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How to create high-potential global marketing messages

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snapshot

A meta-analysis of marketing messages across the U.S., Europe, Asia and Latin

America found that effective global campaigns share similarities but they also have crucial differences.

At the core of every effective marketing message is a truly resonant value proposition, one that is articulate and compelling. That tenet holds true no matter where in the world a message is propagated. But what resonates as a “true value proposition” can differ based on the geographic and cultural context in which it is being shared.

As part of a recent meta-analysis conducted by the marketing research consultancy SKIM, researchers set out to discover how four key characteristics of effective messaging perform in select global markets. Those characteristics are: promise value; emphasize the key benefit first; be specific; and create differentiation. It is generally understood that by writing messages that include these four characteristics, marketers can boost the likelihood of a message performing strongly in the market. However, with more brands and products acting on a global scale, it bears asking how these four common characteristics can be most effectively applied to messaging across differing markets.

Building on previous results of a meta-analysis of messages in Western Europe and the U.S., SKIM conducted a follow-up study of messages in Latin America (covering countries including Brazil, Argentina, Colombia and Mexico) and Asia (covering China, India, Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam and Japan). The results confirmed there are indeed similarities, providing the possibility for developing global messages that resonate in different countries around the world. However, the analysis also uncovered important differences among consumers in the regions. There are certain opportunities for creating effective marketing messages by specifically leveraging Latin American and Asian consumer preferences but there are potential pitfalls that need to be avoided as well. Global brands should be aware of these differences and similarities in order to create effective messages in these markets.



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A winning messaging strategy

SKIM's meta-analysis examined more than 5,000 marketing claims in four categories including personal care, food, health care and laundry/household care. Through multivariate analysis techniques, researchers were able to uncover valuable insights into how to develop a winning messaging strategy.

SKIM created 41 codes representing hypothetical drivers of message effectiveness. In order to construct the codes, previous studies were examined to identify patterns, such as the fact that fluffy messages always seemed to be outperformed by those that include tangible benefits. Thousands of open-ended responses provided a vast amount of feedback that helped the researchers better understand how consumers react to certain characteristics. All of the messages were coded and analyzed to identify the key drivers of success. To ensure the validity of the results and to avoid any discrepancies in the coding and analysis process, every message was coded separately by at least two individuals. For all messages, inter-coder consistency was computed and inconsistencies were resolved by having the coders agree upon the interpretation of the code.

Tie value propositions to regionally-specific needs. The essence of a strong message is the promise of value by means of expressing benefits that help the consumer reach a desirable end state; thus is its defining point of difference. By including clear and tangible benefits, consumers are able to determine what value the product offers. Mentioning multiple benefits is a powerful way to further drive message appeal but it is crucial to be specific and not to over-promise on things that cannot be delivered.

The promise of value is the essence of a winning marketing message, so it is no surprise that this rule holds true across all regions and countries. However, one must evaluate which specific benefit to communicate in each region or country. Consumer needs and desires can differ and therefore a message in Asia may focus on a different benefit than a message in Latin

America. For example a shampoo might promise smooth and shiny hair in messages targeted at Brazilian women, while the same shampoo may focus on "more volume" messages targeted at Chinese women simply due to differing needs:

Brazil: *To promote the growth of smoother and shinier hair*
China: *For thicker, more resilient hair*

Promising value to consumers is essential in creating effective messages, regardless of where in the world the messages are being utilized. However, as the needs and desires of consumers differ by region, the specific benefits that are addressed can, and often should, be customized for each set of consumers.

Emphasize the key benefit first. When there's only a split-second to capture attention, it is important to mention the key benefit first. By doing so, marketers grab the attention of consumers by ensuring consumers are focused on the main value promise. Claiming that a computer now offers "faster loading time, with our most advanced technology" is more effective, as it offers the key benefit of faster loading time first, instead of claiming that "Our most advanced technology now provides faster loading time."

Key benefit first: Faster loading time, with our most advanced technology

Key benefit last: Our most advanced technology now provides faster loading time

Some consumers may have already lost interest by the time they have finished reading about the most advanced technology in the latter claim and thus never realize it offers the benefit of faster loading time.

Be specific. Consumers prefer messages that are specific in the sense that the primary benefit is explained well and that it states exactly and unambiguously what the product delivers. One way to make a message specific is by including both words and numbers that enhance the promise. "98% less hair fall" or "2x damage repair" can be more powerful than simply claiming less hair fall or better damage repair, as it explicitly demonstrates how effective the product is. In addition, including descriptive adjectives that bring the benefit to life also has a positive impact in creating strong messages. The meta-analysis revealed that consumers across all countries prefer messages that specifically demonstrate what it will deliver. The mechanics of making messages specific (numbers, words, descriptive adjectives) are all equally valued across different regions, providing an opportu-

nity for consistency in marketing.

Create differentiation. When considering the previous three characteristics of effective marketing messages, it may appear that there are more similarities than differences across countries and regions when developing global messages. However, SKIM uncovered important differences in the ways that marketers can create differentiation from competition.

In today's marketplace, every product is being measured against a set of alternatives. Rarely, if ever, is a product alone on the shelf. Therefore, it's important to position a brand or product by implying that it offers greater value than the competition. Claiming to be unique (e.g., promising unique benefits or unique technologies) is essential for brands globally. However, the methods for creating this differentiation must be adapted based on the region in order to resonate with consumers.

