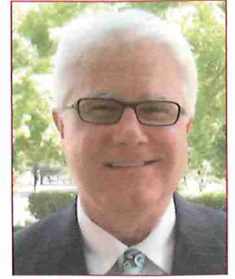


Jeff Williams



## International branding errors cause trouble

The annals of marketing campaigns are littered with offensive and often hilarious translations and branding efforts that have backfired, originating from large companies that should have known better.

At a recent session on "Taking Your Brand Global" at the National Retail Federation's annual Big Show in New York, executives from Disney and Jimmy Choo shoes made the point that you only get one chance to make a first impression. If you blow that, then you have a lot of damage control to do, and you may never capture that market. Even well-established brands falter when they don't conduct the right market research and take into account historical, cultural and linguistic considerations.

Just this past March, footwear giant Nike was in the hot seat for releasing a seasonal shoe around St. Patrick's Day that they branded "Nike SB Black and Tan Quickstrike." What they had not counted on and obviously did not research was the fact that the Black and Tans were a notorious British paramilitary force in the 1920s who were responsible for brutal attacks against Irish civilians. A Black and Tan can also refer to a popular drink that is half stout and half lager, but the more sinister connotation garnered a lot of negative press for Nike and made their marketing team look insensitive and amateurish at best.

Volkswagen had a loyal following and robust sales in Brazil, where their marketing and advertising had been well-established and localized to the Portuguese-speaking market. Several years ago they rolled out their global marketing campaign, "Das Auto," which they mistakenly thought would tout their German heritage and ingenuity and would translate into all markets worldwide. The VW Beetle had been manufactured in Brazil for decades, and the brand was regarded as one of their own by Brazilian consumers. The result in Brazil was a significant loss in market share because the campaign did not resonate at all with Brazilian consumers, who felt the brand was emphasizing VW's German roots and heritage, forsaking its deep ties to Brazil.

Valérie Berset-Price, PTIGlobal's resident consultant for best international business practices, relayed this story of one of the most egregious brand errors that recently occurred in China. The GAP clothing company introduced a huge campaign for a new brand of jeans called 1969. While 1969 in the United States is remembered for Woodstock and the first moon landing, in China it is remembered as the end of the Cultural Revolution. Millions of men, women and children were hurled into forced labor. There

were public book burnings, intellectuals tortured, property seizures and families ripped apart by the state. In short, it is a year that is very, very dark and delicate in the Chinese mind, especially the minds of those forced to live through the atrocities.

Since 1969 was such a positive year in America, the GAP assumed it must have been a great year in China as well. The company obviously didn't think much about this at all and certainly didn't do the market research that would have shown this was a bad idea. It added insult to injury by pricing the jeans at a ghastly \$300 a pair in a country with an average annual income of only \$3,200 per person. Yes, there are individual Chinese women in Guangzhou province who are earning more than this by far and who can afford to buy a nice pair of jeans. But even an American cashier in the Shanghai GAP store admitted it was unlikely she'd see many pairs move out the door. She also told Adam Minter, an American writer living in Shanghai, something that potentially shows even more cultural ignorance: "We chose to have the same product mix here as in our Japanese stores." Yet the Chinese and Japanese markets in everything — even rice — are as different and distinct from each other as the American and North Korean markets. The GAP mounted prominent displays and billboards with the offending numbers 1969 eight feet high to market the new line of jeans. Then it was widely reported that the stores didn't even carry the jeans in the smaller sizes that are common among Chinese women.

The result was a huge loss of revenue and, most importantly, "face," which has a high value in Asian cultures. The GAP lived up to its name and created a large one in credibility and savvy with its Chinese customers. The moral of this story is that (usually) American companies fail to do thorough market research, engage in focus groups or partner with a localization company to carry out international business awareness and brand testing. But most of all, they fail to understand the differences between cultures — including cultural history and in particular how closely culture and language are intertwined — before mounting an expensive marketing campaign and product introduction. **M**

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