

# Cross-culture thinking

By [Brian Elliott](#)

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Cultural Intelligence: About 10 years ago we gave advice to a small outsider in the mobile handset market about how to launch their product in Europe. Its devices were supremely useful and did one thing exceptionally well: Secure e-mail access anywhere. The device looked like a pager and was designed to clip on to your belt.



Recognise it yet? The Blackberry by Research-in-Motion - and at that time no self-respecting European executive would be seen with it. It turns out that in the home of the Savile Row bespoke suit or Italian fashion - the look of a mobile phone matters as much as a power suit or a watch - even to investment bankers.

So, we took the team on a cultural journey through the design capitals of Europe, and played a modest role in influencing the future design journey of the Blackberry. Cultural intelligence matters. Awareness of global design trends matters.

Today brands can be as global as they choose to be. Fast. Yet even a brand like Facebook has been slow to maximise its global footprint. Competing brands in markets as diverse as Russia, The Netherlands, and China, have stolen a march on the master of the social media universe, and they now hold the leadership positions. No mean feat considering the stakes. Fast followers have been present in fashion for ages, yet technology and social media fast followers can do great damage to the international hopes of innovators.

The fickle and morphing media landscape is nothing new to western economies. Creative destruction continues apace. It is a fact of life. What is less appreciated is the speed with which digital and mobile technologies are changing the game in developing markets. Be it in the explosion of mobile usage in China, or the access to high-speed data in key cities of Russia and the CIS; these markets unhindered by traditional media distribution models, now show signs of greater innovation than in the so-called developed world. Authoritarian countries have inadvertently encouraged these trends by ensuring that people look to unofficial and informal sources for real news and information.

What this means is that brands can move faster than before - especially those capable of mixing bricks and clicks effectively. (People the world over prefer real beer to the digital variety - no matter how sexy the iPhone app). Often innovation in brand and communications today comes from these new frontiers.

Convergence is both a threat and an opportunity for brands. All allow brands to deepen relationships across media - "transmedia storytelling" best described by Henry Jenkins of MIT.

These approaches are particularly useful for brands looking to grow in new markets: the Internet knows no geographical borders. However, while brands and their agencies might understand how their products, branding and positioning work domestically, put this to an international audience and *opportunity* becomes a *challenge*.

Communications, whether face to face, screen to screen or advertiser to consumer, work best when people feel they are interacting with someone who understands them; someone who acts like 'one of us'. This is something too easily forgotten by advertising agencies, whether they are networks, boutiques or otherwise. Irrespective of size, age or location, many agencies continue to churn out bland campaigns that claim to be global, when in fact they are just rehashed translations.

What makes a campaign successful are communications which are made relevant to the target audience, wherever they may be. Obvious as it may sound, agencies have developed strategic tools to help their clients improve the effectiveness of their marketing investments (DMG Media in China has D-Dao, Saatchi has Love Marks, etc.). These typically draw from a specific set of local experience. Yet playing on a global stage poses unique challenges, beyond the basic avoidance of cultural and linguistic booby traps.

Here at Amsterdam Worldwide we've developed a new model for international growth for brands. Beyond classic and valuable brand and communications tools, we have integrated *Culture Mapping* in our insight and planning activities.

As an international communications agency, our work aims to convince audiences, irrespective of language, region or culture, that each campaign has been produced specifically for them as a sole target audience. That's why when producing a truly international campaign there's a need to incorporate elements that will resonate with all of the different markets a campaign is scheduled to run in. This helps us achieve local impact with true global reach. Culture Mapping is just one of the tools, we use to ensure local relevance, is achieved. It's a tool that helps us to understand cultural differences to make international communications and brands more effective.

## Social psychology

Culture Mapping's roots lie in social psychology. While working for IBM in the late 1960s, Dutch academic [Geert Hofstede](#), conducted a study of employees across 60 of the company's offices to determine attitudes towards work practices and social values. The resulting data helped create a value-based model now adopted as a way of mapping how susceptible people from different nations are to various 'dimensions of culture'.

