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Industry Focus

## The intersection of translation and advertising

*Christa Tiefenbacher-Hudson*

It seems that every article about international advertising and translation has to provide ample examples of translation blunders for the amusement of the reader. While plenty of funny stories are out there – some true, some simply urban myths – they have all circled the globe and the internet so many times by now that they have become more annoying than amusing. So, you will not find any gratuitous examples of poorly translated advertising slogans in this article, only examples that help illustrate an important point. Since this article is intended for professionals in the translation sphere rather than the uninitiated monolingual, I would rather focus on offering useful information that the reader can apply to the daily challenges of establishing meaningful communication between marketers and consumers – in particular, American marketers and international consumers of products made in the United States.

### What makes advertising work?

My entry into the world of advertising came through translation about twenty years ago. I had translated a few books, both fiction and non-fiction, but needed to expand my activities to the more commercial sector of the translation business. People who work in the field of literary translation know that one of the key objectives of the literary translator is to reflect the author's voice as closely as possible so that the translation pres-



ents a mirror image of the original. In a way, the audience of a literary translation is of no concern to the translator. It is all about staying true to the source.

Not so in advertising, where the focus is on the audience with whom we want to establish a rational and emotional connection. By definition, advertising is essentially any form of message that is designed to influence the perception of a product and elicit a specific response or change in behavior by the message recipient. We want to persuade the audience to act favorably toward the product



– to get them to try it, fall in love with it and buy it again. In the process we have plenty of good things to say about the product, but that doesn't mean much if we don't understand how the audience, the potential consumers, relate to the product (or other products like it), what value they assign to it, what meaning it has in their lives, and why they should believe what we tell them in the first place.

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Effective advertising, therefore, often starts with an examination of how and at what level of a brand

hierarchy a product relates to its consumers. The higher up in the hierarchy the connection takes place, the more emotional and less functional and rational the relationship becomes. The more a product assumes value beyond its functional attributes, the more it becomes a brand that evokes loyalty.

As the brand becomes a “love mark” in the hearts and minds of the consumer, we no longer have to sell, for example, a sweet, flavored, caffeinated soft drink. We can sell the feeling of “coming alive with the Pepsi generation” instead.

This particular slogan surely came about after much research into the attitudes of American consumers about different products in the soft drink category and their relationship with Pepsi in particular. The slogan was very memorable, and Pepsi used it for many years because it captured the attitude and aspirations of their primary audience segment: teenagers, young adults and those who want to feel youthful and energetic. Attitudes such as the obsession with youthfulness are shaped by our American culture which, simply put, asserts that men and women can – and should – control nature, time and aging. Other cultures do not share this outlook and may, in fact, place a higher value on humans being part of nature and in harmony with natural processes, leaving them quite prepared to give age its due.

What, then, of the translator charged, for example, with adapting an outdoor advertisement for Pepsi featuring the “coming alive” slogan to Chinese? If he or she was not given a proper briefing as to the creative intent of this advertising message and if the advertising agency did not do its homework with regard to how the brand positioning and message had to be adjusted to different cultures and market environments, then it should not have come as a surprise that the Chinese slogan, as it appeared on billboards across Taiwan, promised to “bring your ancestors back from the grave” or some similarly outrageous message.

Was it simply a case of a bad translation? Maybe not. Over the past twenty years I have come to realize that it often takes a lack of understanding of foreign languages and cultures on the part of the advertiser as well as a lack of courage to challenge the advertiser’s conventional ignorance on the part of the translator to produce bad translations in advertising.

There is also a certain naiveté at play, a belief that great advertising is all about the genius of the copywriter and maybe the creative director. The other players who contribute to making great advertising possible don’t often make the curtain call: the marketers who have carefully studied the competition and the marketplace; the account planners who have conducted endless consumer research; the media planners who have identified all the right communication channels; and the production artists, producers and art buyers who bring all the ideas to fruition. It takes a great line-up to produce great advertising, not just a copywriter or creative director, however brilliant. Yet after these well-funded teams have done their stuff, we too often think we can turn it all over to a single translator to do the work of an entire team.

