

Languages in international advertising campaigns: the transcreator

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At a time when globalisation is becoming more and more a reality, and the world of the media is becoming more complex and fragmented, advertisers are increasingly facing new challenges. One of the biggest challenges is cross-cultural communication, and now more so than at any other time before.

While the problem of languages in international campaigns has been debated for many years, the advent of new media and in particular the Internet, has substantially modified the advertising environment and increased the need for multilingual communication.

The globalisation of the market means that today companies are addressing an incredibly varied target, with many different languages and cultures. But while until recently international campaigns were little more than translated domestic campaigns, adapted for foreign markets with the help of a good briefing, some consultancy, and an advertising translator, needs have now changed.

Many brands now depend heavily on foreign sales and they have to be able to engage in a two-way communication with the consumers, earning their respect in each market. Consumers are much more sophisticated and demanding, and new media – in particular the Internet, interactive television and even the mobile phone - have introduced the expectation of interaction and dialogue with the brand in their own language and within their own cultural framework. In fact, this is becoming a must since research shows that “Users perceive a company more favourably when they see a version of its web site in their mother tongue, regardless of their English proficiency (Hayward & Tong, 2001)”. Fulfilling all of these expectations implies the steady creation of a great quantity of content and communication suited to each different market while trying to keep a good level of brand consistency across markets to generate brand value. This involves a strong need for co-ordinated action.

In this kind of environment, the old model of creative process in which a campaign is first developed in one language (generally English) for a dominating home market, and then adapted for less significant foreign markets at the very end, is no longer satisfactory. Not only are foreign sales becoming increasingly important, but campaigns are not just about products but about brand values which have to find their place in the value system of each target culture.

The first consequence of this evolution in markets and in brand communication needs is that most creatives and copywriters no longer have the full picture of who their target market is. More and more often the creative of an international campaign and the majority of his target market don't speak the same language, and don't share the same culture. To this one should add the prejudice that creatives used to work for traditional (offline) media have for the online



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world. In some extreme cases, creative teams who have never bought anything online and who are English monolinguals, create campaigns for e-business clients with a 60 to 70% non-English speaking target (non-English speakers constitute 63% of the world's online population according to recent Global Reach findings).

Such a lack of awareness would never be tolerated for domestic campaigns, and it should not be tolerated for international campaigns either.

If in the past, consultants and translators could help solve the dilemma for old-style one-way communication campaigns without too many problems, in our interactive and dialogue-prone new media age, where feedback is immediate, sensibilities heightened, and news travel fast (especially those about cultural faux-pas), “The language function needs to be permanently ingrained in the communication process, a language function which covers a much wider spectrum of competences than that of pure linguistic transcoding (Guidère, 2002)”.

By integrating the language function within the creative process from a very early stage, any language and cultural issue can be assessed and solved during the creative phase. This can be done with the introduction of a new figure within the creative team, that we will name the trans-creator, who would have a role of mediation between the creative leader and the target culture, and who would prove very useful in helping to protect brand consistency across markets.

The resulting modified creative team would be better equipped to deal with today's global markets, and the Internet could be one of its most valuable work tools.

The role and purpose of the trans-creator

Why should a trans-creator be needed, when there are already plenty of translators and localisation companies to do the job out there?

There are a number of reasons, all of which aim at a greater effectiveness of international campaigns and ultimately at cost savings and improved revenues. One of the main reasons is the above-mentioned new need for a two-way brand-consumer dialogue, where contact is practically permanent, and the brand and its communicator have to be always abreast of new developments. When this intensive level of communication covers several markets and different languages the task becomes very complex. Ideally a creative leader should be able to work, create and process feedback in more than one language, but people who can integrate top creative skills with top foreign language skills are rare, especially where a very deep-rooted awareness of foreign cultures is required. And when the number of different languages and cultures in which one has to operate increases beyond a certain limit, the gap in language and cultural awareness becomes too wide for one person to bridge, and the volume of content too large for one person to manage. And the gap in awareness is precisely what the trans-creator is there to fill. He acts as an ambassador, an *alter ego* of the creative leader, who can provide him with the missing perceptive ability for a given language, and the needed insight to produce messages adapted to the relevant culture. As for co-ordinating different languages and managing big content volumes, help is provided by technology (as we will see later).

