communicate Your Brand On The Web: Standardise Or Localise?

INTRODUCTION

Global communications refers to the design of a standardised message to be broadcast in the same fashion simultaneously to different markets across the world. The World Wide Web is a truly global medium that could make such global communications a reality. However, differences between countries and cultures present a complicated challenge to global brand communications. For example, English language remains as a major barrier in countries such as China and Japan even though it is widely accepted as the primary language of the Internet.

There are three main dimensions that any communication message needs to balance: message, format and context. Context refers to the specific factors that exist in the environment of target market. Both the message and its format must be adapted according to the new context. Localisation is the process of converting both the content and format of the communication developed in the brand's home country to a form that is linguistically and culturally acceptable in the target country. *Do companies adopt standardised strategy in the web communication or do they localise in the different markets and cultures?* This remains a global-local dilemma.

THE STUDY

16 global brands were selected from the two lists compiled by Interbrand. Five websites were obtained for each brand: the global website of the brand plus four country-specific websites (UK, China, Hong Kong and Taiwan). In total 711 websites were found and 135 were studied. As each website contains large amounts of

information the study is limited to the home page only. This is justified, as the home page, like the window display of a shop or the front cover of a book, is the first and most important page that a viewer comes to see. Each website is examined using content analysis to identify whether there are significant differences in terms of content, layout and style of their home pages.

THE FINDINGS

The results of the study are shown in Table 1. There is strong evidence that global companies have realised the importance of the web in branding communications and committed huge resources. The sheer number of country-specific websites a company may possess is staggering: Ford (131), Toyota (114), P&G (70), and Coca Cola (34). It is interesting to note that the two English versions of home pages are similar and so are the three Chinese versions. But there are significant differences between the English and Chinese versions. The contents of FMCG brands' home page tended to be more localised than those of car and technology brands. No website was found to be 100 percent standardised or localised. The average score of 4.5 seems to indicate that most brands adopted a mixed approach in their web communication strategy.

LOCALISE: WHAT AND HOW?

Philips's websites are the most standardised: the content is almost same, so is the layout and colour. It is mainly a flat information site (except in Pakistan). All the Philips websites used the football World Cup as the central theme during June 2002. After the England team's defeat the theme was changed next morning only on the UK site but remained unchanged on other sites. L'Oreal's websites used almost the same content and layout but different background colours. They also replaced western

models with local faces on some Asian sites. While Philips, Nokia and Kodak used the same slogan on all their websites McDoald’s preferred to use different ones in different markets:

- Australia *Mac your day.*
- Germany *Every time a good time.*
- Hong Kong *More choices, more joyfulness.*

Unilever’s websites are the most localised. Its website in Chinese bears little resemblance to the UK site with a totally different content, layout and style. Its name is translated in Chinese as 联合利华 (means *United Benefit China*) and it even has a localised logo. One important difference is that Unilever in the UK has separate consumer-oriented websites for its major brands, while in China the only website combines both corporate and consumer communications. Local issues require localised response, for example, the Chinese site provides consumers with tips on how to identify counterfeit products. Comparing the following opening paragraphs on the two websites. The message in Chinese is a rather passionate appeal that tries to win the local people’s favour while the UK message is just a plain factual statement.

Unilever in the UK	Unilever in China
<p>Unilever in the UK has its headquarters in London and companies and facilities across the country. Collectively, these represent the UK arm of Unilever plc, one of the world's leading consumer goods companies. Every day, millions of British consumers choose from Unilever's range of branded products. We have annual UK sales of over £2.3 billion, and our range of household-name brands includes UK market leaders such as Persil, Flora, Magnum and Lynx.</p>	<p>Unilever has always been committed to establishing strong roots in the Chinese market and culture, bringing its sophisticated technologies and worldwide experience to local consumers as well as developing a range of high quality products. Unilever is, as it has always been, a good citizen in the Chinese society, willing to take an active part in the cause of public welfare, contributing to the community it lives in, supporting and helping the Chinese people as they stride forward along the road of high economic growth</p>

KEY FACTORS

Branding communications on the web, like those using the conventional media, is so complicated that there is no single formula to guarantee success. The study, however, has identified three groups of factors that influence the brand's communication strategy as well as its eventual effectiveness (see Table 2). There are company specific and communication specific factors on which the firm can decide, for example, what purpose or role the web communication would have in the integrated marketing communications mix (IMC), whether the website is a flat information site or an interactive one and who the website is targeting at. Nokia is a case in the point. The opening messages on its websites were tailor-made to the target audiences: government decision makers and opinion leaders in the Mainland China and the end users in Taiwan:

Nokia in China	Nokia in Taiwan
Only by cooperating with trust, can we make constant progress. Nokia has long been committed to becoming the best partner in China, to make its contribution to the development of mobile society in the country. "Hand in hand together we create the future". This is our promise.	Dear good ladies, how long haven't you spoilt yourself? Nokia is organising "Nokia Lady's Heart Action Day" in June. All the ladies come along and enjoy yourselves.

The differences between the global brand's home market and foreign markets are the most important factors that affect communication strategy. Given those differences in culture, language and market conditions, the question is not about whether to adapt, but what and how to localise the communication while still maintaining brand consistency and benefiting from the global brand equity. Effective web communications in the foreign market requires the company to take cultural issues seriously and specially design the website to appeal to the local audience. Companies that ignore cultural sensitivity of the local market have to pay a heavy price as Toyota learnt recently in China. In two of its ads, one ad depicted a traditional Chinese-style stone-carved lion - a symbol of Chinese culture- saluting a moving PradoGX. The other showed a Land Cruiser pulling a cumbersome Chinese-made truck on a bumpy road. This had caused a huge outcry in the Chinese public; some first voiced their protest over the Internet. In a country where most other types of media are still under the government's firm grip, the Internet has become a powerful and yet less controlled channel in China. Toyota initially denied these charges but was later forced to withdraw both ads and made a public apology.

Table 1. Summary of the Study

Brand	No. of websites found	No. of homepage examined	S-A* score (1-9)	Findings
Coca Cola	34	10	6	Same theme, localised content and layout. Red (except black in France)
McDonalds	24	15	6	Similar content, same colour, different layout and slogans.
Unilever	3?	3	8	Only three sites found. Fully localised Chinese site.
P&G	35 (70)	16	7	Similar content, localised layout. Localised brand sites. No UK site.
L'Oreal	16	16	4	Same content, same layout except in Chinese, different colours, local model used.
Philips	44	16	2	Same content and layout (except Pakistan), information site
Sony	65	9	7	Different content, layout and colour.
Kodak	41	10	3	Similar content, same slogan, difference in layout
Nokia	35	5	7	Localised content, layout but same slogan.
Ericsson	51	5	5	Similar content, layout varies
Toyota	114	10	6	Similar content but different layout. Some locally owned sites.
Ford	131	9	7	Different content, layout and slogans.
Peugeot	61	5	2	Similar content and layout. Local picture used in background. No US site.
Disney	22	6	2	Similar content and layout
TOTAL	711	135		
Average S-A score			4.5	

* 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Standardisation

Adaptation

Table 2 Factors influencing the communication strategy

Market specific	Company specific	Communication specific
Language	Purpose & objectives	Corporate v brand
Cultural values	Product characters	Target audiences: influencer v end user
Consumer needs and tastes	Brand positioning	Function of website: e.g. flat v interactive
Other environmental factors	Country of origin effect	Web design considerations: layout, style, etc.