## The role of the translator in international advertising

Translators like to be heroes, too. So we may take on work whose scope goes beyond our capabilities, albeit with the best intentions. We think we understand the source text and know the target audience (after all, they are Chinese, Germans, Spanish and so on just as we are). We get our creative juices flowing to translate that tagline or headline and become the foreign language copywriter. Many of us are quite capable of doing so; however, without the support

of a team to prepare the foundation and define the direction for our work, we can easily get into trouble. In advertising, knowledge of the source language and our linguistic and creative ability to interpret that language is rarely enough.

A few years back, we were asked to review a print ad that a French-Canadian trade magazine had translated for a local Minnesota client, Scientific Angler, a division of 3M Company. Our parent company, Martin-Williams Advertising, had created the English campaign, and we were quite familiar with the creative strategy and concepts. The target audience was flyfishers, people deemed to be among the most passionate of anglers, who practiced their sport with obsessive compulsion and valued the right tools that matched their drive for perfection.

Based on these audience insights, the agency had developed the tagline “The method to the madness” for their campaign. The Canadian magazine translated the tagline literally as *La méthode à la folie*. While there was nothing wrong with the linguistics of the translation, it completely missed the idiomatic meaning of the English as well as the creative intent of the original, which was meant to capture the single-mindedness of flyfishers. Instead, the tagline reflected a complete lack of understanding of this audience, who were not a bunch of fools, but people passionate about their sport. Our revised tagline, *Donner matière à passion* (which translates as “Giving substance to passion” or “Giving [the right] stuff to passion”), came out of our knowledge of the creative strategy and was based on an audience profile that shared the commonalities of the flyfishing subculture beyond national borders.

It was experiences such as these that led to our proprietary process of the Six Degrees of Transcreation, which blends the disciplines of translation and advertising, integrating the translator into an international communications team and process. More on that later.

## The international business of advertising

The international advertising business is dominated by a limited number of mega-agency networks with hundreds of offices around the world that are set up to serve equally large multinational companies with offices around the world. The local agency offices usually have full-service capabilities, including creative, marketing, and media planning/buying, and they manage multimillion dollar budgets based on the size of their domestic advertising market. Typically, a lead agency works with the corporate client and develops the global branding and creative strategy; the local agencies are, in turn, responsible for country/market-specific executions as well as other tactical programs that address specific market needs and opportunities. Because of how the labor is divided between the global lead agency and the local agencies, there are few opportunities for translators to get involved.

The next tier of advertising agencies includes the mid-size, often highly creative shops that may or may not be independent. Even if they belong to one of the large advertising holding companies, they usually do not have offices in other countries and have to rely on other agencies for services that allow them to extend their clients’ advertising programs to international markets. Translations are often among the services they require.

The same is true for the smaller independent agencies that serve more local or regional clients who may, nevertheless, seek out opportunities abroad.

In addition to categorizing the complex world of international advertising by the size of agencies and their clients, it helps to apply two additional sets of criteria: Who are their audiences and

how centralized or decentralized are their advertising strategies? In other words, are we dealing with consumer vs. business-to-business advertising and do they pursue global vs. local approaches to advertising?

Based on the audience-centered approach that advertising, by its very nature, has to take, we would be right to assume that it is easier to develop and execute a global advertising strategy when we are targeting international business audiences than when we are targeting consumer audiences. Physicians, for example, share many similarities with their colleagues in other countries when it comes to their needs and expectations of a new medical device or drug. We would also use primarily rational appeals to persuade these audiences of our product's benefits and advantages, which makes the advertising less susceptible (but by no means immune) to culturally inappropriate messages. And the media channels available to distribute our advertising messages to B2B audiences are often international or global by design, allowing us to leverage the same creative executions across different media outlets.

