

TRENDS IN MARKETING (1)

When does culture matter in marketing?

New research suggests that consumer purchasing decisions may be rooted in cultural biases. **Jennifer Aaker** and **Donnel Briley** explain the implications of these findings for the marketing industry.

You need a new computer. You log on to the web and spend time thoughtfully perusing various vendor sites to determine the best fit for your needs. You think you've made up your mind. But then you're whizzing down the highway and pass a billboard touting a different computer. You have only a few seconds to absorb the advertising message, but you're swayed in ways you hadn't anticipated. What's going on?

According to new research, it may have to do with your cultural biases. Or, to be more specific, the instances in which culture matters – and the times it doesn't.

When does culture influence consumer purchasing decisions? This is a complex and under-examined issue recently explored by Donnel Briley of the University of Sydney and Jennifer Aaker, the General Atlantic professor of marketing at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. Four experiments found that culture-based differences show up when information is processed in a cursory and spontaneous manner. So when you passed that roadside billboard, you were likely to be influenced by advertising that appealed to your particular culture. But when you had the time to deliberate more – by examining information on the web, for instance – attempts by advertisers to rely on cultural factors tended not to be as successful.

** 'When does culture matter? Effects of personal knowledge on the correction of culture-based judgments', Donnel Briley and Jennifer Aaker, Journal of Marketing Research. For information, contact: Helen Chang, tel: 001 650 723 3358, fax: 001 650 725 6750.*

For example, in a pilot study, Anglo and Asian American students at a California university with an ethnically diverse population were asked to view advertisements for Welch's grape juice. Some participants were instructed to give their immediate reactions to the advertisements, while others were told to think more carefully before evaluating the effectiveness of the ads.

Half of the ads were 'promotional' in their appeal. That is, they focused on the benefits that could be gained by drinking the juice – eg 'Welch's grape juice can lead to higher energy levels, is great-tasting as well as energising, and is fun to drink.' The other ads had 'preventive' appeals: they highlighted problems that could be avoided by drinking Welch's – eg 'Welch's grape juice can reduce the risk of some cancers and heart disease, helps keep arteries clear so that blood can flow freely, and is healthy to drink.'

Marketers try to understand subtle cultural differences

The results were instructive. When participants gave their immediate reactions to the advertisements, Asian American participants heavily favoured the preventive messages; Anglo Americans had the opposite reaction, rating the promotional messages as more effective. This tallied with the researchers' theories that Americans, who value achievement, accomplishment, and independent thinking, would focus on the positive consequences of their purchasing decisions. On the other hand Chinese subjects, who tend to value protec-



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tion and security, and have more interdependent ways of viewing the world, were expected to concentrate on the negative consequences of their actions or decisions. All this was borne out when subjects gave only a cursory glance at the ads.

Yet this disparity disappeared when participants engaged in more thoughtful deliberations. There were simply no significant differences in how the two groups rated the effectiveness of the advertising when asked to be more careful in their evaluations.

Cultural vs personal knowledge when making consumer judgments

So what determines whether culture matters? A key factor is the extent to which you draw upon cultural versus personal knowledge when making purchasing decisions.

General cultural knowledge includes implicit theories about the world we live in that are largely shared by the members of our society. But in addition to this shared set of ideas, we also have personal knowledge that

can conflict with accepted, culturally derived practices. For example, a boy growing up in China may generally accept the importance of his relationships with others, and therefore seek to keep harmony with family members. But more personal knowledge – such as being exposed to pictures of American cultural icons like Green Day or Madonna – may lead him to sometimes wear clothes that his parents don't like.

In other words, when pressured to form a quick judgment, we generally rely on cultural norms as a 'default.' But when making a thoughtful deliberation, we're more likely to engage in an internal debate, and waver.

In the research, this pattern held across product categories, and in two countries' comparisons (Hong Kong vs United States). Taken altogether, these results underscore the idea that culture simply does not exert the constant, unwavering effect on consumer judgments as previously thought.

Implications and significance of the research

This research has important implications for brand and global marketing efforts by consumer-oriented companies.

After all, notions about cultural differences are often the basis for international marketing communications as well as global brand management strategies. Indeed, the perceived importance of cultural issues has been increasing, fuelled by new technologies that allow marketers to reach consumers across country boundaries. Marketers are spending increasing amounts of time and effort trying to understand subtle cultural differences. Witness the efforts of Nike, IBM and Google.

But for a message to be effective, marketers must understand not only how to tailor a message to a particular culture but when such cultural-values-based messages are most effective. For example, this research suggests that marketing communications appealing to culture-specific values might work best when advertisements draw brief, focused attention (eg, online banner ads, roadside billboards).

Additionally, this notion that culture sometimes guides consumer judgments and behaviours and at other times does not, could be helpful in understanding conflicting findings in previous research. For example, although numerous studies have found cultural differences matter enormously to consumers, in other studies such differences sometimes failed to appear. Such failures tend to offer uninteresting findings and often remain unpublished. The present research suggests that this may be

due to differences in the conditions under which participants provide their responses.

Researchers also may want to consider the distinction between personal and cultural knowledge. When will personal knowledge override socio-cultural norms? Answers to such questions will further illuminate the psychology of consumers across cultural contexts and shed insight on what types of global marketing efforts may be most effective. **F&M**

TRENDS IN MARKETING (2)

Those internet 'second thoughts' cause concern

Choosing more objectively after greater reflection (see previous article) may be on the increase, thanks to growth in the use of internet search and comparison sites. **Alan Mitchell** examines the trend, and what it may mean for marketers.



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As researchers Jennifer Aaker of Stanford Graduate School of Business and Donnel Briley of the University of Sydney report, when pressured to form a quick judgment, consumers tend to use their cultural norms as a 'default'. But when asked to consider their reactions more carefully, cultural differences evaporate.

This raises a question. As consumers increasingly go online to search out product related information, make price and attribute comparisons and access expert and peer-to-peer advice, are internet-enabled 'second thoughts' becoming second nature? If so, what are the implications for advertising and brand building?

For the consumer, the one thing better than a product of known value is a service that navigates you quickly and easily to better value. In the early days of marketing, brands dominated this niche. Then, in many categories, retailers seized this role for themselves.

The question now: is the baton passing to specialist internet services?

According to recent research by marketing services group Creston, two thirds of consumers under 44 agree that 'before I make a major purchase I would look for reviews and impartial information on the internet'. (Less than a quarter of those over 65 answered 'Yes' to the same question).

Online price comparison site usage is growing at around 30% a year (twice as fast as general e-retailing), with sales volumes through these sites growing even faster. Some electrical retailers now get 30% of their online sales via comparison sites. And for some financial services products such as credit cards, it's as high as 50%.