Cultural Introspection: Findings of a Pilot Study

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ABSTRACT

Culture is the sum total of people's beliefs, values, customs, norms, morals, and all other capabilities and habits that regulate their behavior in a society. Culture is all encompassing, affects the very way people think and act, and people are often not even aware of its pervasive effect in shaping their whole lives. Therefore, in order establish effective and efficient exchange relationships, international marketers must understand how their foreign customers perceive them and their culture.

This paper presents a research study designed to measure customers' perception of their foreign marketer's culture and compare it with the marketer's self-perception of their own culture. It also presents the findings of a pilot study conducted to measure the Chinese' perception of the American culture and compare it with Americans' perception of their own culture. The findings are valuable in fine tuning both the objectives and the design of the research.

INTRODUCTION

Marketing aims at understanding, explaining, predicting, and possibly controlling exchanges in all spheres of human life. A major part of marketing's inquiry is devoted to exploring exchanges of interest to for-profit and nonprofit organizations as is reflected in the American Marketing Association's definition of marketing (Approved October 2007): "Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large." (AMA 2007).

Culture has a unique place among the numerous factors that play a role in the formation of human personality. On the one hand, culture is an all pervasive force that shapes the total personality of individuals growing up and/or living in the culture. On the other hand, the unabsorbed aspects of the culture act as external factors that influence, facilitate, and constrain individuals' desires and behaviors.

Just as the recognition of culture as an all pervasive force influencing human behavior is growing, its increasing complexity is making it harder to define and analyze than ever before (Craig and Douglas 2006). Moreover, with the increased interaction of world cultures due to globalization of commerce, education, and travel, cultures are constantly changing by responding to and incorporating elements from foreign cultures. Depending on one's view of its desirability, such changes are described as contamination, pluralization, hybridization, enhancement, or even enrichment (Friedman 2005).

In this dynamic environment, since it is the marketers who take the initiative to establish exchanges relationships with their target customers, it becomes their responsibility to ensure that their consumers form correct perceptions of their intentions and actions.

UNDERSTANDING CULTURE

Despite a very long history of research in the field, and a general recognition of its importance in many disciplines, a universal consensus on the definition of culture has continued to remain elusive. Many competing definitions have attempted to capture the most important aspects of culture.

For the purpose of this paper, culture is defined as the sum total of a society's accumulated learning—consisting of mental knowledge and capabilities, and physical skills—that affects the very way the society lives, and the expression of that learning through their ideas (beliefs, values, and morals), behaviors (laws, norms, customs, habits, language, religion, and social institutions), and creations (social infrastructure, buildings, bridges, monuments, art, architecture, and industrial and consumer products). In short, it is the way people in a society live.

It is recognized that the different dimensions of culture are interrelated. One element of a person's culture such as race has an impact on another element such as the social status, which in turn may influence a third element such as the language spoken. Thus, culture is not a random collection of attributes and behaviors but rather like a jigsaw

puzzle in which each piece has a specific position and role, and all fit together (Terpstra and David 1991).

NEED FOR MARKETERS' CULTURAL INTROSPECTION

Marketing organizations have always focused their research effort on their target consumers as their exchange partners. That is probably due to their implicit and justifiable assumption that they very well understand their own goals and motivations, and take them into account in carefully designing their strategies to fit the needs of each market. Further, marketers pay meticulous attention to educating and training their employees so that they would represent the organization's culture and strategies effectively to the markets.

However, one important but often overlooked aspect of this effort is to make sure that the marketers' well intentioned objectives and carefully designed strategies are in fact correctly perceived by their consumers when seen through the consumers' own cultural lenses. And that is a critical and serious omission because, as far as the consumers are concerned "their perception is their reality," and any misperception about the marketer could turn them away from staying in the exchange relationship and become a strategic disaster for the marketer.

Moreover, marketers can change only what they control. Therefore, they must ensure that their own culture is presented correctly and effectively, and then check to make sure that it is in fact so perceived by their consumers. Such sensitivity to consumer perceptions will help make their intentions and actions effective in achieving their desired effect on their customers.

On this background, the present study was designed to measure how foreign customers perceive a marketer's culture, and compare it with the marketers' self-perception of their own culture. It is hoped that such a study would facilitate valuable introspection for American marketers.