One of the most common methods of creating differentiation is through the use of comparative messages. These messages can create a comparison against an entire category, a key competitor or even against an older version of the same product. The research conducted by SKIM shows that comparative messages without a benchmark work better in Asia but not better or worse than non-comparative messages in Latin America, the U.S. or Europe. As an example, consider the following two messages about anti-dandruff shampoos:

Asia: *80 percent less dandruff in only two weeks*
U.S., Europe, Latin America: *Visible decrease of dandruff in half the time compared to regular shampoos*

Consumers in Asia have a preference for the first statement, which creates a comparison but neglects to benchmark it against anything specific. However, consumers from Western Europe and the U.S. would most likely reject the claim because its comparison is not defined and concrete; they might even consider this statement to be too fluffy and exaggerated. On the other hand, the second statement contains a defined and explicit comparison versus the category, which is valued by consumers in Western Europe, the U.S. and Latin America.

However, this type of claim represents a potential turnoff for Asian consumers, as Asian consumers might perceive such a message as being offensive toward other brands.

Therefore, in order to claim uniqueness, it is best to focus on comparative messages without a benchmark in Asia, whereas for the other regions there is the freedom to focus on either a comparison against the product category or to not include any comparisons at all. Nevertheless, for all regions the most important thing remains to stress the key benefit of the product, thereby promising value to the consumer. This will always be key and setting the brand apart is only of secondary importance.

Must meet certain standards

The findings of the meta-analysis revealed that every message must meet certain standards for style and tonality in order to succeed. While adhering to the message checklist below may not guarantee that a message is successful, it will ensure that the message does not fall short due to weak articulation. Style and tonality often are regionally specific, as language in one country does not necessarily translate into another. Perhaps it is not surprising then that researchers found differences between regions. Pitfalls in some regions represent potential opportunities to strengthen the message in others.

One of the first pitfalls to avoid when creating and implementing strong marketing messages in Western Europe and the U.S. is phrasing messages in a negative way. Although in some instances it is necessary to discuss overcoming a negative, consumers instinctively prefer those that offer to provide something positive: *For clean and spotless clothing* versus *Removes difficult stains, like grease and dirt*.

The first claim is often considered to be more motivating – as it offers to provide clean clothes – than the latter. Negative messaging, despite offering the ability to avoid or overcome the undesirable elements, can create negative connotations in the minds of the consumers.

Despite this, consumers in Asia and Latin America are often strongly motivated by messages that focus on

avoiding something negative. Stating the ability to solve a problem or an issue that a consumer may currently experience can be very motivating in these regions, as it reassures consumers about what will not happen when they use the brand or product. Although the principle of staying positive often enhances message effectiveness, marketers in Asian and Latin American markets have more freedom to incorporate the prevention of negative elements. Of course, some product categories such as hair care and laundry are more suitable for prevention claims (prevention of hair fall, protection from damaged clothes, etc.) than other categories. But especially in categories such as these, in which prevention is a key benefit, focusing on this prevention can strengthen the appeal of the message in Asia and Latin America.

The benefits offered in a marketing message are often supported by reasons to believe, such as a new product formulation, a new technology or professional endorsements. These reasons to believe are provided to add credibility to the claim that the brand or product can deliver on its promise. There are different ways to incorporate these supporting elements, many of which are perceived in very different ways across regions.

References to technologies and formulations often run the risk of being perceived as jargon, which should be avoided in most countries, but the mention of technologies and formulations can substantially strengthen the effectiveness of a message in Asia. With this in mind, it is still important to use self-explanatory terms and avoid complex and abstract terms when mentioning technologies or formulations.

Asia: *With a triple action system that is scientifically proven to repair broken hair*

The message enables consumers to visualize what a triple-action system provides and therefore increases the effectiveness of the communication.

In Latin America, but also in Asia, endorsements from relevant experts and professional institutions are appreciated. Including a reference to a health institute, for

example, can strengthen a message and the idea that the product can deliver on the promise. However, expert endorsements can only be effective if consumers perceive the expert or association to be relevant and credible as an expert judge of the topic. Utilizing endorsements from unknown entities, or those which may not be relevant to the topic, fail to strengthen a message and can sometimes breed distrust.

Latin America and Asia: *Gentle for the skin – approved by the Association of Dermatologists*

Finally, in Western Europe and the U.S., consumers prefer reasons to believe that refer to ingredients they know and possibly explain how those ingredients will help the product deliver on the key benefit.

Europe and the U.S.: *With proteins that strengthen your hair from root to tip*

This type of message can motivate consumers as it describes not only what the protein does but what it does for

the consumer: create stronger hair. When mentioning ingredients it is important to ensure that consumers are aware of and knowledgeable about these ingredients and their function, otherwise they will be perceived as jargon and run the risk of losing the ability to enhance the value proposition.

With all of this in mind, there are several other pitfalls that need to be taken into account when crafting marketing messages globally:

- **Be respectful.** Know your audience; don't inadvertently be condescending or presumptuous.
- **Be clear.** Use simple and unambiguous language to ensure the message is understood.
- **Be coherent.** Connect the dots and ensure the proposed benefits and supporting reasons to believe are related to each other.
- **Be fluid.** Create sentences that flow naturally in the native language and do not sound contrived.
- **Avoid humor.** Be direct and focus on efficiently getting your value proposition across. Although humor

can be effective in a marketing campaign, a message only has a split-second to grab and maintain interest. Therefore, it is recommended to focus on the value promise rather than making the consumer laugh.

Resonate all over the world

The results of the analysis by SKIM confirmed that there are indeed similarities that enable messages to resonate in different countries all over the world. However, the analysis also highlighted several important differences among global consumers that must be taken into account when developing communication messages. By leveraging the key global characteristics of strong messaging and making slight adjustments to match the preferences of local consumers, marketers can ensure that brand and product messages resonate with all consumers. [①](#)

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