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Problems of intercultural communication in professional activity

We are living in modern fast-developing world. Nowadays globalization and the Internet allows us to interact with a completely different contingent of people, whether in the professional field or in the entertainment industry. However, we should not forget that globalization does not erase all cultural features. Sometimes we have to deal with someone who has completely different culture, different from ours. To establish understanding and make a fruitful collaboration with such person, we need to consider differences in the value system of a partner, to understand all the nuances of the culture inherent to this man. Misunderstanding and ignorance of the most common modern cultures and their peculiarities can lead to misinterpretation of actions or speech, misunderstanding, and curious situations.

Now we can consider freelancing as the most modern and popular way of working. Freelancer is a private specialist. Freelancing is especially common in such areas as journalism, law, computer programming, architecture, design in all its forms, translation, photography and videography, various expert and advisory activities. The most common way to offer freelancer services is Internet. That is why the customers could be totally different people, even from other continents, and consequently belonging to other cultures.

For example, a freelancer who works in design sphere received an order to design a batch of greeting cards for the holiday Fitr Eid al-Fitr. The customer was some citizen of the United Arab Emirates. From the fact that the freelancer had no experience in creating art products for the customer, who professes Islam, he probably could make impermissible and even abusive mistakes. For example, to portray a happy family which celebrates holidays, or depict some funny animal. It is prohibited for Muslims to create any image of man or animal to avoid possible idolatry and polytheism. Muhammad and his followers zealously destroyed the idols in Mecca and elsewhere. Another reason to prohibit images of living creatures according to Sharia is to prevent a person with their creativity to compete with Allah. Islam believes that the creation of a living being is Allah's mission, He is the Creator. Man, if he depict a living creature (sculpture or portrait), will never be able to animate it and set in motion.

Thus, freelancer may commit some mistakes because of his inexperience and incompetence and ignorance of the basics of modern culture. Therefore it is important to have knowledge about the features of different cultures, in our information age, especially if you are dealing with foreign clients or employees at work.

This situation is more than hypothetical and we may show real life examples of intercultural misunderstanding in wider areas, such as the fashion industry, advertising, television series.

Even the professionals can make mistakes. In 1994 the famous fashion house Chanel has released dress with the image of the Arabic text on the corset. This caused a big scandal, as it turned out, the inscription on the dress, was taken from the Quran. Such way of using quotes from the holy book was insulting for Muslims. The designer of the fashion house, Karl Lagerfeld was shocked by this news, because he believed that the inscription on the dress quoted some love poem. However, he immediately apologized. [1]

Another incident occurred with Nike and organization CAIR (Council on American-Islamic Relations) in 1997. Cause of the incident was a design of the Nike sneakers. The logo on the sneakers looked like the word «God», which caused outrage among Muslims. The company Nike apologized and promised to withdraw all products that might lead to such incidents. «We hope that Nike will be now aware of the sensitive market that they have and the global issue that pertains with the shoes,» said Nihad Awad, executive director of CAIR. [2]

Such confusions could be avoided if the manufacturer knew the basics of cultural specificities of its consumers. That is why the large companies that focused on the broad markets should deal with great

responsibility and they must think carefully about their products. Because it is meant for a wide range of consumer and therefore they will be judged by people with different mentalities and points of view.

Such misunderstandings appear not only with Islamic culture, but also with other cultural groups. Real example of the failure in the market because of cultural illiteracy is the case occurred with cosmetics company Revlon, which factories located in 22 countries. The company has launched a perfume with the camellias aroma. In Brazil, these flowers are used for ritual purposes, and therefore the sale of these perfume had no success. [3]

Also, it is possible to assume the situation with a freelancer who was never interested in Japanese culture, received an order for souvenirs from a Japanese customer, postcards for example. Freelancer designed a postcard remembering all the associations with Japan. It depicts bowl of rice with chopsticks which vertically stuck into it. For people who are not interested in Japanese traditions such postcard would not seem strange or unpleasant. But for Japanese people such a postcard would be completely unacceptable, because in Japan, a bowl of rice and chopsticks stuck in it, is traditionally part of the meal that accompanies a funeral service. Of course such confusion will most probably lead to loss of client.

We could avoid such errors, if the manufacturer and the performer approach more responsible to work, select materials, which appropriate to the needs of the consumer, and not contrary to its traditional cultural contexts.

As has been previously said, misunderstanding and ignorance of the features of different cultures can lead to various conflicts. As an example we can consider the popular media franchise “Pokemon”, which was created in 1996 by Satoshi Tajiri. The images, which shown in this cartoon, has caused a number of claims related to religion, racism, cruelty to animals, gambling, etc. For example, some images of pokemon were perceived in the USA as the embodiment of racial stereotypes associated with African Americans. Namely, it was pokemon Jynx, with black skin and big lips. For Japanese mentality such comparisons are not typical. The Japanese people did not see anything offensive in this kind of images. However, in the American version of the series they still had to recolor the character purple. [4]

Attitude to racism and sexism is different in different cultures. There we can give an example with our freelancer who has received an order from the USA to create of video about the different categories of citizens, who are driving a car. Freelancer decided to base this video on a Russian stereotype that women drive car worse than men. This video will not cause the disturbance in Russia. But in the United States and European countries such video would be offensive and derogatory to women. Therefore, to avoid such confusion, you should pay attention to the peculiarities of mentality and value system of the consumer.

Peculiarities of different cultures are important aspects in various types of professional activities, more so if the job includes direct contact with the customers of different cultures, which is frequent situation for free-lance designers. The development of communication systems facilitated globalization, but it can't erase the cultural features of different nations. To avoid misunderstanding, curious situations and conflicts they should be taken into account.

References

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