LOCARIA

CULTURAL ADAPTATION

THINK LOCALLY TO WIN GLOBALLY

How global brands can protect creative impact across markets

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INTRODUCTION

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR THINKING LOCALLY TO WIN GLOBALLY

There's nothing a marketing team fears more than an ad that doesn't land with its audience, except maybe an ad that missteps and goes down badly, leaving the brand worse off reputationally than before the ad was created.

And what's one element that heavily impacts perception of an ad across different markets - culture. Culture impacts what consumers buy, but also how they perceive ads and, by proxy, the advertised brand. And these perceptions can vary a great deal between markets, in ways that can either reduce resonance, or even worse, offend and put off local audiences.

Creating separate ad concepts for each market is not always feasible, for cost and also brand governance reasons and while a very generic ad concept might be "safe" to use in all markets, it loses an opportunity to show local consumers and clients that the brand really knows each market.

The question becomes how can a brand and its creative teams create emotionally resonant and effective ads that keep a consistent core, but also flex to local audience needs and expectations? How does a brand embed a local culture in its advertising while keeping its core DNA intact?

These days, brands are working with creative agencies based in one market (quite often where a brand is headquartered), to create advertising that will be used across multiple markets, cultures and languages. This can make sense as it allows a synergy between brand management teams and the creative teams - one point of contact and centralised brand assets and brand platform. It's a very practical choice in many ways.

Most ads are products of a specific culture, and creatives and brand managers will unwittingly bring their own cultural assumptions, shortcuts and symbolism to the table. Understandably, their focus will be on creating the best possible impact in their own culture and language, and that's the metric an ad is initially judged on. However, this can sometimes mean that the ad is not best positioned to go global, proves difficult and time-consuming to adapt for new markets, or worse, risks unintentionally offending or alienating consumers and clients.

It's crucial to ensure that concepts are pressure tested for all markets they'll be shown in, as in the snapshot culture of the internet, where images and moments can be taken out of context and spread around the globe in a matter of seconds, ads need to be culturally sensitive and teams aware of their global impact. Brands understandably fear negative reactions and are sensitive about reputational risk, as well as wanting ads that hit home wherever they are shown. For this reason, it's important to integrate local in-market experts to provide cultural insights to shape global ads.

THE COST OF GETTING IT WRONG

For any ad there are two unwanted outcomes. One is that the ad has a negative impact. An ad that does not respect local cultural norms, conventions and expectations, that culturally "puts its foot in it", can sour brand reputation for years. This can have an impact on revenue, from product sales to share price.

Recently, Swatch faced a boycott in China after an ad featuring the racist "slanting eyes" gesture went viral on social media. In 2021, BMW sparked outrage in the UAE by showing footballers breaking off from singing the national anthem to jump into a fleet of cars. This was considered disrespectful of the anthem in Emirati culture. When launching in Spain, Coors ran into issues with the translation of their "Turn it Loose" campaign slogan, as they accidentally used slang for diarrhoea. Notoriously, HSBC ended up abandoning a rebrand as the "Assume nothing" slogan had been translated as "Do Nothing" in multiple markets. They then had to spend $10 million on a more global and translation-friendly tagline of "The World's Private Bank".

These days, brands need to be even more careful about the risk of accidentally offending people. Ad concepts stripped of context and short, edited clips can spread quickly on social media.

In our digital-first world, responding to a cultural backlash takes days, or even years, whereas it only takes a few minutes for the damage to happen.

The second unwanted outcome is that the ad has no impact at all. An ad that feels detached from a culture can fail to move the needle and end up as a waste of creativity and budget. When Pampers first launched in Japan they used imagery of a stork, which is associated with babies in the English-speaking world. In Japan, however, this didn't resonate because in the Japanese fable, babies arrive on a giant peach, not carried by a stork. So the cultural shorthand of one market did not work in a market that doesn't share that same shorthand.

Ensuring your ads respect cultural sensitivity is important. An investment in cultural consultancy and concept testing as part of ad development, can save a lot of hassles and dollars later down the line. As the saying goes, you can't lock a stable door after the horse has bolted.

