

Rethinking the “G” Word

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The next time someone is tempted with the brilliant idea to employ the word -or prefix- “global” in your brand messaging, tread softly. It’s currently a term so laden with history and controversy that it has similar properties to nitroglycerine: a useful tool for moving great masses at the appropriate distance, or alternately, something that if mishandled could easily blow up in your face. When a mainstream national magazine like Newsweek publishes a five-page article entitled “Globaloney”¹ replete with color photos and informative charts, it’s time to re-evaluate where the terminology is headed, especially with regard to branding. Global brand strategies are one thing, but calling them that is another.

At issue is a confusion of linguistics, as “global” has migrated from representing a hopeful and idealized concept to one guaranteed to raise the hackles of a bevy of stakeholders. How did this happen, and what do we do with our brand messaging now that the term has been so battered and devalued? In a word, keep the strategy and ditch the term.

Once upon a time, companies known as multi-nationals dominated the arena, bent on selling their products at home and everywhere else. Even the term “multi-national” sounded ominous, conjuring up images of companies focused on dominating nations as did Roman armies swarming across the earth in conquest and plunder. A May 1983 article² by Harvard’s Theodore Levitt famously predicted a globalization of markets, built on improved mass communications and a broadened reach of global media. All companies needed to do was create standardized products for the world market and the products would fly off the shelves.

It next became fashionable to build global companies, promoting global brands. A wave of acquisitions and mergers and LBOs caused companies to rebrand themselves under silly names³ like Pepsico and Novartis, and to create global products (remember the “world car”?) for newly-opened markets. It took marketers by surprise that consumers continued to show a preference for local products, or those crafted to local/regional sensibilities. But global brand-building, a methodical process, moves through space and time, rolling like a ponderous ball. Expectations about what ‘global’ signaled gradually transformed. Those who adopted global strategies, names, brands and products became associated with institutions leading the assault on local cultural identities.

What followed were protesters battling police in the streets of Seattle and Genoa, looting Starbucks and McDonald’s. Today the name of the enemy is globalization, sometimes called Americanization, and to its foes it represents a disregard for local convention, gross insensitivity, a steamroller-one-size-fits-all mentality, centralized decision-making, standardization, homogenization and mass dumbing down. Hence the backlash, and hence the newfound caution in even trotting out the term ‘global’ with regard to brand.

Hence the introduction in Egypt of cheese-flavored potato chips bearing Arafat's picture, and Mecca-Cola, a treacly Islamic-themed soft drink. Brand has become a vehicle for corporate imperialism when bundled with the word global.

Granted, there are some generic products which can be sold anywhere without the interference of cultural barriers. But the word global is now so polarized that it has come to suggest threatening forces, and the destruction of tradition and heritage, as opposed to representing the messianic benefits originally intended. Perhaps it is time to revive the antiquarian term "international" when we speak about our brands. In doing so, we suggest a cooperation between nations and cultures, acknowledging the qualities of what came before, with respect for local sensitivities.

Finally, how do we retain the global brand identity without using the word global, while remaining regional/local in our thinking? The answer is a simple one: return to the essential brand promise, and make certain it is upheld. In its simplest terms, a brand is a promise, which leads the consumer to a rewarding experience. If it can be stated in words meaningful and sensitive to the relevant locality, if the promise is then kept, the brand will prosper, no matter what we label it or where.

Footnotes

1. "Is It Globaloney?" by Karen Lowry Miller, Newsweek Magazine, December 16, 2002
2. "The Globalization of Markets" by Theodore Levitt, Harvard Business Review, May 1, 1983
3. "Whatever Happened to No Logo?" by Johann Hari, New Statesman, November 11, 2002

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