

New Perspective of Cross-Cultural Communications: Applications in China Marketing

**Hong Wang
Shantou University**

The success of marketing communication in today's world is obviously determined by marketer's cultural intelligence, and this is particularly true for international marketing practice, in which cross-cultural perspectives are definitely important. Cross-cultural communication is becoming even more important for the Chinese marketers in this new century since China planned to more widely open its market to the world and export more of its service and products to the world market. This paper suggests that Chinese marketers are better prepared for cross-cultural communication and put it at their corporate strategic level for marketing China and China marketing. It also suggests that anthropological approaches offer highly effective applications and solutions toward the understanding of cross-cultural issues in international marketing communication.

INTRODUCTION

International marketing communication is communication that crosses national boundaries for business purposes. Communication among people from the same culture is often difficult enough. Therefore, communication between people from different cultures from the point of view of language, values, customers, and ways of thinking, will be far more difficult, with a degree of miscommunication being almost inevitable (Ferraro, 2006). Problems in marketing communication conducted cross-culturally often arise when participants from one culture are unable to understand culturally determined differences in communication practices, traditions, and thought-processing in another cultural context. Marketing communication literature focused on advertising supports the hypothesis that advertising content differs between countries. International advertising research has confirmed differences in advertising content between countries. The premise upon which these studies are predicated indicates that advertisements, in part, reflect individual countries' social systems (Emery and Tian, 2003; McLeod and Kunita, 1994; Mueller, 1992; Ramaprasad and Hasegawa, 1992; Zandpour, Chang, and Catalano, 1992).

The importance of cross-cultural communication is evident for China marketing and marketing China, since there are many factors that influence the relationship between Chinese and non-Chinese businessmen. According to Harrison and Hedley (2008), there is an important question of how to sell and market to Chinese companies effectively, both for new market entrants and for those companies with existing operations in China. They point out several factors, such as patience, flexibility, plenty of negotiation, and remembering the basics of marketing, that underlie the preparation of adapting to the local environment.

The core of anthropology as a social science concerns culture and its relationship to human behavior. Although there are many different definitions of culture employed by scholars from various fields, such as

political science, history, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and so on, the common points made by cross-disciplinary scholars are clear. The essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas that are historically derived, selected, and generated to support attached values. Culture systems may be considered as products of action or as conditioning elements of further action. They consist of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts (Feldhusen, 2008; Lillis and Tian, 2010).

THE IMPACT OF CULTURE ON MARKETING COMMUNICATION

Lee, Yang, and Graham (2006) conducted research about tension and trust in international business negotiations with 176 American and Chinese executives who participated in simulated international business (buyer–seller) negotiations. The data collected reflect a series of cultural differences between the two groups. The Chinese and American executives mutually felt tension during the negotiation; however, for the Chinese, greater levels of tension led to an increased likelihood of agreement, but also led to lower levels of interpersonal attraction and in turn lower trust of their American counterparts. For the Americans, the felt tension marginally decreased the likelihood of an agreement and, did not affect interpersonal attraction, but did have a direct negative effect on trust. Zhang and Zhou (2010) inquire: “Are those Chinese companies simply lucky survivors in chaotic price wars, or do they know something about how to wage price wars that their Western counterparts do not?” In their study, they found that luck had nothing to do with being a victor in a price war, but good planning and execution did. It is fair to say that Chinese companies are much keener about price wars than the executives in the West.

Cross-cultural marketing communication is marketing communication among consumers or customers whose culture differs from that of the marketer’s own culture in at least one fundamental aspect of cultural such as language, religion, social norms and values, education, and life style. Cross-cultural marketing communication demands that firms be aware of and sensitive to cultural differences. To respect the right to culture by the consumers in various cultures and marketplaces, marketers should understand that their customers have a right to maintain, practice, and identify with their own culture. If the marketers want to succeed in cross-cultural marketing, they must work in a way that respects the consumer’s values and their right to cultural ties. For example, for Western marketers to communicate in a business setting, it is important for them to respect the Chinese government’s claim for *guoqin*, which means that they must “consider the special situation or character of China” (Yan, 1994). In another research on refrigerators, Baoku, Lijuan, and Bingru (2011) state that peasants evaluate product attributes differently in various regions and markets. In the case of the refrigerator market, segmentation is very important. This is evidenced by the fact not only related refrigerators, but also high-tech products China has a total of 53 state-level high-tech development zones (Tu, 2011). In sum, marketing communication is not an independent behavior, but is related to all other business or market behaviors. From the anthropological perspective, then, all market behaviors are culture-bound. Buying and selling take place within the culture itself (Hamilton, 1987).

In order to match marketing with consumer preferences, purchasing behavior, and product-use patterns, marketers benefit from understanding the market’s cultural environment. Business firms should not focus on cultural differences merely to adjust marketing communication programs to make them acceptable to consumers. This is to suggest that firms should also identify cultural similarities, in order to identify opportunities and modify standard marketing strategies based on marketing communication theory informed with cultural information. Working skillfully with these cultural similarities and differences in the worldwide marketplace is an important marketing task for businesses.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

In the 1950s, anthropologist Edward T. Hall was beginning a career that would be highly influential in business in terms of cross-cultural communication. From 1950 to 1955, Hall served as director of the

U.S. State Department's "Point Four" training program, a training program designed to teach technicians who would be working outside North America. Hall clearly understood the significance of cultural influence on communication effectiveness. Hall built a career in the cross-cultural communication field and eventually wrote several seminal works in business, anthropology, communication, and many other fields (Jordan, 2003).

