Wood markets Asia

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Speaking their language: Marketing across Languages and Cultures
Introduction

"If I'm selling to you, I speak your language. If I'm buying, dann müssen Sie Deutsch sprechen [then you must speak German]."

_German Chancellor Kohl_

Seems kind of obvious I guess, but then again there is nothing common about common sense. Presenting effective marketing content German is not simply a matter of swapping words; as anyone who has ever learnt a second language can attest to, language and culture are two sides of the same coin; they reflect and supplement each other, and in marketing language and culture are the two big guns in the marketer’s arsenal.

Here in the South Pacific marketing has been greatly simplified by a common business language, English, and a fairly homogenous view of what accepted business practices are. Marketing materials are often used across the region with little or no change; we see a lot of the same ads on TV here that our cousins in West Island do. But as an exporter goes further a-field it becomes evident that marketing materials need to be adapted to suit the unique requirements of the market into which we seek to promote. Would the Toyota “Bugger!” ads go down as well in the USA as they did here in New Zealand?

At the most elementary level this customization involves presenting information in the native language of the audience, while at the other extreme it involves the presentation of the entire marketing package localised for appropriate linguistic and cultural context.

Today I intend to touch on the translation and localization processes, as well as provide some ideas and tips for presenting marketing materials in some non-English speaking markets.

**Terminology**

Every industry has its jargon, and it is important to be clear on the definitions.

**Translation** is the transposition of the meaning of a word from one language to another. Complications can arise, often when local slang is not taken into account.

- When Coors Beer translated their slogan, "Turn it Loose" into Spanish, it was only after the ads went public that they realized it could also be read as "Suffer From Diarrhea."
- The grocery store chain Konsum in Sweden had a minor problem with their Hungarian customers helping themselves in the chain's convenience store Servus. "Servus" means "yours for free" in Hungarian.

**Transliteration** is the transposition of the sound of a word into the characters of another language. This can be fraught with challenges too, as the following will show.

- The Coca-Cola name in China was first transliterated to characters to be read as “Kekoukela”, meaning “Bite the wax tadpole” or “female horse stuffed with
wax”, depending on the dialect. When this error was identified, Coke then researched 40,000 characters to find a phonetic equivalent “kokou kole”, translating into "happiness in the mouth."

- Bacardi concocted a fruity drink for marketing in Europe with the name “Pavian”; this was supposed to denote French chic and have appeal to the yuppie market. But “Pavian” means “baboon” in German.

**Localisation** refers to taking a message or a set of materials and changing it to suit the local cultural context. For example, it may refer to changing the imagery on a brochure to represent the local context, or re-writing the text to stress points more appropriate to the target market.

**Globalisation** refers to preparing processes and materials in such a way as to ensure that they are flexible enough to be manipulated for local markets.

**The Business Card**

The basic tool of business everywhere, the business card is perhaps the most translated item on the planet. But what exactly should you translate/transliterate on the business card? There are no hard and fast rules as to what is appropriate, but from experience here is what we suggest.

**Your name**
Some may prefer to leave it in Latin script, but this can produce pronunciation and memory issues on the part of the recipient. I myself have great difficulty remembering people’s names in my first language, let alone a foreign one.

As a general guide for a few Asian languages:
- Japanese: transliterate to katakana, this will provide an easily readable name for the recipient. Do not use Kanji; it is regarded by Japanese as somewhat odd for foreigners to use the ideographic characters, and Kanji can have multiple possible pronunciations.
- Chinese: transliterate to appropriate Chinese characters to mimic English pronunciation. Chinese is an ideographic script (the characters represent ideas/concepts). Note however that there are two main Chinese written scripts, Simplified Chinese (as used in mainland China) and Traditional Chinese (as used in Taiwan, Hong Kong etc.). There is no guarantee that a Simplified Chinese character will be intelligible in Taiwan, or vice versa.
- Korean: transliterate to Hangul. Hangul is a phonetic script (i.e. the characters represent sounds) so your recipient will have a fair idea of how to pronounce your name.

**Your title**
The position you hold within your company, and how this is explained in the target language, can have great impact. In some cultures it can be the deciding factor as to whether or not the client will meet with you, or consider you responsible enough to sign agreements with. Of course different cultures have very different management structures. In Japan there is a level of manager called “kacho”; this can be used for anything from office supervisor through to General Manager. There can be multiple
“kacho” within the one company; the rankings of the “kacho” may not be formally noted anywhere, but will only be evident by the group dynamic.

Your title should be translated into the target language; but do the research first. Ensure that the title in the target language you are assuming is appropriate within your industry and do not over or understate your case.

Presenting the Company Name
Most marketers will be very protective of their business name. The question always arises; should we transliterate/translate it? This should be approached on a language by language, culture by culture basis as to what is appropriate for the local market and what options are available, as well as being a reflection of your individual corporate culture.

