



TRANSCRIPT

Lost in Translation

Michael Madsen:

Hi, I'm Michael Madsen, International Liaison Partner for BDO Canada. Welcome to Bored at the Airport with Mike. This show is about doing business globally. Whether your business has international presence, is considering an international expansion, or if you're in the middle of revising your expansion plan, then this show is for you.

Today, we'll share the stories of three companies who got lost in translation. Simple mistakes led to millions of unintended internet views and shares. How can companies avoid getting lost in translation?

Narrator:

Expanding internationally is a goal for a number of companies, especially as countries like China and India continue to grow in size and influence on the world stage, but even multinational companies get it wrong when moving to other markets. Successful global marketing strategies depend on a company's understanding of how culture affects consumer reactions in each of its international markets. In turn, they must also understand how their strategies affect those cultures.

Successful global marketing strategies depend on a company's understanding of how culture affects consumer reactions in each of its international markets. In turn, they must also understand how their strategies affect those cultures. When auto giant Ford launched an ad campaign in Belgium, it was attempting to highlight the quality of its latest vehicle. The slogan was, "Every car has a high quality body", but a mistranslation made it, "Every car has a high quality corpse". Not the kind of junk you want in your new car's trunk.

Here are three companies whose marketing strategies literally were lost in translation. The 1970s are famous for bell bottoms and the rise of disco, but it was also an era of economic struggles.

There's a crisis of such proportion that we probably haven't even begun to grasp it yet. Cultural change. This is no simple reform. It really is a revolution. And technological innovation.

Electrolux, a Scandinavian electronics company, got caught in that cultural difference. Trying to introduce a line of vacuum cleaners to the U.S. Market. Electrolux used a rhyming phrase. Nothing sucks like Electrolux.

Clip:

Boo. You suck.

Narrator:

While the slogan might have been grammatically correct, it never really took off with U.S. shoppers. Once upon a time, the Coors advertising team came up with a phrase, "Turn it loose" to appeal to people, looking to have a good time and connect that good time with enjoying Coors Beer. So far, so good. Connect your brand with an experience. Check. Make it memorable. Check.

Expand that campaign into Spanish. Check. Check the translation. "Turn it loose" translated into Spanish basically meant "diarrhea".

No one wants a beer to do that to them.

Clip:

My fellow citizens of the world. That's one small step for man. My conscience won't let me go shoot my brother.

Narrator:

In the 1960s, Pepsi took its "Come alive with the Pepsi generation" slogan to China. Which was not very well received. The reason? In Chinese, "Come alive with the Pepsi generation" translates to "Pepsi brings your relatives back from the dead". Expanding business into China seems to bring some significant translation challenges. Coca-Cola, like Pepsi and dozens of others, have had a history of massive and obviously unintentional translation fails with their taglines. KFC, for example, misinterpreted "Finger lickin' good" to something more cannibalistic in Chinese.

Getting a country's official language correct is one thing, but don't forget to research the colloquialisms of the culture. Poor translation doesn't just involve language. In fact, images can be just as offensive and/or inappropriate than a poorly translated phrase. Translation traps are everywhere. Be it a badly translated slogan, a company name or a cultural hiccup. Conquering new markets is about the right marketing, and marketing means translating ideas, not just words.

Michael Madsen:

How can companies avoid getting lost in translation? It's time to get some deeper insights from our expert guest for this episode, Deborah Williams-Walsh. Deborah is the National Markets Director for Strategic Initiatives for BDO Canada. She has over 20 years experience in driving organizational growth through strategic development, tactical implementation, and successful execution of revenue focused marketing strategies in Canada, Europe, and the UK.

Deborah, what are the important steps companies must consider when developing a marketing plan in other parts of the world?

Deborah Williams-Walsh:

So it's a good question there, Michael. Actually the answer starts close to home. It's amazing to me how many people don't actually understand their product or service. Before you enter into any new marketplace, whether it's a new marketplace domestically, or whether you're about to cross a border, which obviously increases your exposure substantially, you have to understand why people are engaging with you, what problem you're actually solving for that client, and why they're buying your product as opposed to that of your competitors. So it's really important once you know what you're selling to understand both the location and the specific audience in that location as well as possible, but still recognize that you're still a stranger.

And so, lean into all of the resources of which there are so many domestically within Canada, you've got governments, trade associations, the World Trade Center, BDO works with them. EDC, we do a lot of work to support clients with EDC, and also lean into people that you might not necessarily think of. It's amazing how often at BDO we're approached by clients who want introductions to BDO in other countries or alternatively want to have a conversation with BDO marketing people domestically or internationally because for the price of a coffee, it's amazing what insight we can give.

Michael Madsen:

Understanding a different culture is paramount for a new brand's successful integration into that market. Talk to us about that.