Consumer audiences are much more differentiated, not only from one country to another but also within the same national marketplace. Advertising and marketing have reached a level of consumer analysis that enables us to slice our audience into ever finer segments, based on age, income, social status, education, ethnicity, cultural norms and values; attitudes towards contemporary issues; preferences for certain product features; how the audience lives, works and spends leisure time; and what the audience watches, reads, listens to and so on.

How similar or different the advertising strategies and executions for a consumer brand are from one country to another therefore depends very much on the degree of similarity or difference between the audience segments we are trying to reach and other key market parameters such as the native culture, socio-economic climate, available marketing and media channels, and the competitive set.

The possible variations seem endless. There are nevertheless a fair number of global consumer brands for which global branding strategies make sense not only from a financial point of view, but also from a marketing perspective. For example, Kimberly-Clark decided to use the same creative strategy for its advertising campaign for Cottonelle toilet paper in all its global markets (even in those markets where the product is sold under a different name) after carefully identifying the shared values their consumers associate with the brand. The ads and commercials are executed locally, following a global template.

High-end performance cars such as BMW also use global branding strategies as they target very similar consumer segments across international markets. While BMW presents a globally branded image on its website, for example, there are subtle differentiations in how they emphasize different attributes of their brand in different markets without abandoning the essence of their brand. Their German slogan is *Freude am Fahren* ("the joy of driving"), which speaks to the sensual appeal of the BMW design and

driving experience. Adaptations of this slogan are used in most of their international markets. In the United States, however, they sell "the ultimate driving machine," which beautifully captures the emotional relationship between the driver and the car as an object of his or her desire in a culture where automotive technology is identified with power and control.

Last but not least, we need to consider the one essential part of advertising I have not really addressed yet: media. Without media channels to deliver the message, there would be no advertising. And after all, the media are the message. There have been absolutely radical changes in the type of media available for advertising. Traditional media, such as print ads, television commercials, billboards and so on, are being eclipsed by the truly global medium of the worldwide web on the one hand and highly targeted media on the other hand that speak to the consumer individually – such as text messages transmitted to your cell phone when you walk by a store that sells products that complement what you are wearing. These messages are brought to you courtesy of tiny chips imbedded in your clothing or other personal items that are scanned and trigger the emission of the messages.

So, when it comes to new media, technology enables both very global approaches to advertising (as documented in John Yunker's *Global by Design* newsletter) and very localized/individualized advertising that is tailored to neatly defined consumer segments. It remains to be seen how adaptable the direct media strategies are when it comes to international markets and cultures as well as different legal environments.

## Blending the disciplines of translation and advertising

Having worked at the intersection of translation and advertising for over 20 years, I have come to love and admire the art and science of advertising. Its creativity never ceases to amaze me. And it is a highly enjoyable challenge to preserve the integrity of great creative work as we adapt it to other languages, cultures and markets. In doing so we, as translators, have to share the same objectives as the team who created the original advertising: inform, persuade and motivate our audiences.

This reminds me of conversations I have had repeatedly with different clients. In discussing the translation of an ad or similar promotional piece, more often than not I'm told that they need "just a translation" and all we really have to do is make sure that we don't offend our audience – with a bad translation, that is. After establishing ambitious objectives for the US advertising, all we have to do when it comes to the international ads is not offend our audience. The only answer I can give to such a request is: "How low do you want to set the bar?" If we cannot be reasonably sure that the translated ads will achieve the same objectives as the English ads,

we may as well not waste our client's money. But it's not a matter of a simple translation.

To ensure the successful outcome of our work, we have developed a proprietary

*Too often we turn over a project to a single translator to do the work of an entire team.*



BMW is a good example of global branding.

process that we call the Six Degrees of Transcreation. It offers a set of criteria for adapting advertising and marketing materials for diverse international and ethnic audiences and helps us determine the degree of differentiation that is required to ensure the relevance and effectiveness of the material.