WHERE BRANDS GET IT WRONG

1. ASSUMING TRANSLATION IS ENOUGH

On a basic level, ad copy needs transcreation into local languages, not just translation. Transcreation is short for translation + creation, which indicates the essential creative aspect of the process. A message can be linguistically correct and still fail to resonate. The core challenge is not just accuracy but preserving intent and emotional effect at scale. Depending on the copy, this can prove more or less straightforward. Sometimes concepts, play-on-words, humour and tone work brilliantly in one language, but will not resonate in the same way in other markets.

A great ad in English can fall at the first hurdle if the play on words it is built on only works in English. Similarly, acceptable tone and style can vary between markets; in some countries, a playful tone might be suitable for healthcare-adjacent products, while in others, a more serious tone is expected for anything from the healthcare aisle. By building off the master asset and bringing their own creativity and culture to the table, a transcreator ensures the meaning and the impact are effectively conveyed for their market.

2. NOT FACTORING IN LOCAL CULTURAL CONVENTIONS

Local cultural conventions and religious and social norms can impact how an asset is perceived. What is normal and expected in one market can differ a lot in another. For example, appropriate clothing can vary between cultures - a shot of someone in a swimsuit advertising a holiday is standard in some countries, but in some Middle Eastern markets, this would be very taboo and inappropriate.

Staying on visuals, Japanese ads sometimes feature anime or cartoon characters for a broad range of products, from heat patches to whiskey, but in other markets, a cartoon character immediately signals a product for children (or maybe cereal at a push). What is acceptable vs. inappropriate varies between cultures, and it is best for a brand to adhere to local conventions, so the focus stays on the brand and the product.

WHERE BRANDS GET IT WRONG

3. ASSUMING ONE CREATIVE IDEA WILL RESONATE GLOBALLY

Aside from the potential for offence, non-adapted ads can also create a distance or lack of resonance with global audiences, a sense of "this isn't really for us". For example, a bride in the US will wear white but in many countries in Asia, white is associated with death instead, so the choice of dress colour might convey an unintended idea.An ad that uses the buzzer sound familiar to US audiences from basketball games will not resonate in the same way with audiences in the UK where a soccer whistle is the more common audio shorthand for end of play. The Hertz ads featuring Tom Brady are an excellent example of an ad that does not carry over, given that Tom Brady, while considered a GOAT in the US, doesn't have that instant recognition and star power in other markets

Choice of cast and actors can also affect the perception of a brand as local or international, and this matters to some local audiences more than others. Some markets are used to seeing casts that mirror their own ethnicity, whereas some markets expect a more multi-ethnic cast, and expectations tend to reflect local population makeup.

For some brands, products and markets, positioning a brand as local rather than international may be beneficial, and implies a deep understanding of the market. For some, being an international brand is part of their appeal or standard in their sector, and the choice of cast and visuals can play a role in this positioning.

4.DISREGARDING AI BIAS

There's also a lot of debate around the use of AI in creative work, and while there are lots of competing assessments and arguments for and against, there should be attention paid to how AI content adapts to different cultures. AI is built on specific data, often primarily from English and English-speaking cultures, so there is a risk that it generates content that is based only on the existing cultural norms of the cultures it draws data from, which may be in conflict with the cultural norms of other countries.

Local human insight is key to catching cultural missteps, especially when content is created not just with the conventions and assumptions of one culture, but also based on AI's interpretation of those conventions and assumptions. A dual layer of review is needed for the initial assets, both from the cultural perspective of the creative who is prompting the AI and from the perspective of the cultures in which the asset will be used.

THE STRATEGIC SHIFT

Without a clear plan to address the pitfalls of global assets, campaigns can run into:

- Cultural Friction: the ad misses the mark, causes offence, or has no local resonance
- Operational Friction: rejections arise at the last minute, budgets balloon and production timelines are impacted by reactive adjustments

There are two approaches agencies can take to ensure they are producing culturally appropriate ads and campaigns.

