

Constructing Culturally Competent Website for International Business Programs

Mary Goebel-Lundholm
Peru State College

Catherine Reid
University of Nebraska, Omaha

Research indicates cultural markers used in web design as important for effective transmission and understanding of desired message. Better than localization strategies which focus on specific countries and languages, the culturally competent website is easily reachable and comprehensible to international audiences. Using previously identified effective web design criteria accompanied by cultural markers; the paper evaluates two International Business Program web sites to determine effectiveness of message transmittal and if determined to be necessary, make recommendations for improvement.

INTRODUCTION

American (United States) universities have long attempted to attract diverse audiences. Universities traditionally include international audiences as potential clients. With the advent of the internet and recognition of its potential to more readily access prospective international clients, university websites became omnipresent in attempts to gain competitive advantage in marketing efforts. How culturally competent are publicly supported university international program websites? Are publicly supported university websites designed to appeal to culturally diverse international audiences? A review of two publicly supported university websites serves to answer these questions.

Cultural sensitivity and adaptability to specific culturally defined markets are the foundation for Barber and Badre's (1998) body of work. Through their body of work, Barber and Badre define and explore the effective use of cultural markers in web design. In spite of rapid ongoing change related to web use, "basic tenets of usability including learnability, efficiency, and satisfaction combined with a basic component of HCI (human-computer interaction), detailed audience analysis, take on a larger meaning when designing for an international market" (Badre, 2001). Badre's investigation of cultural markers relative to web design indicates, "Global Interface is culturally dimensional" (Badre, 2001).

Institutions of higher learning design their websites as marketing tools to attract as large and diverse an audience as possible. An inquiry into their creation is best seen through the lens as developed by Wurtz's evaluation of McDonald's website adaptations to varying international markets. The paper begins with a brief review of traits related to high and low context communications developed by Edward T. Hall and several applications adapted by Wurtz from Hofstede's work. The paper then applies these measures to two publicly funded American Universities to determine appeal to potential international audiences.

HALL AND HOFSTEDE

Edward T. Hall developed the concepts of cultural contexts while teaching cross-cultural communication skills to employees of the United States Foreign Services. Hall, with his colleague, George Trager, combined pertinent characteristics from anthropology and linguistics to develop frameworks to identify and chart cultures across certain dimensions. One dimension with particular application to the education environment is the categorization of cultures as high or low context. The terms “high context” and “low context” summarize generalized observations relevant to cultural differences (Hall, 1976).

HIGH CONTEXT VERSUS LOW CONTEXT

High context and low context explain differences in communication styles found within homogenous societies. The concept is important to understand the degree to which a person fits within the contextual framework in communication. Innate understanding of messages within a single culture occurs because communicators share, in their past history, a formative cultural experience. This in turn creates a unique environment rife with clues to meaning within the communication environment.

TABLE 1
SUMMARY OF COMMUNICATION CHARACTERISTICS OF LOW AND HIGH
CONTEXT CULTURES

LOW CONTEXT CULTURES	HIGH CONTEXT CULTURES
Overtly displays meanings through direct communication forms.	Implicitly embeds meanings at different levels of the sociocultural context.
Values individualism.	Values group sense.
Tends to develop transitory personal relationships.	Tends to take time to cultivate and establish a permanent personal relationship.
Emphasizes linear logic.	Emphasizes spiral logic.
Values direct verbal interactions and are less able to read nonverbal expressions.	Values indirect verbal interaction and is more able to read nonverbal expressions.
Tends to use “logic” to present ideas.	Tends to use more “feeling” in expression.
Tends to emphasize highly structured messages, give details, and place great stress on words and technical signs.	Tends to give simple, ambiguous, noncontexting messages.

Source: Adapted from *Beyond Culture*, E. T. Hall, 1976. Copyright 1976, 1981 by Edward T. Hall.

To communicate effectively within and across these communities, communicators need to comprehend both the overt communication and be attendant to subtle communication cues. Communicators need an explicit knowledge of signals in the environment to correctly interpret the intended message. For instance, high context societies know parts of a message without speaking due to years of interaction. The table above summarizes components of high and low context cultures relevant to communication.

