

## The Costly (and Humorous) Impact of Cultural Blunders

Having a poor understanding of the influence of cross cultural differences in areas such as management, PR, advertising and negotiations leads to damaging blunders. Neil Payne of Kwintessential highlights the sometimes humorous, often financial devastating consequences of cultural blunders.

It is crucial for today's business personnel to understand the impact of cross cultural differences on business, trade and internal company organization. The success or failure of a company, venture, merger or acquisition is essentially in the hands of people. If these people are not cross culturally aware then misunderstandings, offence and a break down in communication can occur.

The need for greater cross cultural awareness is heightened in our global economies. Cross cultural differences in matters such as language, etiquette, non-verbal communication, norms and values can, do and will lead to cross cultural blunders.

To illustrate this we have provided a few examples of cross cultural blunders that could have been avoided with appropriate cross cultural awareness training:

- An American oil rig supervisor in Indonesia shouted at an employee to take a boat to shore. Since no-one berates an Indonesian in public, a mob of outraged workers chased the supervisor with axes.
- Pepsodent tried to sell its toothpaste in Southeast Asia by emphasizing that it "whitens your teeth." They found out that the local natives chew betel nuts to blacken their teeth which they find attractive.
- A company advertised eyeglasses in Thailand by featuring a variety of cute animals wearing glasses. The ad was a poor choice since animals are considered to be a form of low life and no self respecting Thai would wear anything worn by animals.
- The soft drink Fresca was being promoted by a saleswoman in Mexico. She was surprised that her sales pitch was greeted with laughter, and later embarrassed when she learned that fresca is slang for "lesbian."
- When President George Bush went to Japan with Lee Iacocca and other American business magnates, and directly made explicit and direct demands on Japanese leaders, they violated Japanese etiquette. To the Japanese (who use high context language) it is considered rude and a sign of ignorance or desperation to lower oneself to make direct demands. Some analysts believe it severely damaged the negotiations and confirmed to the Japanese that Americans are barbarians.
- A soft drink was introduced into Arab countries with an attractive label that had stars on it--six-pointed stars. The Arabs interpreted this as pro-Israeli and refused to buy it. Another label was printed in ten languages, one of which was Hebrew--again the Arabs did not buy it.
- U.S. and British negotiators found themselves at a standstill when the American company proposed that they "table" particular key points. In the U.S. "Tabling a motion" means to not discuss it, while the same phrase in Great Britain means to "bring it to the table for discussion."

In addition to interpersonal cross cultural gaffes, the translation of documents, brochures, advertisements and signs also offers us some comical cross cultural blunders:

- Kellogg had to rename its Bran Buds cereal in Sweden when it discovered that the name roughly translated to "burned farmer."
- When Pepsico advertised Pepsi in Taiwan with the ad "Come Alive With Pepsi" they had no idea that it would be translated into Chinese as "Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the dead."
- American medical containers were distributed in Great Britain and caused quite a stir. The instructions to "Take off top and push in bottom," innocuous to Americans, had very strong sexual connotations to the British.
- In Italy, a campaign for Schweppes Tonic Water translated the name into "Schweppes Toilet Water."
- 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 Yugoslavian hotel: The flattening of underwear with pleasure is the job of the chambermaid.
- In a Bangkok dry cleaner's: Drop your trousers here for best results.
- In an East African newspaper: A new swimming pool is rapidly taking shape since the contractors have thrown in the bulk of their workers.
- Detour sign in Kyushi, Japan: Stop--Drive sideways.
- At a Budapest zoo: Please do not feed the animals. If you have any suitable food, give it to the guard on duty.

In conclusion, poor cross cultural awareness has many consequences, some serious others comical. It is imperative that in the global economy cross cultural awareness is seen a necessary investment to avoid such blunders as we have seen above. ✧

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*Following years of traveling, studying and working in the Middle East and Islamic world, Neil successfully completed a Masters at SOAS University, London in Middle Eastern Studies. Using his experiences in academia, translation, interpretation, teaching, lecturing and cross cultural training he established Kwintessential. Kwintessential was born out of the idea that the current world climate is in desperate need of cross cultural dialogue and aims to promote inter-cultural communication within communities, businesses and organizations. Visit Neil & Kwintessential at [www.kwintessential.co.uk](http://www.kwintessential.co.uk).*

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