So what are your options? As an example, take a company called “Offshore Timber Suppliers”. In Japan your options would be:

1. Leave it in English. The use of Latin characters in Japan for company, brand and product names is well established. This particular combination of sounds may, however, be difficult for Japanese to pronounce. At the same time, your company name, to the non-English speaker, will carry no meaning. The meaning of the company name will be lost.
2. Transliterate to the phonetic script katakana. This is a Japanese script that is primarily used for foreign or loan words. This would provide Japanese readers with an exact pronunciation and it will retain a foreign “feel” to it, but again there would be no meaning associated with the sounds.
3. Translate into Japanese kanji/hiragana. Kanji are the Chinese characters that are generally used for most nouns and verbs in Japanese; hiragana is the script that is used to phonetically represent the sounds of native Japanese words. If the brand contains real words (as in our example) you can create a name that will represent what you are in Japanese. This will give the product name a definite “Japanese” feel; if your goal is to present as a Japanese product then this may be the identity for you. However, be warned that many kanji have multiple possible pronunciations. Selecting kanji where there is no ambiguity as to pronunciation should be a priority; likewise your non-Japanese speaking representatives should be educated in the pronunciation of the name and the relative meaning.

A note to those who do business across the Chinese speaking world. The main spoken language across China and Taiwan is what we call Mandarin. The written language is quite different; Mainland China uses Simplified Chinese characters while Taiwan uses Traditional Chinese characters. The Hong Kong spoken dialect is called Cantonese; it uses on the whole the same written character set as Traditional Chinese with a few unique variations, but the pronunciation of the characters is quite different. If you have a transliteration of your business name done for Hong Kong, the pronunciation of your name may vary considerably when you go to Mainland China or Taiwan.

Address
In all cases except Chinese, we would never recommend a client translate or transliterate the address. It serves no purpose to give a Japanese businessperson your
card with the address in katakana. However, in China it is considered appropriate to present a card totally in Chinese. For China we would always recommend a double sided card; English on one side and Chinese on the other.

**Numbers**

In general you are safe using Arabic (a misnomer, our numbers are actually derived from Hindi) numbers (1, 2, 3 etc.) across the world. The key exceptions would be Arabic (!), some Indian languages and Chinese. In Japanese, if the writing is vertical it is usually in native Japanese numerals, if horizontal it is normally in Arabic numerals. However, some points to note:

- Avoid using commas in numbers where possible. Whereas in English we use a comma to separate the thousands from the hundreds, this is by no means universal. Some languages have no commas (e.g. Chinese) while some European languages use a comma rather than a decimal point. So where an English speaker sees “1,050” and thinks “One thousand seven hundred and fifty”, an Italian would see “One point zero five zero”.

- The Billion Conundrum. Should you be fortunate enough to be working in such exalted figures, be aware that there are two billions in English. The USA billion is one thousand million, but the UK billion is a million million. Be aware that many of the people who have learned English as a second language around the world have learnt from ancient textbooks and dictionaries, and yes clarification has had to be sought. Pass me a document for translation with the word “billion” in it and I will be requesting a written response in numerals.

- Measures. All cultures have developed at some stage their own forms of measures (shoe sizes being a most frustrating example). In many places these have been mainly supplanted by the metric system. For example, in Japan the metric system is used in most common situations, the main exception being when describing land or floor area; rather than square meters they use a native measure “tsubo”; 1 tsubo being equivalent to 3.3 square meters. China, on the other hand, has retained most of its own measurement systems; originally the measures used a base 16 but in the early 20th century they were standardized to make them convert roundly to metric units. It is recommended that when quoting any kind of measure the measurement system is explicitly stated.

**Translation and Localisation**

Translation should be viewed as a part of a process of localization, not as a discrete enterprise in its own right. The number one question we are usually asked is “How much localization of my brochure/website etc. is necessary?” There is no hard and fast answer. Each situation is unique; some clients wish to present as a totally local brand, others wish to retain some or most of their offshore image. But if I had to provide a guide it would be a 70:30 split. Look to retain 70% of the overall image and customize 30% for the local market.

The development of a localised marketing package requires thought and planning. This part of the presentation is about what are some of the logical steps you can take
to ensure that what you end up with is a good fit for your organisation, and the cultural and linguistic market you are talking to.

Don’t only consider the textual content; even non-verbal marketing needs to be considered in light of the market it is being used in. A brief example to illustrate.

- A name brand laundry detergent was launched across the Middle East. The marketing department had decided it was best, due to language and dialectical differences, to go with a purely image driven advertising campaign. They elected for three images running from left to right; next to a washing machine they placed a dirty shirt, then a box of laundry powder, and finally a clean shirt. Unfortunately they did not realise that in most Middle Eastern languages the direction is right to left; this is reflected in the culture in that progression is considered to start on the right and finish on the left. The interpretation? “Give us your shirt and we will make it dirty”.
- And if you have every tried to fast forward through the movie trailers at the start of a video while on a layover at a hotel in Dubai, and been puzzled why it keeps taking you back to the beginning, you should now understand why.