In an attempt to deal with the same issues, Geert Hofstede, a Dutch business consultant, developed a framework to display how different cultures process information. Hofstede’s dimension of collectivism describes how some societies integrate people from birth into strong, cohesive groups where individuals define Collectivist themselves as part of a loyal, life-long in-group. Societies believe in placing relationships at the heart of all existence. Hofstede’s dimension of individualism describes societies in which individuals maintain strong, unique identities based on self reliance.

ELIZABETH WURTZ

Wurtz (2005) acknowledges the low context nature of internet communication and related marketing. As a result, Wurtz's review of McDonald's marketing to high context populations identifies a transition away from text specific content to greater use of adaptable imagery as a means of effective communication. Recognition of implied communication cues through imagery, which include body language, situational settings and implied behavior, communicate more effectively to high context audiences. Therefore, the visual layout (including images, photos and animation) and how the primary product is featured, combined with ease of navigation attract potential clients.

She predicates her work on several assumptions related to internet usability and design. The first assumption is that the internet user has appropriate accessibility and technological capacity to navigate effectively at complex websites. Moreover, the user has the time and patience to use a site to find desired information. Finally, she acknowledges that web designers make certain assumptions about interface desirability of special effects, animation and user satisfaction.

In her work, Wurtz (2005) finds more prominent, elaborate animation in high context cultures. Images of people, most often in action, i.e. dancing or other active motion imply happiness. Inclusions of certain culture specific motions (Japanese bowing, Latin American dancers) serve as non-verbal means of assimilation of the viewer. Since high context cultures include collectivist societies, imagery tends to be displayed in groups. While individuals are found in high context websites, the focus is not on the individual but rather the enjoyment from the use of a product. Interpretation of message derives from the visual cues: the look on ones face, the interaction between group characters, often, the joy of dancing or relating to another. High context websites display happy, healthy people which imply a good life.

As the table below demonstrates, high context websites tend to be multi-layered. For example, the home page displays cubes that when clicked on roll to a new side to reveal more information. Another example is the use of pages in a book. The user must click on the top of the page and engage in the act of physically moving to the next page. This of course, requires the motivation of the user to engage with the site in a search for desired information.

TABLE 2
SUMMARY COMPARING HIGH AND LOW CONTEXT WEBSITE CHARACTERISTICS

WEBSITE CHARACTERISTIC	HIGH CONTEXT	LOW CONTEXT
Imagery	Active/manifests in greater animation/Groups	Subtle Effects/More Passive/Individuals
	Invites user to interact	Written/textual links
	Creates visual connection between image and text Action invites viewer to be part of activity-often dancing, people interacting	Tends to suggest individual enjoyment or reflection Explains how one sees oneself
Text	Slogans	Logos
Promotes	Lifestyle/healthy/holistic	Product
	Focus away from product toward enjoyment derived from product	Consumerism
Transparency	User "chases" information	Sender does the work to clarify message

WEBSITE CHARACTERISTIC	HIGH CONTEXT	LOW CONTEXT
	Use of numerous mouse-overs to find embedded information	Detailed language/large number of links/clear verbal description
	Receiver works to retrieve information largely found in environmental cues Relies on user's patience and willingness to find information	Direct/immediate availability of information
Navigation	Parallel	Linear
	Montage/Information found in layers	Tabular/Functional design with clear information
	Cascade of links open in new browser windows	Pages open consistently from initial page

Source: Adapted from "A cross-cultural analysis of websites from high-context cultures and low-context cultures," by E. Wurtz, 2005, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communications*, 11(1), article 13. Retrieved from <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol11/issue1/wurtz.html>. Copyright 1999-2010 John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Low context websites tend to focus on the individual and how that single person derives pleasure from the use of a product. The question answered through the site is: what does the product deliver to the person. The answer is delivered through clear, textual messages with numerous links from one main page. The focus on the individual tends to mean less activity, more subtle motion if any motion at all. The website designer places information in positions of importance, easily noticed and accessed by the user. Reflecting low context cultures focus on consumerism, the website tends to highlight the product and directs users through the use of direct language to locations to garner desired information.