RESEARCH DESIGN

1. As the first step, the study created an exhaustive list of important universal facets of culture useful in comparing consumer decisions across cultures. These facets were then classified into several dimensions to facilitate easy communication to the consumer subjects, and meaningful analysis of the results subsequently. The dimensions used to so classify the cultural attributes are presented in Exhibit 1.

EXHIBIT 1
DIMENSIONS OF CULTURAL ATTRIBUTES
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Personal Values
Preferences for and importance of personal values

Social Values
Preferences in relating to and working with others

Importance of Context in Communications
Relative importance of context as opposed to content in communications

Attitudes and Values toward Environment
Values related to economic, technical, and physical environment

Social Attitudes
Attitudes toward roles and behaviors of others

Determinants of Social Status
Attributes used as determinants of social status

Concept of Family
Definition of family, and its importance in personal decisions

Demographics
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2. To measure the cultural dimensions, Semantic Differential scales were used in preference to Likert scales because they can precisely and effectively convey the exact cultural aspect being investigated in each item. Moreover, since the main objective of the research is to develop qualitative understanding of misperceptions and identify cultural dimensions of potential difficulties, the unique advantage of Likert scales in generating a summary index through summated ratings was of little interest to this study.

3. A sample item illustrating the semantic differential scale used and the Instructions given to the respondents are presented in Exhibit 2.

EXHIBIT 2
SAMPLE INSTRUCTIONS AND SEMANTIC DIFFERENTIAL SCALE USED
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"Each cultural dimension is followed by a 5-point scale with labels describing its two opposite ends. The numbers 5 to 1 represent the adjectives: Very, Somewhat, Neither Nor, Somewhat, and Very, applied to the label closest to it.

For example, consider Item 03, of the questionnaire reproduced below:

CULTURAL ATTRIBUTE	American	Chinese
Preference for a life that is physically active versus passive		
Active = 5 4 3 2 1 = Passive	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1

It asks you to indicate each culture's preference for physically active versus passive lifestyle. Therefore, the numbers have the following meanings: 5 = Very active, 4 = Somewhat active, 3 = Neither active Nor passive, 2 = Somewhat passive, and 1 = Very passive. If you believe that a culture prefers an extremely active life style, circle number 5. On the other hand, if you believe it prefers somewhat active life style, circle number 4."
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OBJECTIVES OF THE PILOT STUDY

It was decided to conduct a pilot study using the instrument with two important objectives:

1. To examine the adequacy of the instrument in eliciting the desired information from the respondents, and

2. To evaluate the adequacy of the information sought in generating meaningful conclusions for the marketers.

DESIGN OF THE PILOT STUDY

1. Two equal size samples of 10 respondents, one consisting of Chinese individuals and the other of resident Americans were selected for the study. The individuals were selected from available volunteers based on the following criteria:

a. Their exhibited level of enthusiasm and interest in the study

b. Their ability to understand the questions and communicate their responses effectively

c. Their willingness to identify their names with their responses to enable further investigation of the reasons for their specific individual responses where necessary.

2. After administering the questionnaire and collecting their responses, the respondents were invited to a group discussion to talk about any difficulties they had had in using the instrument and their suggestions to improve it to make the study more effective.

3. After examination of their responses, individual respondents were approached to seek any necessary clarifications of their responses that may have apparent contradictions or misunderstanding of the intent of the inquiry.

4. Based on the learning from the respondents' individual and collective feedback, modifications to the original questionnaire were planned. To ensure that the modifications and changes proposed were adequate and effective in serving their purpose, a supplementary questionnaire consisting of changed and new items was created, and administered to the same respondents. Since the respondents' names were identified on all responses, it was possible to merge the responses obtained from the two surveys at individual level. The merged responses were then examined to check if the modifications had in fact been effective in eliciting needed information, and if the total information was sufficient enough to draw meaningful conclusions for American marketers.

INVESTIGATING THE FINDINGS OF THE PILOT STUDY

1. The pilot study enabled the researcher to identify problematic wording and/or sequencing of items of the instrument and make necessary changes to correctly convey the cultural dimensions being explored.

2. The study showed that there were two alternatives to convey exact meaning of each item in the survey and elicit precise information from foreign customers:

a. Either translate the questionnaire into their native language, or

b. Select respondents who not were not only proficient in English, but understood both cultures well enough to understand the precise intent of each question.