1. Upstream Insight Integration: cultural insights and audits are integrated proactively into the campaign and asset ideation stage
2. Downstream auditing: a reactive cultural audit of the master concept and assets before production

UPSTREAM INSIGHT INTEGRATION - DEVELOPING A GLOBAL ASSET

The ideal scenario is an upstream strategic service that embeds local experts and local cultures in the initial ideation and development stages. This means creatives can:

- Develop a creative that is adapted and pressure-tested for multiple markets, from the get-go
- Determine the strategic direction needed to internationalise the assets

Based on the initial local cultural insight, creative teams can determine if a global ad, which is more culturally neutral and that broadly works for all markets, is best, or if there are enough differences between markets so that a culturally nuanced concept, with assets heavily tailored and adapted for each market, works best, taking into consideration any reshoots or editing required.

A culturally neutral ad has the advantage of only needing one master shoot, with small edits, local-language voiceover and on-screen text needed for each market. However, in some cases, the impact and resonance of a more heavily adapted ad, tailored to each market, may make the additional spend worthwhile.

On a practical basis, integrating cultural insight from ideation also helps minimise:

- Tension between HQ brand consistency and local authenticity, as both perspectives are at the table from the beginning
- Late-stage in-market stakeholder feedback that delays production, as these concerns can be anticipated and addressed ahead of time
- Increased cost due to reactive cultural adjustments, since these can be avoided or anticipated

Embedding a multi-cultural perspective from ideation helps develop the strategy and determine the most effective approach to adaptation.

DOWNSTREAM AUDIT - ASSET RISK CHECKS

If a brand has already produced a concept or asset, there's still time for it to undergo a cultural audit, where local experts can review the storyboards or mock-up, to check for cultural fit and flag adaptations needed to minimise cultural friction and increase local resonance.
Strategic use of local experts to review established campaigns and concepts to identify adaptations and gauge local resonance, means concepts and assets can be checked for fit with local cultures, and potential pitfalls and offence can be avoided.

While making adaptations may entail additional costs at this stage, it is worth it to ensure the asset makes an impact the way the brand wants to.

SNICKERS
A SUCCESS STORY

A successful campaign that has used both a global and locally adapted ad strategy is the long-running Snickers' "You're Not You When You're Hungry" campaign, which has run in over 60 markets since its inception.

What started as a Super Bowl ad featuring Betty White, went on to feature Russian prima ballerina, Anastasia Volochkova, and drove a big increase in earned engagement in Russia. In Australia, it pivoted to feature Alf from Home & Away dirt biking, and in China featured Yao Ming, the NBA superstar returning to his full height when he's had a Snickers. The local versions of the ads play on local icons and demonstrate how a core concept can be readily adapted to each market.

In 2025, one version of the ad featured Jose Mourinho as a hungry Viking, taking advantage of The Special One's international reputation. Recently, they have also shown how the concept can be adapted not only to different markets but also to different generations and online cultures, with a "Hangry Gaming" ad featuring Bukayo Saka (British footballer) and Angry Ginge (live streamer).

On the other hand, another series of Snickers ads features Mr. Bean and has run in 60 countries. This is an excellent example of a well-thought-out global campaign that allowed them to leverage global resources and budgets to create an ad that works effectively across multiple markets without significant adaptation required. Choosing a character who is globally known and infamously doesn't talk, is a strategic choice that allows a culture-neutral ad to resonate well across diverse markets with minimal intervention.

CONCLUSION

Whether a brand goes for a globally neutral ad that works in all markets or a culturally nuanced ad with local talent it's clear that creativity thrives when it engages with cultural differences.

You don't have to compromise your core brand DNA to resonate across borders. You just need to know how it translates. Not just the words, but in nuance, humour, and emotion. By embedding cultural insights from the start, you protect your production budget, safeguard your reputation and ensure your creative vision hits the mark every single time.

READY TO PRESSURE-TEST YOUR NEXT BIG CONCEPT?

Get in touch today to integrate expert cultural strategy into your creative pipeline. Let's make sure your message lands exactly where it's supposed to.

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