These 'dimensions' are defined as: *Power Distance*; *Individualism*; *Masculinity* and *Uncertainty Avoidance*. Applied to modern communications, they can tell us a great deal about how different nationalities function psychologically. For example, Americans exhibit a higher level of *individualism* or 'me' orientated opinions than their Chinese, Brazilian and Russian counterparts. Likewise, Japanese people are noted for high levels of *uncertainty avoidance* and are more 'masculine', reflecting a more materialistic yet cautious mindset. The British, Germans and Swedes score low in *power distance* - meaning nationals from these countries value equality.

Awareness is a prelude to application and so Culture Mapping becomes most useful to marketers when two of these dimensions are cross-referenced, as it can help identify buying motives, status needs, communication styles and the level of information needed to make the most effective impact across a broad range of different cultures.

Let's consider three of our recent campaigns and review how Culture Mapping has helped us inform our approach.

## General Motors / Opel Meriva - Embrace Life

Our pan-European 'Embrace Life' campaign for Opel Meriva was specifically designed to ensure a perfect fit within a broad target geographical area, and focused on two key dimensions: Masculinity-Femininity and Individualism-Collectivism. The Meriva has an innovative design with rear doors opening backwards. It is the most important car launch in 2010 for GM in Europe.

Culture Mapping shows that the more 'Masculine' cultures of western and southern Europe such as Germany, Austria, Italy and Greece place a high value on performance and speed. In terms of Individualism-Collectivism, Culture Mapping reveals a clear difference between more individualistic northern European cultures compared to the collectivist southern and eastern countries. People in collectivist cultures place a higher value on family, sharing with others, conformity to the norms of their group, and a preference for more visually driven communications.

For more 'Masculine' countries that place high value on speed and performance, we provided more design focused imagery and detail on engine specifications, top speed and safety credentials. The articulation of the campaign - 'Embrace Life' - centred on the functional zone created by car's portal doors. In more 'Feminine', family driven cultures, we focused less on the car itself, but rather on the emotive family benefits the vehicle provides. This meant the intended take-out of 'Embrace Life', was as much about family and togetherness as it was safety. Specifications placed greater emphasis on storage capacity, quality and the overall utility it provides families.

In targeting collectivist, multi-generational cultures such as Italy, we featured groups of people, young and old, in order to trigger positive associations with the kind of relationships that potential buyers value. We also focused on key, emotive visuals that convey harmony, sharing and togetherness.

Culture Mapping can also help to inform decisions about the use of media channels and placement. For example, to tap into the mindset of collectivist cultures our media strategy/recommendation, weighted outdoor elements in and around airports and other travel hubs, and along side major sporting events (lots of embracing going on when your team scores), and greater emphasis on the use of online social media overall communications strategy.

## Onitsuka Tiger - Tansu: Made of Japan

In spring 2010, we launched an ambitious worldwide campaign for Japanese sneaker brand, [Onitsuka Tiger](#) (by ASICS) - for which we later won a Gold Lion at the Cannes Advertising Festival. The campaign, entitled '[Tansu](#)' fused eclectic and ancient traditions of Japanese art and contemporary culture to ignite the brand.

The centrepiece of the campaign was a totem to traditional Japanese Tansu furniture-making: a one and a half-metre long bespoke wooden cabinet - built in the shape of a sneaker.

We commissioned Niigata-based Tansu masters, Ogura Tansu Ten, to handcraft the model. This generations-old company of traditional Japanese artisans is known for its distinctive 'puzzle box' cabinets and chests, which are the epitome of traditional Japanese art and design, and lay claim to a rich and colourful history dating back to the time of the Samurai. Sneaker fans were invited to solve the puzzle and win exclusive prizes when the Tansu sculpture toured flagship Onitsuka Tiger stores, as well as design, fashion and specialist trade fairs around the world.

Those unable to see it live could explore it online. A fully interactive, stop motion animation 'virtual sneaker' re-imagined the Tansu shoe's hand-made look and feel, perfectly replicating the craft that went into the sculpture's construction. The website also enabled users to open doors and drawers to discover a myriad of secrets and surprises about the brand, the new season's collection, and the Tansu tradition.

