



A viaLanguage White Paper

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Speak to Your Market in Their Cultural Language **Tips for going beyond just translation**

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Speak to Your Market in Their Cultural Language

Is it possible to have a document translated from English to Japanese and despite all the best efforts to ensure each word is accounted for still find that your message is misunderstood? Of course. In fact, it is all too common and most often due to a failure to also adapt the message to the culture of the target market.

Successful translation is more than simply exchanging the words and grammar of one language for those of another. If this were the beginning and end of the process, one would only need a dictionary or an online translation engine in which to plug in the desired material: English in, Japanese out.

The reality is that the parts of speech, while obviously keenly important to any translation project, are just one piece of the puzzle. Behind every language is a unique, idiosyncratic culture, and to expect that your message will be understood by your market without accounting for it can be a costly gamble.

In Japanese, for example, communication is “high-context,” which means that readers have a need to sense the age, background, and social/professional status of the writer. It is also necessary to take into consideration the expected inclusion of various indirect communication cues, such as the use of purposely vague expressions, in order to avoid culturally inappropriate confrontations.

To assume that simple translation, or worst yet a translation tool like BabelFish, can capture those cultural nuances is a recipe for embarrassment and very likely serious damage to the reputation of your organization in the eyes of your targeted market.

Examples of problems

Examples of blundered translations abound. You’ve likely heard of some of the more famous gaffes. Pepsico, for example, learned the hard way that before advertising its product in Taiwan it should have more closely scrutinized its campaign slogan: “Come Alive with Pepsi.” Due to a failure to consider the cultural nuances, the ad asked its audience to drink Pepsi because, as the translation read in Chinese, “Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the dead.”

Fellow soft drink giant Coca-Cola Co. suffered similar issues early in its history after failing to include cultural adaptation into the translation of the company’s name in China. When shopkeepers there attempted to represent the sound “Coke” in Chinese the translations ranged from “bite the wax tadpole” to “female horse stuffed with wax.”

Perhaps the most oft-cited error may be that of U.S. car manufacturer Chevrolet. The company, introducing its newest make, the Nova, in the Spanish-speaking world,

assumed the name would summon up the same astronomical image of a bright star as it did for U.S. markets. Unfortunately for Chevy, translators neglected to appreciate that “Nova” would be read by Spanish speakers as “no va,” or “no go,” not a welcome association with a new car.

The need to respect these cultural subtleties is growing ever more acute as companies seek to take their brand and products to a global audience or merely enlarge its appeal in the fast-growing Hispanic market in the U.S. So what is a company to do?

The solution: Cultural adaptation

Whether using culturally sensitive images, employing proper communications mediums or incorporating popular jargon or slang, the most successful translations demonstrate a deep understanding of — and respect for — the culture with which it is attempting to communicate.

Colors, symbols, images — all are part of your message. Often these elements are responsible for the initial response in your audience before even a single word is read. So it’s imperative to adapt the entire communication, not just the words, to ensure the desired result.

This requires understanding both the protocols and the taboos that define ways of communicating in a given market. Cultural adaptation provides the cultural lens through which your non-English-speaking customers view your message, your products and services, and ultimately your value.

Step 1: Select the right translation partner

Given the above, it’s clear that your translation company must necessarily make the culture the targeted audience a priority. Simply consider that in the U.S. alone one third of the market (approximately 99 million people) is made up of non-White racial or ethnic consumers. A great many view advertising as “not for them” and feel that the mainstream media neither understands them nor speaks directly to them.

Not only does adapting your translation to the culture help preserve and further your message, it also demonstrates that you care about your market’s unique needs. Indeed, this difference between translating and truly communicating can have an enormous impact on the ROI of a campaign.

Step 2: Prepare & collaborate

Before the translation project begins, make sure that a style guide and/or glossary have been developed, and are ready for review and approval. In order to avoid confusion down the road, it’s important to get the necessary input and approval on these materials first.

Also, if possible appoint a lead in-country reviewer to scrutinize stylistic issues closely and then contribute to and approve the guide. This ensures that the reviewer's style is incorporated into the work and that there are no surprises at the end of the project.

Step 3: Evaluate the English source material

Search the translated material for pressure points that might call for cultural adaptation. This could be the copy itself, proposed slogans, even key search engine words and phrases. Consider elements such as idiom, humor, values, and symbols and how they should be adapted to the given market.

Your organization should be fully appraised of all interpretations, connotations, associations, and potential messaging confusion for the culture with which you are communicating. Save time and expense by performing this early in the process.

Step 4: Review technical issues

There are a host of technical issues that cannot be overlooked during the translation process, especially related to websites and software applications. Pay special attention to details like fonts and line breaks as their use can have different meanings in different cultures.

For instance, italicizing Japanese script will only confuse most Japanese readers. A more-accepted practice to convey importance or impart respect is to use additional punctuation marks or double-width characters.

Your desktop publishing specialists need to be aware of these issues and work closely with your translation partner to ensure that the format of the translated page is culturally appropriate for the target market.

Getting it right

Making cultural adaptation a key feature of your translation effort is an important step in communicating with your market. By building those cultural elements into the final translation, you help ensure a culturally sensitive result that preserves the essential meaning of the original message without alienating your audience.

Choose a Translation Partner Wisely

Of course, translation budgeting is only part of creating and managing an effective language access program. Selecting the right vendor is also key. As a full-service language service provider, viaLanguage has the right team, the right tools, and all the resources necessary to process your translation and localization jobs efficiently and cost-effectively in more than 50 languages—regardless of your project's size or complexity. viaLanguage's combination of expertise across the content spectrum, proven methodology, superior technology tools as well as a range of value-added

services result in 99% on-time delivery with quality assurance checkpoints all along the way.

Take the Next Step

To learn more about how viaLanguage can help you cost-effectively reach your multicultural communities, call us at 1-800-737-8481 or create your free account at www.viaLanguage.com.