UNIVERSITY WEBSITE REVIEWS

Two North American (United States) publicly funded universities with open enrollment served as the basis for the evaluation outlined here. Particular attention for the purpose of this evaluation focused on websites developed for international professional development programs rather than the home page for the institution. The paper explores the websites of the University of Nebraska at Omaha International Professional Development program found at [http:// world.unomaha.edu/ipd/main.php?submenu=home](http://world.unomaha.edu/ipd/main.php?submenu=home) and the University of Colorado Denver Institute for International Business found at http://www.ucdenver.edu/academics/International_Programs/CIBER/Pages/IIB_CIBER.aspx.

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA INTERNATIONAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The website for the University of Nebraska-Omaha International Professional Development program seen below, fails to use elements to meet the needs of a high context audience. Everything from the imagery to the verbiage accommodates a low context audience.

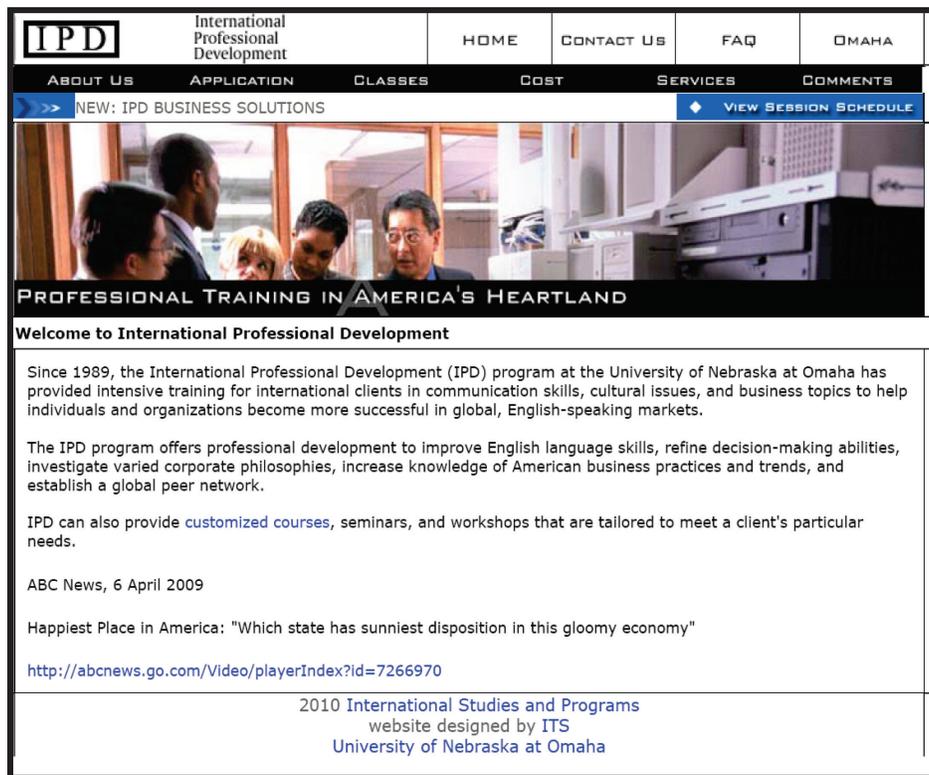
Imagery on the website is very limited. The single picture, while diverse does not deliver a contextual meaning easily discernable to the typical person from a high context culture. It is clear from viewing the picture who is talking however; there is nothing to indicate a setting from which to interpret further meaning. It also lacks a sense of place. The use of a diverse group does fit within the parameters of high context design; however, the high context viewer looks at the faces to garner meaning. The picture is ambiguous, it is impossible to read the faces of all the group members. The positioning of several heads viewed from the side or behind disguise potential meaning derived from facial expression. Those with expressions visible are difficult to read or appear to indicate some negative or bitter expression. This

interpretation is not attractive nor does it imply a desirable message to attract an international person to the location.

