

Do research to identify the communication norms and preferences of audiences in different countries

## AVOIDING GLOBAL MISUNDERSTANDINGS

When we think of miscommunication across national boundaries, the most memorable blunders often relate to problems with translation. But there are far more subtle pitfalls that can occur. Here, Angela Sinickas shares some of the common mistakes that can lead global communications to miss the mark.

Many of the pitfalls of communicating internationally can be avoided through the timely use of research. Below I've summarized some of the most common research findings I've learned over the years from interviews, focus groups and surveys conducted for clients around the world.

### Appealing to a global audience

The simplest of friendly greetings e-mailed by an executive to a global audience can make the executive seem US- or Euro-centric. "Enjoy your summer vacation," said in June, makes no sense in the Southern hemisphere where winter is closing in. "Happy Holidays," referring to the end of December for those who celebrate Hanukkah or Christmas, is meaningless and possibly offensive to Hindus, Buddhists, Moslems and others.

The typically upbeat and positive tone of employee communications preferred by American executives is seen as "propaganda, very rah-rah American" in Europe. European focus group participants at one client said they felt they were "treated like children" by the official corporate communications.

Content of a global publication doesn't seem international to readers outside your company's headquarters country if you just mention other countries in passing.



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The same can be said if you quote only home country executives in stories primarily about another country just because they're easier to contact in your own time zone. The comments I've heard about many "global" publications include:

- "The stories often feel as if they were researched by phone." (They had been.)
- "Articles about our location sound exotic and as if written by tourists."
- "It seems that [the publication] has taken cultural stereotypes rather than real cultural diversities. I doubt all employees can recognize themselves culturally."
- "Although I can see an aspiration to include non-US material, typically, the 'meaty' stories are US based. Non-US stories tend to be smaller, or clustered at the back of the publication, which in itself communicates a message."

Other findings on content include:

- Using middle initials in names is viewed as an "Americanism."
- People in the UK don't always like being lumped into Europe, which they often consider to be only continental Europe. UK-based companies usually refer to "the UK and Europe."
- German-based companies are more likely to send lengthy, detailed communications to employees, which tend to be read in their entirety by German employees. In many other countries, employees expect information to be provided in "bite-size chunks."

### Face-to-face communication

Outside the US, especially in many Asian countries, employees may be less comfortable asking questions or

speaking up in large group meetings. Whether staff meetings are conducted, or if it is considered disrespectful and challenging for employees to ask questions of their managers, also varies. These differences need to be taken into account when developing communication training programs or including communication expectations in supervisors' performance reviews.

### Pitfalls and preferences

**Voicemail:** In many countries, leaving a voicemail instead of walking down the hall to speak to someone may be seen as rude, not efficient. It's also harder to understand a voicemail in a language that is not your native tongue than to understand the same message in a written e-mail.

Another pitfall for international voicemails, especially those left on cell phones, is that the quality of the connection may be so poor that the recipient cannot even understand who sent the voicemail.

**Online communication:** Just because people have e-mail addresses, don't assume they have good online access. Even in office settings in many developed countries, desktop computers are sometimes shared by multiple users.

**Publication design:** The most visible and "important" placement in a magazine layout or poster, in most Western countries, is the top right corner. It's also the most expensive ad space. In Japan and other countries where writing does not flow from left to right, the top left corner is the most noticeable.

**Photography:** Photos present one of the greatest pitfalls for cultural appropriateness. For example:

- Group photos filled with smiling faces are seen as very American and are not well received in

many European and Asian countries. A French focus group participant shared a story of an American photographer insisting his project team all smile widely. When the photo appeared in the global employee magazine, the Frenchman was teased by his colleagues for “grinning like a silly American.”

- Photographers looking for an interesting way to shoot a group picture in another country are often guilty of cultural stereotyping that makes employees feel marginalized. For example, a single issue of a global publication included Egyptian employees posed on camels and Japanese employees performing traditional art – neither of which had anything to do with what the employees were being recognized for in the articles.
- The American trend of wearing business casual when captured on film or video, presents a hidden message to people in countries where more formal dress is still preferred. An employee in a German focus group said, “People in the US aren’t wearing suits. They don’t look as if they’re working as hard as we are.” Also, in hierarchical cultures, employees think that publication editors are treating senior management disrespectfully if they publish photos of leaders wearing business-casual clothing.
- Alcohol and short skirts in pictures can be offensive for religious or cultural reasons.
- People as subject matter can create a problem as well. Japanese employees at one company said they did not use the wall calendars sent to them because they were filled with pictures of customers using the company’s products. They recommended pictures of landscapes or still lifes.

*Color and design:* These are perceived differently as well. A global publication with a very bright, primary-color palette was seen by European employees as very American. One employee’s comment was: “It’s gaudy; it looks like a flyer to buy something, not like an employee publication.” On the other hand, Americans thought the color palette was very European. Professional communicators from around the world who were asked to evaluate the publication in comparison to employee publications generated in their own countries had wildly opposite impressions:

- “The overall design is pedestrian in the extreme. There is no edginess or innovation that one would associate with the age group and industry.” (Australia).
- “Good consistent design throughout. This is a bold, aggressive, almost in-your-face design.” (Canada).

### Conducting research

Focus groups and surveys don’t always work the same way in different countries. For example, in some south Asian, African and Latin American countries, workers would not expect management to ask for opinions about company strategy. In these instances, it might be more appropriate to conduct research with professional and management employees only.

Focus groups in Japan would generally result in consensus. I find it more useful to distribute written focus group questions to individuals for them to write down their own answers, and then consolidate the comments.

Surveys have become more familiar around the world, but communicators still need to think about how survey questions are phrased.

Focus groups can help identify the appropriate range of responses

to a question. For example, in focus groups we learned that many employees for whom English was a second language used their employee magazine as a way to practice their English. We probably would not have thought to offer that as one of the response options on a survey question.

Finally, there are some very bad months for conducting research in different parts of the world:

- August in most of Europe, when many people have a month off.
- Late June in Sweden, when many head off to their lake cottages.
- January in New Zealand, which is equivalent to the European August get-away.
- Between a four-day weekend near the end of November (beginning with a holiday called Thanksgiving) and New Year’s Day in the US.
- Golden Week in May in Japan, which includes multiple holidays back to back.

### Informal research

Much of the research that led to the findings in this column was conducted by formal focus groups or interviews. But simply talking to people informally can turn up extremely valuable information.

For example, the social responsibility group of a large multi-national company with operations in many African countries wanted to initiate a new project to help the Pygmies in Chad. As the group debated internally what types of projects to support, one of the team asked local management to find out what the Pygmies would find most valuable. The answer was: “Help us get identity cards. Without them, we are non-persons. With them, we can get access to all the services already available in our country.”

That probably would never have occurred to most of us sitting in a corporate headquarters. scm