So localization involves preparing marketing materials for the local context. There are a wide range of issues to consider, but I will restrict myself to some of the things you can do in preparation for considering localisation.

**Audience profile**

Marketers (should) write marketing materials with a clear audience in mind, but I cant count the number of times people have come to me and said “Here is one of my main items of marketing collateral, it’s my core brochure, translate it into language X”. Demographics count in all cultures. Define your audience; create a brief/ or an audience profile for the person/organisation that will be doing your localization. Outline to whom the materials will be presented to, how they will be presented, what format and in what scenarios they will be used.

**Presentation style**

Depending on the target demographic, the presentation style may need to be altered. For example, younger Japanese tend to be averse to reading extended lengths of text; a bullet point approach may be far more effective in reaching this market.

**Dialects**

They exist in most languages to various degrees. In English, a good awareness of the usage of English in the USA, UK, Australia etc. can allow you to develop marketing copy that is “dialect neutral”. In some languages (e.g. Spanish) this is also possible, but in others it can be more difficult. If your target is a distinct geographic region or you know a dialect is prevalent, specify this to the localization provider.

**Be prepared for change due to the total volume of characters**

Different languages and scripts mean that the total length of a message can vary significantly. For those who have experience in PPC (Pay Per Click) search engine advertising, you will be aware that there are very strict character limits. Yet some languages have difficulty in fitting tight restrictions. German is a language where, due to the nature of the vocabulary, words end up being very long in character count. The
Document type and format
You can greatly simplify the process if you are clear about the document type and format you wish the content to be returned to you in. If the marketing materials in question are HTML pages from a website, then request that the translation/localisation be done in the source HTML code. Avoid trying to save money by getting work done in text format and then having in-house staff copy into different formats; all the good work of the translator may be undone by one simple operator error when transferring across formats.

Read up a little bit
Take the time out to read up on the target language and culture. I am not advising that you need to become a fluent speaker, but try to learn a little about how the language works, some of the writing conventions etc. It will give you a position of strength when dealing with your translation/localization agency and enable you to appreciate some of the restraints and opportunities in the process.

Taking these simple steps can greatly assist both you and the agency you work with to ensure that what is developed is a best fit for you and your audience.

Globalisation preparation
As discussed, globalization refers to setting up your marketing collateral and processes to ensure that you can efficiently and effectively adapt materials for a local market.

Language logistics
One of the key issues here is to consider coordination of collateral over various languages and media. In other words, the logistics of managing a globalisation effort. Many of you will be familiar with maintaining marketing material content in a wide variety of formats in English, ensuring it is all up to date and consistent. When working across multiple languages, coordinating multiple media updates can be problematic, and inconsistency of content across media and languages is a common issue.

For example, an international education provider has multilingual marketing collateral in the form of web, printed brochures, DVD and PowerPoint presentations that are distributed through resellers globally. The provider needs to release updates to course outlines; web content is updated and localized via a multilingual content management system (m-CMS), but what of the other marketing collateral? Does anyone know where this exact content is replicated? Is the content catalogued and cross-referenced between media? Is the manager of the (e.g.) Thai marketing collateral even aware that the course outlines have been updated?

A well-designed and implemented system will also save you money, time and grief. If content is broken up into discrete blocks of information, and these blocks are cross-referenced between media and languages, any translations undertaken can be recycled. We have seen organizations pay for the translation of exactly the same
content multiple times because they had no way of coordinating the same content between different media.

Media design
There are ways to minimize the expense and logistical effort of presenting across multiple languages. By using smart design systems, cost effective high impact materials can be produced.

Print materials are a prime example. Cost of print for brochure type marketing collateral can be prohibitive. Typically the highest cost is incurred on the smallest print run; and on full colour, high quality brochures the cost factor can restrict you in your ability to deliver a quality presentation in languages where you only have a need for a small number of brochures.

One way around this is to design your brochure with the “blank” concept in mind. Design the brochure so that all the colour and images are generic across all languages. Leave the space for text as a blank in the master design. Do a high volume print run of these colour blanks; minimize your expensive colour print costs by doing the most expensive component in the highest volume. Then, as required, over print in mono with the text of each of the target language(s) in the blank spaces provided. So, you may only need 100 copies in Russian, but these will cost you no more on a per item basis than the 5000 copies you did in Chinese.

Conclusion
This has been, of necessity, a very brief look at a few of the challenges of developing localised marketing materials. In an ideal world we would be able to create specific marketing collateral for every one of our potential audiences, by language, culture and demographic; the reality is that there are trade offs to be made in terms of cost, practicality and convenience, but I hope you have seen that that there are systems available that will allow you to present your brand or product in an appropriate format and context.