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Remarkable or Modest? The Role Played by Culture in Advertising

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ONE OF THE PROBLEMS we have to solve in teaching our students is how to make their classroom activities relevant to the world around them and, wherever possible, to provide them with assignments in their final year of studies that both prepare them for their Masters dissertation and at the same time allow them to carry out research relevant to real people and the real world. In this article we describe an interdisciplinary and intercultural advertising project consisting of several interconnected assignments that meet these goals.

Profile of the Students

Our students are all pre-experience students following a four-year program in Business Communication Studies, including a full-time course of study and a research-based dissertation, which leads to a Master of Arts degree. In the European context, pre-experience students, who range between 18 and 22 years old, follow a course roughly equivalent to a US Bachelors and Masters combined. The program includes courses in foreign language studies (French, German, English, or Spanish), sociolinguistics and cross-cultural pragmatics, intercultural studies, and organiza-

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tional communication studies related to the international business context within which many of them will work. Many of our students enter their final year with language skills in their selected foreign language at an advanced or sometimes near-native level of proficiency.

Background of the Project

The project gives students an opportunity to think about how theory may be applied in practice to shed new light on a real life problem of interest to international business. It also draws on their foreign language skills as students produce advertising texts that are equivalent in their own language and culture and that of their target language and culture. Finally, it requires students to use their written communication skills in reporting in a convincing way on the decisions they have made once their investigation is complete. (Appendix A presents an overview of the assignments included within the project.)

The project starts in September, at the beginning of our students' fourth year of study. It lasts for a total of six weeks as part of a longer 13-week course in research methods in intercultural communication, and it is taught in parallel to a language skills course on academic writing. Following the course, from January onwards, the majority of students begin their research-based Masters dissertation, which generally takes from six to nine months to complete and which concludes their degree.

For the past two years we have run the project with five different tutorial groups, each concentrating on a different language and/or culture, i.e. Dutch, including the Netherlands and Belgium; English and the United Kingdom; French and France; Spanish and Spain; and German and Germany. Students work in pairs and are required to design, carry out, and report on an investigation into the impact of using cultural differences in creating an effective advertising campaign. At the end of the six week period, they hand in a report in which they discuss this investigation in an appropriate way, according to the conventions and standards of an academic article.

Theoretical Issues

Two main theoretical discussions underpin the project. The first is whether advertising campaigns should be standardized or adapted across different cultures (Levitt, 1983; Jain, 1989; Keegan, 1989). Our students are—or at least should be—familiar with these debates before starting the project as a result of previous courses in marketing and communication in multinational corporations.

The second discussion centers on how the different values held by different national cultures affect the success of an advertising campaign. For example, according to Hofstede's (1991) well known work on cultural values, in countries like the UK and the US, masculine appeals like monetary success, ambition, and the "live to work" ethic may be more successful than feminine appeals like modesty, caring, and a "work to live" approach to life; the reverse may be true for the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries. Our students enter the project with an extensive, if untested, knowledge of Hofstede's theory, and we have, therefore, chosen his work as an accessible macro-cultural theory that encompasses the European cultures on which we focus, and which may also be considered relevant to advertising. We introduce our students to several studies, specifically looking at the application of Hofstede's work in practice in advertising research (Han & Shavitt, 1994; Zhang & Gelb, 1996), and we use these to encourage a critical discussion of cultural theory and its limitations.

Part I: Theory into Practice

Translating these theoretical discussions into practical business applications is a big challenge for our students. The first three assignments in the project (and three weeks of the course) are designed to help them meet this challenge, as they require the students to refer to existing theory and to define an appropriate research question in their project planning, as well as to develop a critical awareness of the usefulness of theory, together with its limitations.

For Assignment 1, we provide students with approximately ten scholarly publications to encourage them to approach the theory

critically. They then use these as they familiarize themselves with the existing literature on cultural values in advertising and identify any methodological problems associated with it. For instance, specifically in relation to Hofstede (1991), we discuss at length the pitfalls of considering national culture as a watertight predictor of cultural values and the effect that this may have on the research findings in an investigation across two different cultures. We also introduce the students to Schwartz (1992) on individual cultural values as a useful addition or alternative to Hofstede's work, and we discuss with them how to combine both approaches within one research design and the reasons for doing so. (See also Hoeken & Korzilius [2002] for further discussion on the factors that should be taken into account in effective intercultural communication research.)

Assignment 2 asks students to define a relevant research question and any related sub-questions. We work closely with them in identifying a research-based motivation for their investigation (the why), on the basis of what they have read, together with their own specific aims within the project (the what). At the end of the three week period, students produce a first draft of an introduction—Assignment 3—according to the Create A Research Space (CARS) model provided by Swales (1990), in which they review the relevant literature, introduce their main research question and the motivation behind it, discuss why their work is relevant, both academically and practically, and then go on to provide a short overview of the aims of the project.