The six degrees include the brand essence and values associated with the brand; the origin of the brand; the brand positioning in the marketplace; the media used to promote the brand; the creative expression of the brand (in words and visuals); and the language of the brand. We examine these criteria against the information we have about the target market(s) and culture(s). All essential findings and considerations are captured in a creative brief that informs the work of our language teams. Unless, of course, we find that the advertisement should not be adapted in its current form because, for cultural or other reasons, it has no relevance to the target audience and/or would not achieve the desired objectives.

To illustrate how this process is applied, here is a case history based on the work we did for Polaris Industries over a number of years. We were responsible for adapting their snowmobile campaigns, designed for the US market, to French for use in the Canadian market. Among US marketers there is a prevailing assumption that Canadians are just like us, so we can use the same advertising; we just have to translate it for those French-speaking Quebecois. Of course, being quite aware of the differences between Canadian and US culture that prove this assumption wrong, our task was to determine the degree of differentiation required between the US and French-Canadian campaigns, and then execute the campaigns accordingly.

The first of the six degrees, the essence of the brand, is something we have to understand but cannot change. So, the French copy needed to portray the same dynamic brand personality that embodies passion, fun and a sense of adventure.

The second degree, the US origin of the brand, had a positive effect on the perception of the product, but there was no need to play it up or down any more than it was in the English copy.

The Canadian Polaris marketing team provided the direction with regard to the third degree, the positioning of the brand in the marketplace against the competitive set. Among the imported brands, Polaris had a premium position, while the native Ski-Doo from Bombardier was the market leader. This meant that copy had to be adjusted as needed if it did not reflect the Canadian market positioning.

The fourth degree, the media channels, were the same as in the United States; the campaign relied on dealer promotions, direct marketing and collateral materials distributed in the stores supported by broadcast and print advertising. One important piece of information emerged from the examination of the marketing criteria: the gender mix of our Canadian audience was different than in the United States because it contained more female riders. This fact, combined with other differences in the cultural context of our audience, would influence how we adapted the campaign components.

As we looked at the fifth degree, the creative expression, we determined that the original campaign's powerful visuals expressing the Polaris lifestyle and riding experience would resonate well with Canadian consumers. We decided, however, to modify the copy in several of the pieces to appeal to the different gender mix of our audience. Instead of focusing on male-oriented individuality, for instance, the French-Canadian copy emphasized the shared passion



The French-Canadian Polaris campaign focuses less on the macho and more on shared passion.

and dream of escape. And there were always a few campaign components such as seasonal sales promotions that had to be changed completely because they were based on US seasonality – the Fourth of July or Thanksgiving – and had no relevance to the Canadian calendar and culture.

When it came to the sixth degree, the language, it may have been implied that it would have to change, as prescribed by law. But we felt it was vital for the Polaris brand that the use of French was not just perfunctory, and we made sure that the brand truly spoke the language of their audience, the Canadian outdoor enthusiast.

## The translator as part of the team

In the transcreation process I have described, the translator becomes part of a multidisciplinary and multinational communications team that combines multicultural marketing, art direction and translation. To be sure, it does require more creative writing skills in the target language because the translator essentially becomes an in-language copywriter. Not every translator would feel comfortable in that role or would be qualified to assume it. All of us engaged in this work, however, have found it to be very rewarding.

Our approach to blending translation and advertising may or may not be unique, but it enables us to provide a more strategically driven and precise language product, and it enables our clients to meet their communication objectives to inform, persuade and motivate their diverse international audiences.

As for the role of translations in international advertising going forward, the international advertising business will surely continue to evolve. Whether the trend will be towards more international mega-agency networks or a growing number of independent agencies, there will always be a place for translations that are able to mitigate cultural and market differences and find just the right expression for our clients' advertising messages – no matter what language. **M**

## Suggested Reading

Simon Anholt: *Another One Bites the Grass: Making Sense of International Advertising*

Felipe Korzenny and Betty Ann Korzenny: *Hispanic Marketing: A Cultural Perspective*

Clotilde Rapaille: *The Culture Code: An Ingenious Way to Understand Why People Around the World Live and Buy as They Do*

Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner: *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Diversity in Global Business*

John Yunker: *Global by Design* (E-Newsletters)

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