

Cross-Cultural Minefields

John K. Nixon

Many years ago, I owned a Chevrolet Nova, one of the early attempts by General Motors to produce a smaller and more economical car. It turned out that the car never sold well in Latin America. This may well have been because ‘no va’ in Spanish means ‘doesn’t go.’

In fact, the auto industry is littered with examples of marketing fiascos of this kind. The Korean company Kia faced a backlash in Ireland when it introduced the Provo. Provo is the slang name for the Provisional IRA, a militant offshoot of the Irish Republican Army. Ford’s Pinto is the Spanish name for a small spotted pony. It is also Brazilian Portuguese slang for a diminutive male sex organ. Similarly Mazda’s Laputa translates to the Spanish for prostitute when the syllables are separated.

There are numerous other examples of marketing slogans that got lost in translation. Pepsi’s “Come alive with the Pepsi generation” emerged in Chinese as “Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the dead.”* An Italian maker of battery chargers included their registered internet domain in their website, [\[genitalia.com\]\(http://genitalia.com\), which has unintended English language associations.](http://www.power-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

Parker pens were surprised when their sales pitch, “It won’t leak in your pocket and embarrass you,” came out in Spanish as “It won’t

leak in your pocket and make you pregnant.” A classic case of misconstruing the message was Perdue Chicken’s claim that “It takes a strong man to make a tender chicken.” The Spanish version read “It takes an aroused man to make a chicken affectionate.”

The translation of documents, brochures and signs can often produce hilarious results. A sign in English in a Bangkok drycleaners read: “Drop your trousers here for best results.” Another in a Belgrade hotel elevator: “To move the cabin, push the button for wishing floor. If the cabin should enter more persons, each one should press a number of wishing floor. Driving is then going alphabetically by national order.”

In a Yugoslav hotel, guests were assured: “The flattening of underwear with pleasure is the job of the chambermaid.” A sign in English at a Budapest zoo warned: “Please do not feed

**A sign in English
in a Bangkok
drycleaners
read: “Drop your
trousers here for
best results.”**

the animals. If you have any suitable food, give it to the guard on duty.” Finally, a helpful sign in the window of a Rome tailor’s shop advised: “Women can have a fit upstairs”!

Logos and symbols can also cause problems. A Canadian company shipped a load of paper products by sea to Yemen, a conservative Islamic country. They were surprised when the stevedores in that country refused to unload the shipment. Each carton of paper was illustrated with a colour photograph of the company’s employee of the month, a young smiling secretary wearing a miniskirt, which offended the local religious and cultural norms.

Misunderstandings of this kind are not confined to the written word. US and British negotiators found themselves at a standstill when the American company proposed that they “table” some key points. In the US, “tabling a motion” means to not discuss it, while the same phrase in the UK means “to put it on the table for discussion.”

Lack of forewarning can sometimes result in both parties being embarrassed, even mystified. The CEO of a British publishing house travelled to Brazil for meetings with a business associate. This was his first visit to Latin America. On arrival he was greeted by his Brazilian host with an effusive Latin style hug and kisses on both cheeks. Taken aback, the Englishman reacted in confusion by planting a kiss directly on the man’s lips!

A classic case of getting it wrong occurred during the search for Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attack on New York. The US State Department had thousands of matchbooks produced, each bearing the image of Bin Laden and a message in Arabic script announcing an award for his capture. These were to be distributed in rural areas of the country.

The thinking was this: The majority of rural Afghans had no access to radio or the internet, but research showed that a high proportion were smokers. Heavy smokers may look at a matchbook when lighting up twenty or more times a day. Up to eight additional people are exposed to a single matchbook, as they are borrowed or shared. Every time they pulled a matchbook out of a pocket they would be reminded of the bounty being offered.

For a number of possible reasons the campaign proved ineffective. Firstly, the majority of Afghan peasants were illiterate and thus would not understand the written message. Then the reward cited on the matchbooks was missing a zero. It read \$500,000 instead of \$5,000,000. Add to that the fact that the website on the match-

books was incorrect, so that anyone contacting it would receive an error message.

To top it off, the background on the matchbook cover was green, a colour that Muslims associate with Islam; thus many Afghans would interpret it to mean that Bin Laden was a holy man.

All of this goes to show that, when trying to get your message across in a foreign country, it is vital to do your homework on the cultural side to ensure that you are not offending the consumer with ill-chosen slogans or embarrassing mistranslations.

It also pays to proofread the final product, and it helps if you keep your kisses on target!•

John Nixon is a professional engineer living in West Vancouver. Most of his career has been devoted to consulting engineering in mining and metallurgy. He holds a B. Eng. degree from McGill University and an MBA from York University.

*Of undetermined veracity: <http://www.snopes.com/business/misxlate/ancestor.asp>

**[A] helpful sign
in the window of
a Rome tailor’s
shop advised:
“Women can
have a fit
upstairs”!**