The picture better fits a low context audience in which images serve as “window dressing” rather than convey significant meaning. The picture suggests little thought outside of a need to show a diverse group. It implies the picture is not that important, therefore not considered a significant contribution to overall meaning. Further, it suggests the picture from a distinctly “western” perspective; that the issue is diversity rather than delivery of message.

There is one minor high context element in the presentation. Pictures in high context cultures tend to indicate a “hierarchy,” an easily identifiable order within the composition of characters. If a sense of orderliness cannot be visually presented, the picture may not convey the intended message. The picture presented in the University of Nebraska-Omaha portrays one older gentleman leaning into the group, shoulders back, making direct eye contact with the implied speaker. This gentleman’s body language is the strongest which implies the leadership position. A person from a high context culture would also identify the most senior person in the picture as leader.

FIGURE 1
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA OMAHA; INTERNATIONAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



Source: University of Nebraska at Omaha, International Professional Business.
Retrieved from <http://world.unomaha.edu/ipd/main.php?submenu=home>

While the leader might be identified, the picture provides no further cues as to what is happening leaving the viewer outside the experience. Nothing invites the viewer to explore further meaning behind the picture.

Also, this picture occupies roughly 50% of the visual space thereby wasting an opportunity to provide information important to high context audiences. Pictures of previous program participants engaged in activities or pictures of program leadership or instructors provide greater visual meaning. The viewer

could more readily be invited into the site through the inclusion of people with clear expressions of happiness, curiosity or learning.

Verbiage on the site is direct, a low context concept. The selected script is simple, rather boring. High context viewers prefer more flair, generally representing softness. Parts of the text do blink or change in sequential order. However, the animation serves as nothing more than a distraction, if noticed at all. The motion does nothing to invite the viewer to engage in the site or to learn more through interaction with the site.

The quote from ABC evening news found toward the bottom of the page, confuses the readers from high context cultures. Just what is meant by “Happiest Place in America,” “Which state has sunniest disposition in this gloomy economy” moreover, is this reference to Omaha Nebraska? Expressions are not easily interpreted as meaningful language to a high context person. What exactly does it mean, “Happiest place in America?” In addition, expressions such as “sunniest disposition” and “gloomy economy” may be descriptive to the reader whose first language is English; however an international audience would have difficulty understanding what this means. And, finally, the link to take the reader to the ABC site opens to an advertisement unrelated to the happiest place in America. The link fails to take the viewer directly to images related to Omaha Nebraska. The link failure certainly implies a failure of concern about the viewer and the viewer’s needs.

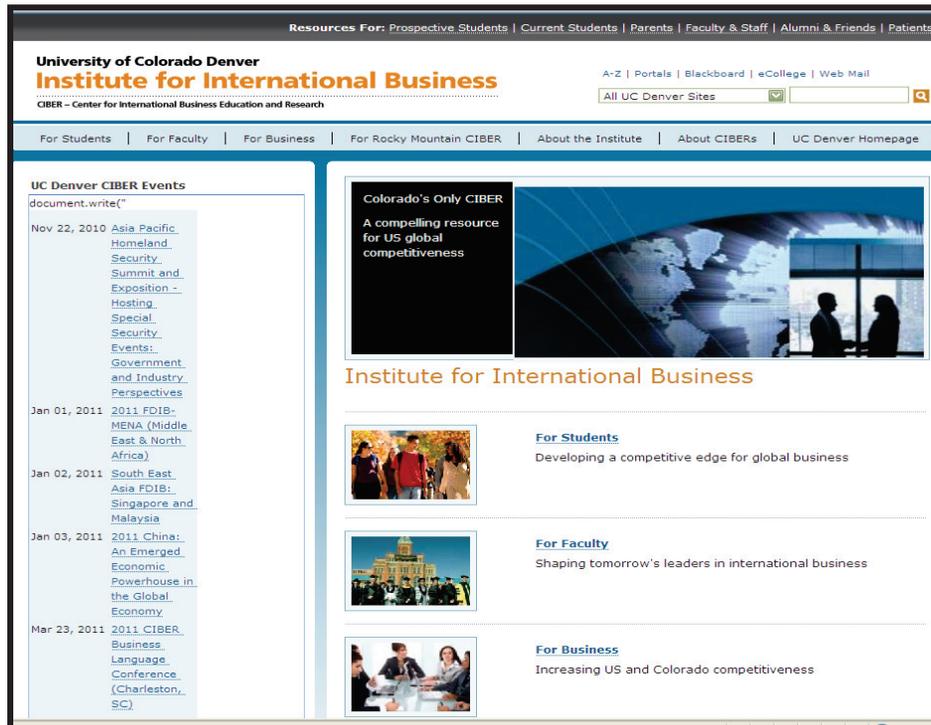
When shown to an individual from a high context culture, the first reaction was “this is fake. It can’t be from a real university interested in attracting students.” The website designed for the University of Nebraska at Omaha’s International Professional Development program evidences design characteristics of low context cultural iconography and text. The site fails to appeal to the high context audience.