Analysing what a trans-creator could actually be doing for the creative team will help us understand how distinctive international campaigns are and how important this role is. Let us begin a short travel through the linguistic function of an international campaign.

Briefing Function

The first function of the trans-creator is therefore that of briefing the creative leader with all the most important facts and information about the brand perception in his specific foreign market. For best results, the creative leader and the trans-creator should be capable of working as one, with the trans-creator supplying exactly the information that the creative leader needs, and the creative leader able to guide and trust the trans-creator as if he were his own eyes and ears for that given language. The trans-creator is needed because “Creative people are often quite bad at distinguishing between concepts which are striking because they sound good in their own language, and concepts which are striking because they are actually based on a more universal truth which will appeal to human beings on a profounder level, irrespective of language and culture (Anholt, 1998)”.

However, good results can never be achieved if the work relationship between the two is not long term. In the end, the judgement of the trans-creator will be instrumental in describing what the brand perception is in a given market, and the trust that the creative leader has for the trans-creator is the cornerstone on which the creative process will be built.

The need for a constant relationship, and a streaming briefing process is one of the main reasons why briefings provided by external consultants can no longer be regarded as sufficient. These give a snapshot of the situation at a given moment, while today’s commercial communication is continuous and needs constant monitoring and feeding, in particular on interactive media such as the Internet, where the brand-consumer relationship is particularly intense. Only someone with a deep knowledge of a given market and culture can correctly pick-up and interpret the feedback in a way that can benefit brand communication production.

If some companies actually provide the advertising agency with very detailed and exhaustive briefs, others are not as efficient. In either case the function of the trans-creator can be precious. When there is a good brief, the trans-creator can filter and interpret the information through his own experience of the market for the benefit of the creative leader, clarifying any point that might not be clear, and even giving some creative input about what might work best for a specific market, while in the case of a meagre brief, he can supplement any information gap with his own findings. Being involved in the project from the outset means that the research will be 100% relevant and to the point, saving considerable amounts of money in non-relevant outsourced research, which then needs to be sieved through. But most importantly, an early long-term involvement in the project as a full-fledged member of the creative team, guarantees not only a good knowledge of all the issues and a greater focus in the preliminary research, but also a permanent flow of information and therefore an up-to-date

image of the situation, which includes such important aspects as new legal provisions, brand perception, competitive review, etc.

It is at this stage that the Internet can play a very important role.

The Internet as a tool for market research

The Internet has boosted globalisation opening new markets and annihilating distances, however it also produced a platform on which the farthest and most diverse cultures are rubbing shoulders, thus highlighting the challenges of cross-cultural communication in an unprecedented way.

But the Internet did not only bring challenges. For the first time in history, we are offered the opportunity to overcome these challenges by learning plenty about foreign cultures first hand. It is there on the Internet for all to see: an enormous amount of content produced in your target country is available to anyone 24 hours a day. Simply by spending some time browsing websites from the target country you will immediately notice a difference in the general feel of the local online communication. The things that matter are different (just visit a couple of national newspapers websites), attitudes and opinions are different, and the relationship with the brands is different.

In recent years, when global companies and their online advertising agencies started creating international websites, they had to go through a steep learning curve. Very often they had to learn the do's and don'ts of international communication the hard way. The simple fact that, according to Nielsen NetRatings, people spend a much longer time interacting with the brand on the Internet meant that the content provided came under much closer scrutiny, and therefore any error or gaffe would be a lot more likely to be picked up. Communicators also had to learn that "Multi-language online strategy is about more than translating a website into a handful of languages. It is about meeting global business objectives by tuning into the cultural dynamics of the local markets (New Media Age, 9 September 1999)".