Deborah Williams-Walshe:

Culture is everything in marketing. I hesitate to say they're synonymous, but they're kind of synonymous. I mean, marketing by definition is the practice of mass persuasion. That's the difference between business development and marketing. Some of the organizations that I think have done it well, you look at Starbucks, they've leaned into that whole West Coast, urban coffee culture. You and I sit on the west coast ourselves in Canada, and Lulu has taken that- or Lululemon, sorry, has taken that healthy sort of lifestyle, casual clothing thing that Vancouver's known for, and they've blown it up. And when that goes right, you can actually take your culture and show the best of it and attach it into cultures in the countries you're moving into.

But if you look at something that's going wrong, if people don't understand culture, the example that the I always think of is Walmart. I mean, Walmart, they are smart. They know what they're doing, and they have the resources to do this well, but about 15 years ago, they bought a chain in Japan, but Walmart are known for steeply discounted goods, and the Japanese culture has a distaste for what they perceive to be cheap. To make sure that people can have cheap food, Walmart invests in a lot of frozen goods, but Japanese shoppers, they're used to fresh produce and meat. And so it went badly wrong. It can go sideways very, very quickly, and especially if you don't have the same resources as those large organizations.

Michael Madsen:

I use Google Translate all the time for personal use, but brands need to go way beyond that simple translation tool in order to understand and connect with other cultures successfully.

Deborah Williams-Walshe:

We've all got good examples. As you can tell from the accent, I spent a lot of summers sort of visiting different countries in Europe. So translation challenges are some of the easiest mistakes to make. Bizarrely, they're also the easiest to avoid, and to be honest, they're the ones that if you're a marketing person, they contribute to the greatest areas sort of schadenfreude, right? And I think we've all seen examples.

Kentucky Fried Chicken. They're the success story in Japan, where I used Walmart as the less successful, but, "Finger lickin' good" in Chinese, I think translates to something like, "Eat your fingers off". So what I would say is, do not use Google Translate. You can absolutely use it for personal use, but a direct translation is almost guaranteed not to be the correct translation, but I'd actually recommend that you hire translation services in the country you wish to go into. Language is perpetually changing, and honestly, if you don't believe me, then just ask the makers of Corona Lager. Right? So two or three years ago, that meant one thing. Then it meant something else. I swear they must have paid someone to change it to "COVID".

Michael Madsen:

So Deborah, without compromising your brand, how do you adapt your marketing message to respect cultural differences?

Deborah Williams-Walshe:

This is a tough one, right? Because people feel they're selling out, and especially with private businesses, you have that emotional kind of ownership. What I would say is it really goes back to the very first point that I made. You truly have to know what it is you're selling and why people buy it. Don't get absolutely hooked up on the slogans and the messaging that you've built around it. They're not sacred. If you know what it is you're selling and why people buy it and you understand the audience that you're now trying to access, then you're able to stay true to your core identity and your USP and still be flexible with the wording.

And this applies to anyone. As a woman, right? I've heard of Oil of Olay. An Oil of Olay is worth about three billion dollars in revenue for Proctor and Gamble. It's huge, but yet up until really recently, that traded under four or five different names around the world. Even the brand name for a three billion dollar product is not sacred. What you have to do is be true to your core, back to knowing yourself, but be absolutely willing to adapt to the best of you to embrace the best of the location that you're going into.

Michael Madsen:

It's hard enough to build a compelling marketing strategy. How can you develop a marketing plan that can work globally?

Deborah Williams-Walshe:

The answer is research. I think most of the people listening to this podcast, aren't really going to go from Canada or wherever to global. They don't necessarily have the resources, financial or human. What tends to happen is people move into a country one at a time. One of the phrases I think I've stolen from someone else is you may not be able to boil the ocean, but you can boil a cup of tea. So I think when you go back to that core of who you are and what you do, then you build your global strategy in a modular way. By far the majority of Canadian companies that go international, look at the States, there's a common language there. They can access the States by road, by rail, by plane, by boat, if necessary. So the logistics distribution seems to make sense. Invest, invest, invest in research, take as long as it takes to feel like, well, you can't get it a hundred percent right. You know your audience as well as you possibly can. So that would be my advice.

Michael Madsen:

Deborah, thanks so much for joining me today. Deborah Williams-Walshe, National Markets Director for Strategic Initiatives at BDO.

Thanks for being part of Bored at the Airport with Mike. I'm Mike Matson. If you like this episode, subscribe to our podcast, connect with us on our LinkedIn group page Bored at the Airport.

Narrator:

On our next episode...

Clip:

Target is closing all 133 of its stores in Canada. They bit off more than they could chew. Tried to do too much too fast.

Narrator:

We'll explore what happened when one of the largest department stores in the U.S. misjudged their supply chain capabilities and ended up incurring losses of two billion dollars and over 17,000 jobs.

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