

## **Cross-Cultural Consumer Marketing**

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Marketing activities that originate in Western countries span the globe and reach many cultures. Questions of cross-cultural ethics arise when marketing practices that are acceptable in one country are inappropriate in another.

Consumer marketing, which is impersonal and directed at a mass audience, may be distinguished from relationship marketing, which is based on personal contacts. This is an important distinction because many of the cross-cultural problems surrounding consumer marketing arise precisely because much of the world has traditionally relied on relationship marketing.

World cultures tend to be either rule-based or relationship-based. Rule-based Western cultures rely on a legal or regulatory system to enforce what are seen as universal rules of fairness. Non-Western norms tend to place human relationships at the center of things. While relationship marketing developed in both kinds of cultures, consumer marketing is very much a product of the West and is an inherently foreign practice in relationship-oriented cultures. Even relationship marketing is done differently in the two kinds of cultures. These differences can present ethical challenges.

### **Consumer Marketing in Relationship-Oriented Societies**

Impersonal consumer marketing asks consumers to trust products and believe advertisements created by strangers, which is unnatural for people who traditionally place their trust in friends and family rather than an economic or legal system. As a result consumers may have neither the skills necessary to identify safe and effective products nor a functional legal system that regulates them. Global firms may find it legal and possible to sell dangerous pesticides, high-tar cigarettes, unwholesome baby food, or unsafe equipment that would be unmarketable in some Western countries.

Mass marketing can also inject culturally inappropriate products, prices, and promotion into local cultures. “Morning after” pills may become available in strongly Roman Catholic countries, or the market prices of life-saving drugs may be far beyond the means

of most people in economically less developed countries. Advertisements may contain sexual material or portray disrespect for parental authority that is frowned upon locally. Conversely, local custom can draw multinational enterprises into supporting practices contrary to their own values. Ultrasound machines may be used locally to identify unborn female babies for abortion, and donated organs may be reserved for high-status individuals.

### **Relationship Marketing**

Even relationship marketing differs in rule-oriented and relationship-oriented cultures. Non-Western business cultures typically value loyalty to one's associates, boss, or company. Suppose, for example, that a Western purchasing agent has been interacting with Asian suppliers but changes jobs. The Asian partners may view the agent as immoral for failing to follow through on personal commitments, even though his or her departure from the company may be perfectly normal from a Western point of view.

Western business culture, on the other hand, typically values playing by the rules more highly than personal loyalty. Asian business people, for example, may respect intellectual property obtained from Westerner business partners with whom they have a long-term personal relationship, but they may feel free to use it for their own purposes when there is no such relationship. To the Western mind, relationships are irrelevant when it comes to law.

### **Addressing Cultural Difference**

One approach to accommodating cultural difference is to try to design a single product or promotion that is compatible with a wide range of markets. A growing trend, however, is to do the opposite. Although global communication and distribution technologies are often viewed as a force for homogenization, they actually reinforce regional differences. Multiple cable and satellite channels enable regionally-specific programming, and direct advertising through the Internet reaches highly refined market segments. Sophisticated manufacturing plants and supply chains fill highly customized orders on a global scale. It is rapidly becoming possible for marketers to respect local cultural norms wherever they do business.

### **Further Reading and References**

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