Tansu had broad appeal across Western Europe and the US, where, the cultural dimensions of masculinity and individualism are key. The creative challenge was leveraging Onitsuka Tiger's Japanese cultural credentials; making these ideas wholly relevant to the brand, while leading all campaign materials back to product. With previous campaigns we

focused more on innovation, style and modernity, so to differentiate Tansu, we felt it was necessary to distinguish the concept of 'craftsmanship' in order to appeal to an individualistic Western audience; as well as to ensuring Asian audiences appreciated the contemporary values rooted in the authentic heritage of Japan.

In the virtual world, consumers crave connection with the real, so in order to further illustrate the brand's deep sense of history and authenticity, we created a 'behind the scenes' movie showing the show model being made. This was the ideal way of showcasing the level of detail and expertise that went into creating a 'masterpiece'. The fact the campaign focused around a core centrepiece and was delivered across on and offline platforms meant that it was universally accessible - which encouraged the target audience to engage with the brand beyond the product itself.

## **Pernod Ricard - Ararat Brandy: The Legend of Akhtamar**

Cultural considerations also played a huge part in our campaign for Ararat, the Armenian brandy one drunk by Churchill and Stalin, now owned by Pernod Ricard (A household name in Russia and former Soviet countries). The purpose of the global campaign was to re-launch the brandy to Armenian, Russian and Eastern European communities and their global Diaspora.

We created a groundbreaking film playing on Ararat's Eastern cultural heritage entitled '[The Legend of Akhtamar](#)' for which was recently awarded a European EFFIE. The film retells a traditional Armenian love story in a modern context, and features a young Muscovite who travels to meet his girlfriend. During the journey he encounters a mysterious taxi driver who senses his fare's troubled state of mind and recounts the dark legend of Akhtamar.

It's not a traditional commercial. Firstly, it's a 20-minute film that was solely distributed online. However, because it's an authentic story, staying true to its heritage is important both culturally and strategically for the Ararat brand.

Despite being massively influenced by western brands, Russian and East European consumers are beginning to rediscover and reinvent their own brands. In this case, the target audience was predominantly Collectivist, meaning that they value family and conformity and respond best to more visually driven communications. That's why we supported the campaign with print, outdoor, and social media components - to hone in on the word of mouth effect, driving conversations about the campaign.

However, where gauging the masses in Eastern Europe is concerned, there's a fine balance between what's acceptable and what's not. Nostalgia has a huge cultural impact, and while Russians in particular have a deep-rooted national pride, they are conflicted as soon as anything 'Soviet' seeps into their thoughts - and younger audiences switch off.

Getting a brand noticed in Russia means exercising cultural sensitivity, cutting through trite Western-influenced clichés and understanding the modern consumer's aspirations. A product like Ararat has a natural advantage - it is deemed premium, is popular and well-known already, but that's not enough to give it the edge if it's my father's brandy. People were attracted to the film by choice, which speaks volumes about the way in which international audiences choose to interact with brands and media platforms online. We earned their attention. To give this some context, we filled the equivalent of 10 000 movie theatres in 6 months.

Brands looking to make their marketing truly international are already acutely aware of the vast onslaught of digital platforms revolutionising the way people experience and interact with them. However, to take advantage of the global growth opportunities it is not enough to translate your website. In the battle for attracting real breathing consumers, relevance and resonance win. Whether used to inform a car company's brand strategy, re-launch a well-known brandy to a new audience or involving the target audience in the deep history of a brand, Culture Mapping has a range of practical applications that are geared towards enhancing a brand's effectiveness and audience engagement.

While the importance of emerging markets is not news, less appreciated is the opportunity companies from emerging markets have to move from being suppliers and imitators to brand owners in their own right. Now that they know how to make products as good as any in the West, in brand and communications terms their lack of entrenched distribution

structures and natural openness to new technologies and new media, mean that they can radically and rapidly expand from protected local markets to a bigger global stage.

The lessons of Samsung, Sony, and Nike, are not lost on Tata, Chery, and Li-Ning. What took the former 15 or more years, will take the latter 5 years or less. If you haven't heard of those brands don't worry, you will soon enough.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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