Part II: Language Skills and Culture

With their research approach defined, students then work with us in the design of advertising texts for use across different cultures. An initial assignment—Assignment 1—requires students to survey magazines designed for different target groups and, wherever possible, different cultures; identify the advertising appeals; and match the appeals to one or more of Hofstede's cultural dimensions.

For the students in the 2001/2002 tutorial group looking at the use of English and the appeals used in the Anglo-Saxon cultures,

this proved to be a lively discussion, as their class tutor from the UK and an international student from Arkansas in the US regularly differed from the Dutch students in their perception of advertising texts and the appeal they thought was being used. For example, in kitchen advertising the Dutch students concentrated on utilitarian appeals, whereas the UK and US lecturer and student consistently identified an appeal to status associated with owning a particular brand or design. This was an unexpected and immediate illustration of how the effects of advertising may vary across cultures.

Students are then asked to undertake a number of tasks as they prepare an international advertising campaign. These include analysing their target culture, relevant cultural dimension, and target group (Assignment 2) and selecting the product they will feature in the texts (Assignment 3). In 2001/2002, for instance, we settled on a mobile phone as a relatively neutral product used widely across different cultures, and we decided to focus on students as the target group. Debate over rejected products was itself instructive. For example, one group proposed using a bicycle on the grounds that everyone has a bicycle, and it would, therefore, be a neutral choice. This was eventually rejected, since the students concluded that the central place taken by the bicycle in the Netherlands could not be assumed to be the case in other countries or cultures. Similar discussions led to the rejection of soccer, as a sport most generally associated with men rather than women in the Netherlands, and grass hockey, as a sport considered by some in the Netherlands to be an upper class activity.

In terms of relevant cultural dimension, we generally suggest that students focus on the dimension that Hofstede's work predicts will vary the most between the Netherlands on the one hand and their target culture on the other. For example, our 2001/2002 students considering target groups in the Netherlands and the UK varied the appeals used in their advertising texts on Hofstede's masculine-feminine dimension (e.g. success versus modesty) since, according to Hofstede, this is the dimension across which the two cultures vary the most.

A parallel assignment completed while they prepare their texts—Assignment 4—is to translate (e.g. from English to Dutch) and back-translate (Dutch to English) a number of well known advertising slogans, such as “Top breeders recommend it” and “Just do it!” This is to make them aware of the difficulties associated with finding an equivalent text across two different cultures, not only in terms of a literal meaning, but also in terms of concepts (Zhang & Gelb, 1996). It is also of particular relevance for us in Nijmegen, as it allows our students to apply their foreign language skills and their parallel studies in sociolinguistics and pragmatics in a real life context. Translation and back-translation is a simple exercise to conduct in class, but it makes the point succinctly.

Creating the Advertising Texts

Once the students have decided on the product they are going to feature in their texts and the cultural dimension to focus on in the advertising appeal, they then assemble a series of manipulated texts consisting of a visual and a short slogan and accompanying text, focusing on a product, appeal, and situation (Assignment 5). Each series is made up of four different versions of the same advertisement for each target language and culture. Students looking at the Netherlands and the UK, for example, created two advertising texts in Dutch—one with a masculine appeal and the second with a feminine appeal—and two advertising texts in English, again with a masculine and feminine appeal. Appendix B provides an example of the English versions of the advertising texts for a specific situation and product, showing variation across the appeal used.

Like the other assignments, this one promotes a great deal of discussion on topics such as situational equivalents across different cultures for a particular target group, text equivalents in different languages, including the lexis and concepts involved, and the appropriate representation of different cultural appeals. For example, in the Dutch versions of the Appendix B texts, reference is made to a different examination scale, running from one through

ten, reflecting the difference in grading scales between the UK and the Netherlands. Once the students' texts are completed, the final assignment—Part III of the project—is an extended report written either in Dutch or in their target foreign language, in which they discuss the theoretical background to the project and the decisions they made in constructing their texts.

Re-applications in Different Contexts

Clearly the standardization-adaptation debate and the role played by cultural values in advertising appeals are only two of the many other possibilities that could be used as the theoretical background to a project of this nature. (See, for example, Hayes and Kuseski [2001] and Witte [2001], who also describe the application of theory in practice.) In addition, more specific to our project, Hofstede's work is only one theory that may be used as a starting point for a discussion on cultural values, and this may be adapted to suit the needs and backgrounds of the students and lecturers involved. A discussion of textual or conceptual equivalence across different cultures and the development of a critical awareness of theory are of relevance in many different contexts, not only in our context in Europe where cultures are often (but not always) demarcated by national borders, but also in multi-cultural societies within one national border, such as those in China and the US. For us, teaching the course has been a stimulating and rewarding experience for all the instructors involved—and we hope the students, too—and it has made us acutely aware of our own cultural limitations.

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