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO DENVER INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

The website images displayed below presents a contrasting approach which reflects greater attention to the high context viewer needs. Elements from the website of the University of Colorado, Denver, Institute for International Business seen below, reflects excellent consideration for communication specifically with an international high context audience.

Multiple images connect the viewer to various informational links. The primary picture located in the upper right corner of the home webpage provides a combination of an “active” globe with an inset of people greeting each other. While the images of the people are in silhouette, there is no question these are people meeting within the context of the active global community. The imagery of the continents set against a comfortable blue clearly indicates movement. Lines of what appear to be wispy clouds suggest a world in motion. This imagery is repeated on various pages layered underneath this original picture. This and other images provide visual links accessed by mouse-overs indicative of a site designed for high context cultures. Underneath this opening pictorial presentation is a column with various pictures with minimal writing directing the viewer to various options available within the website.

FIGURE 2
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO DENVER INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS
WEBSITE PRIMARY PICTURE



Source: http://www.ucdenver.edu/academics/InternationalPrograms/CIBER/Pages/IIB_CIBER.aspx

FIGURE 3
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO DENVER INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS
PICTURES FOUND ON HOMEPAGE



Source: http://www.ucdenver.edu/academics/InternationalPrograms/CIBER/Pages/IIB_CIBER.aspx

Each picture displays either a group or several people. No picture portrays a single person. While the pictures are relatively small, each clearly displays people engaged in activity, some smiling, some walking, some appear engaged in inquiry. The pictures display imagery which suggests an interesting, holistic lifestyle; some show meetings indoors while others show people enjoying the out of doors. The focus is not on a product but upon people deriving pleasure from the experience of engaging in associated activity. Each picture invites the viewer to explore information behind the imagery. Mouse-overs take the viewer to numerous montages of pictorial and verbal information. The last picture in the column is a globe, again implying universal accessibility.

The menu column shown below is located on the website on the upper-most left hand side position. This vertical menu positions activities according to date. The inclusion of dates as well as verbiage invites the user to find information adding an extra dimension to the viewer's environment. Verbiage is minimal; the user can navigate through the events by use of the visual dates portrayed as time line.

FIGURE 4
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS MENU OF DATES FOUND ON HOMEPAGE



Source: http://www.ucdenver.edu/academics/InternationalPrograms/CIBER/Pages/IIB_CIBER.aspx

The website for the University of Colorado at Denver is much more attuned to an international audience accustomed to the use of high context information display. Multiple layers of information located under active, inviting pictures accessed by mouse-overs, appeals to high context users. Minimum verbiage allows the high context user to interpret imagery yet locate information efficiently with visual cues provided by dates. The website used for the University of Colorado Denver's Institute for International Business displays excellent consideration for the high context audience.

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