The sheer size of the interface between brands and consumers offered by the Internet is unprecedented, with a huge volume of constantly updated content streaming from the brand to the consumer and an amazing flow of feedback streaming back. A brand's website can help establish a portrait of its target market infinitely faster and more accurately than traditional channels, since the cycle of trial and error is much quicker.

In a few years of international Web presence, brands can accumulate a staggering corpus of knowledge of local market culture, which can provide precious indications for offline campaigns. What is more, the information gathered is 100% relevant to the brand and does not include a huge amount of unnecessary data. Companies are interested in how the target market relates to them, and not in becoming experts in every aspect of a country. Unfortunately most of the time such specific knowledge goes to waste because online



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communications are kept largely separate from offline activities, leading to error repetition and loss of revenue, this time on a bigger scale.

Therefore the first step to take to improve the quality and the success rate of international campaigns - thus cutting costs and increasing the return on investment - is to make full use of the enormous cultural quarry represented by the brand's websites. And no one could do this better than the trans-creator himself.

With all the information that he can derive from Internet market analysis, he will be able to provide a very clear picture of the target to the international creative team, helping at the same time to prevent any error, misinterpretation or faux pas. This will in turn reduce the need for later corrective action, thus reducing costs.

Preventing inconsistency

Another problem which plagues big international campaigns is inconsistency across media and not necessarily across languages, since it is important to avoid "too much" consistency between markets. Otherwise, "In presenting a face to the world, a company risks presenting the wrong face to entire nations (Child et al, 2002)". The real problem tends to happen between different marketing channels within a same language. The increased need for a strong brand-consumer dialogue requires more and more the use of media synergies to convey the message to an increasingly atomised market. However, both marketing departments and advertising agencies are often ill equipped to fulfil expectations.

A real-life example we could make is that of a large corporation that decided to launch a promotional campaign for a product across several countries, in which the TV campaign, the Direct Marketing activity and the online activity would be each led by a different department, none communicating with each other. This meant that the campaign message was translated three times (loss of money) in three different ways (loss of consistency). However the TV and the DM were to drive traffic to both Points of Sale and to the website. And the website was to generate traffic to the Point of Sale. The DM was also responsible for setting up the POS. The discrepancies were therefore going to become practically impossible to miss by the target audience. A few days before the launch of the campaign, by pure chance, a member of the online department noticed the discrepancy in the advertising headline on the TV ad's superscript, and the one used online in his native language. This prompted other checks, and the realisation of across the board inconsistencies in all languages. Urgent editing work had to be carried out at an enormous cost, and in some cases the discrepancies could not be removed.

This example perfectly illustrates the need for greater integration across all media (convergence), and the need for an in-house co-ordinator for each language to centrally control the message. This is another function that the trans-creator would be entrusted with. The task is quite vast and delicate, but modern technology could help him in managing the right level of localisation consistency both across media and between campaigns, contributing



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to earn brand value internationally. We are now going to analyse in which way the creative process of an international campaign differs from a traditional one, what its benefits are and which technologies could assist the process.

The international campaign requires a new process

Strengthening the creative leadership is one of the benefits, which best justify a greater integration of the linguistic function into the creative process of international campaigns, and the subsequent *de facto* modification of the creative team structure.

When the scope of campaigns remains within national boundaries, the traditional creative team works perfectly, following a creative process that has been tested and improved over the years, becoming very efficient and yielding good results.

At the centre of the creative process lies the creative director who is in control of the whole creative process, from the briefing to the output of the campaign. If the brief lacks information, he may require some extra clarifications from his client or his planners then he interprets what the client wants and thinks of a way of conveying the message to the target audience. This is followed by the phase of approval/negotiation of the idea with the client, and then by the production and implementation of the campaign. The creative director is then able to decipher and assess the feedback directly and immediately, the results appear clear and obvious straightaway, and praise or blame can be attributed with a certain level of certainty.