Clearly, in the real world when conducting the survey in a foreign market, the latter is virtually impossible and the only alternative would be to translate the questionnaire in the <u>local language</u> of the customers. Here, the term "local language" must be taken microscopically or dialectically, because the issue is as much about local culture as it is about language. In other words, even while conducting the survey in another English speaking country, it may be prudent to translate the questionnaire into local English since conveying the precise meaning of certain concepts may require using locally preferred and used terminology.

3. Revelations about Very Different Meanings of the Same Words or Concepts in Different Cultures

The study showed that many concepts explored in the study can have very different meaning for people of two different cultures. In other words, the marketers and their foreign customers may be speaking the same language, even using the same words, and yet meaning totally different things.

Such revelation brings out the necessity to investigate the precise meaning of each concept for people of different cultures before they are asked to rate the cultures on those dimensions. Given below is an example to illustrate the point.

Investigating the "The Child Centered v Adult Centered" Dimension

The item inquiring the respondents to rate the American culture on the "The Child Centered v Adult Centered" dimension reveals an interesting insight into this phenomenon.

CULTURAL ATTRIBUTE	American Respondents	Chinese Respondents
Importance and influence in family decision making, of children (child centered) v adults (adult centered) in American Culture Child Centered = 5 4 3 2 1 = Adult Centered	**5**	**2**

There is a general consensus that the Amerian society is more Child-centered than many other societies. Yet while as expected, the America respondents rated the

American Society as very Child-Centered (5), the Chinese respondents rated it as mostly Adult-Centered (2).

A discussion on the reasons for this revealed two things:

a. That the very meaning of what is Child-centered and what is Adult-centered was very different to individuals in the two groups.

b. That the Chinese considered their own as a very much Child-Centered society, even more so than the American society.

To investigate this matter in depth, the two groups were asked explain what the meaning of being child-centered (i.e. properly caring for and giving importance to the needs of the children) was in their own perception by answering a set of additional items given below:

What does "Proper Caring for and Giving Importance to the Needs of Children" mean to you?

CULTURAL ATTRIBUTE	American Respondents' View	Chinese Respondents' View
Absolute concern for and importance of the children in family Very High　　　= 5　　4　　3　　2　　1 = Very Low	**5**	**5**
Influence of children v parents in choosing programs of study Children　　　= 5　　4　　3　　2　　1 = Parents/System	**5**	**1**
Influence of children v parents in deciding whether, when, and what to study Children　　　= 5　　4　　3　　2　　1 = Parents/System	**5**	**3**
Influence of children v parents in setting the pace of learning Children　　　= 5　　4　　3　　2　　1 = Parents/System	**5**	**1**
Preference for discovery v instruction method of learning Discovery　　　= 5　　4　　3　　2　　1 = Instruction	**5**	**2**
Preference for individualized v standardized testing in evaluations Individualized　= 5　　4　　3　　2　　1 = Standardized	**5**	**1**

As can be seen, the two societies have quite different views about the type of care, the extent of guidance, and amount of control should be provided for the children.

Their responses along with a dialogue with the groups on the issue clearly explained the reasons why the Chinese respondents did not perceive the American culture as child-centered. They agreed that the American society gives a lot of importance to the

children's needs, gave priority to their schedules, and spent a lot of money on them. However, they strongly felt that American parents did not adequately supervise, guide, and control their children and therefore, in a sense, neglected their children.

The implications of such vastly different views about critical concepts such as "care and caring" can be serious. For example, such views, if generally present in the Chinese society, may result in Chinese parents not favoring American educational product for their children. And American marketers of children's educational products would be well advised to keep this in mind in formulating their marketing strategies for China.

Conclusion

The pilot study brought out important issues that must be dealt with in conducting international and intercultural studies.

1. Establishing baseline meanings of important concepts such as happiness, freedom, care, control, hard-work, timeliness, etc. through investigative questioning of people of the different cultures involved.

2. Translating questionnaires into foreigners' native language and dialect to convey the precise meaning of each inquiry in the respondents' culture.

3. Sprinkling the instrument with similar but differently worded items in different parts of the questionnaire to validate the correct understanding of questions, and internal consistency of responses of each respondent.

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