Hall's practice and influence in the fields of cross-cultural communication and intercultural training have been monumental. He clearly understood that errors in cross-cultural communication could destroy a business deal or a peace agreement. In his first book, *The Silent Language*, he explained culture as communication, and communication as involving much more than just language. Communication included nonverbal characteristics and had to be understood in its cultural context (Hall, 1981). In later books, he explored the culturally different ways of conceiving space and time, as well as the implications in business practice. Hall's practice in and theoretical contributions to marketing communication generated great impact and international value in terms of cross-cultural factors. Many other anthropologists, such as Gay Ferraro (2006) among others, have continued Hall's work on communication in international settings.

Anthropologists' interest in cultural studies grew out of academic purposes but has been extended to business applications as well. The results of anthropological study on culture have been widely applied in various fields of the business world. In the business world, a profound understanding of cultural values in general and specific individual cultural characteristics in particular can lead to greater success in the global market and economy. On the other hand, cultural misunderstandings can be counterproductive for individual development, organizational effectiveness, and profits, because cultural factors influence people's motives, brand comprehension, attitude, and intention to purchase. Therefore, it is important that we clearly understand the fact that in the global marketplace the effectiveness of communication depends on many factors, however, the primary one among them is the capacity to understand our cultural preferences and how they influence and are influenced by those from other parts of the world (Emery and Tian, 2003; Lillis and Tian, 2009).

We argue that the anthropological approach is a very effective way to assess the impact of culture on international marketing communications. We agree with Mariampolski (2006) that culture is important as a heuristic principle for describing and classifying human behaviors, and it is also an analytic concept to be used for explaining how individual choices result from the interpersonal influences and the symbolic universe that delineates everyday life. According to Mariampolski, culture operates on both the material and nonmaterial levels of human experience, serving as the foundation for the behaviors, meanings, and tools of all human collectives. To Mariampolski, cultural tools refer to all of the physical components of a group's life experiences, which include technology and materials, as well as the fundamental rules, codes, and techniques for accomplishing daily affairs. Cultural meanings refer to the sense-making process how people intellectually or emotionally understand the purposes, implications, and associations that underline all of human behaviors and the tools individuals use in everyday life.

Business negotiation, another kind of important format for marketing communication, also necessitates awareness of cultural difference. A recent study by Chang (2003) has concluded that in Chinese society, people emphasize the "zero-sum game" in most of their business competition activities. It is suggested that a successful negotiation should create a "win-win" situation. As Thompson (2001) noted, a true win-win negotiation is one where any agreement reached by negotiators covers most interests of both sides. However, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to improve one party's outcome, while simultaneously not hurting the other party's result. As such, honesty could be the first step toward a better agreement with the Chinese business community. To be honest about one's intentions, goals, and interests can help to build trust and create a positive bargaining zone. Respecting culture difference and being patient in waiting for a response will be the second step toward a successful negotiation. Lastly, but not finally, extra services or practical favors cement friendship and sincerity in business transactions.

These two recent studies suggest that in the real business world, firms can profit by studying the Hofstede culture model, which entails accepting cultural differences and practicing those skills in marketing communication practices, enabling them to gain the expected or better outcomes. There are

innumerable factors that affect the international business environment but a fundamental precondition of any successful international business enterprise is effective communication, which more or less involves the businessperson's awareness of other cultures. As such, cross-cultural problems definitely provide greater challenges and opportunities for business firms in the 21st century, even though these challenges might not be new to the marketing communication field itself. The effectiveness of international marketing communication can be strengthened when businesspeople become aware of cultural differences and their impact on communications.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS TO CHINA MARKETERS

The importance of the success of marketing communication is obvious in progressively more competitive international markets. Marketing communication strategies and skills determine the profitability of business organizations. Culture is one of the key factors that lies deeply rooted in the life of each individual and exerts tremendous influence on a variety of human behaviors. Cultural difference can have a profound impact on outcomes that are vitally important to the success of a business deal. From a practical standpoint, building an awareness of both visible and invisible manifestations of culture is a critically important first step in determining how to effectively conduct marketing communications internationally and cross-culturally.

Cross-cultural communication is becoming even more important for the Chinese marketers in this new century since China planned to more widely open its market to the world and export more of its service and products to the world market. It is suggested that Chinese business leaders are better prepared for cross-cultural communication and put it at their corporate strategic level for marketing China and China marketing. It is true that in today's business world, whoever masters cross-cultural communication strategies and skills will win the competition.

While international business is often conducted through various means from culture to culture, marketing communications can be enhanced when managers are cross-culturally trained to be aware of areas likely to create communication roadblocks and conflict. International business in general is enhanced when people from different cultures find new approaches to solve problems by creating solutions that combine cultural perspectives and examine the problem at hand from each other's differing perspectives.

Moreover, it is key for cross-cultural business leaders to understand one's business partners well enough to make cultural adjustments to solve the conflicts (Hooker, 2008). Anthropologists are professionally trained to be highly sensitive to cultural differences; the result of anthropological study on culture has been widely applied in various fields in the real business world. It is suggested that anthropological approaches offer highly effective applications and solutions toward the understanding of cross-cultural issues in international marketing communication.

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