These nicely oiled mechanisms, however, seem to break down when it comes to international campaigns. The creative director finds himself in the foggy world of unfamiliar cultures. Even if a brief is very detailed and complete with regard to the consumers of a foreign country, he lacks the cultural parameters to evaluate the data and the expectations. He may fail to ask questions and clarifications because they do not even occur to him. What are vital issues in a foreign market are irrelevant to him. External consultants might warn him about the most obvious pitfalls, but he will never have the ease and confidence of perception that he enjoys in his home market: the creative director and his team suffer from a *knowledge deficit*. Since they cannot produce a campaign with the full awareness of its potential effect, their communication becomes more disempowered, and the creative leadership is exposed to criticism by local agencies and markets, and can be challenged.

At this point the process can follow two routes: either the campaign is developed as if it were for the home market and then translated and adapted for the foreign market by translators and localisation specialists (a similar approach to the one predicted by David Ogilvy back in 1983 in his book *Ogilvy in advertising*), or the creative work is carried out by different creative teams in each of the relevant markets.

In the first case (the centralised approach) the creative director, and the client too, feel reassured because they are acting within known territory, only to risk big disappointments when the campaign is launched in foreign markets: the creative director and his team could



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end up creating content which, with a better awareness of the target market, they would never dare to release. Additionally, this approach entails that the creation of the foreign campaign is totally entrusted to an external translator, whose work will be difficult to evaluate by the creative director, and which could therefore not be in line with what the client wants. Traditionally the evaluation and final approval is performed by the client's country managers, but this practise is fraught with dangers: country managers can evaluate if the language is correct, but they do not have the wider picture of the whole campaign and lack the sensitivity that a professional creative/copywriter has to tell a good translation from a great translation. Moreover, relying on the client (the country manager *is* also the client) for linguistic feedback and cultural consultancy can make both the creative director and the client nervous for fear of repercussions, and it gives the client an extra chance to judge you.

Additionally, translating a ready-made campaign into a foreign language places an unreasonable burden on the translator. He is considered the sole responsible of the success or failure of a campaign in a given market, even when that market was not considered during the creation of the campaign in the first place.

In the second case (the decentralised approach), brand and message consistency are at risk, and the result might alienate the client who can feel that certain markets have strayed too far from the core values of the brand. But there are worse implications to the decentralised approach: not only does the implementation of a single big idea become practically impossible - thus totally undermining the creative leadership - but because of what we will call the *primadonna effect* (creatives from different local agencies squabbling about the superiority of their ideas), local creative teams will be very reluctant to recognise such leadership, and local centrifugal forces will tend to make an overall control of the campaign practically impossible.

In the end it becomes virtually impossible for the lead agency to determine who is responsible for what. According to campaign results, there is a serious chance that a client might envisage a change of lead agency, albeit within the same network, and this is a result that no agency aspires to.

What can be done? It is quite simple. By working in close contact with a trans-creator, the creative leader (as opposed to the creative director) can retain control of the international campaign to levels that are (almost) equal to that of domestic campaigns. Their relationship has to be close, but the payoff can be substantial: the creative leadership can be restored.

The first pre-requisite for the relationship between creative leader and trans-creator to work, is for them to realise that they are working together on the creation and implementation of a single big idea across more than one culture, and that this requires a strong leadership. A single idea across cultures is possible because "Humans always say the same things, albeit in different languages. The universality of the spirit was the response to the Babelic confusion: there are many languages, but meanings remains the same (Paz, 1971)". The creative leader and the trans-creator have to be



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aware that the level of success of a campaign can be consistent across markets only if the creative leader is prepared to listen and use the trans-creator's advice all along the creative process, and trust it as if it came from a part of his own brain. Being both part of the same team means that comments, suggestions and amendments can be done in total frankness, freedom, and confidentiality, without fear of being judged by the client as is the case when these functions are carried out by the country manager.

When the trans-creator eventually translates the campaign that the creative director has developed in a much higher state of awareness of the foreign market (thanks the constant contribution of the trans-creator himself), he will have to explain to the creative leader how and why the translated version is going to work, so that both can agree whether the overall campaign conveys a consistent message, and whether this message is the one desired. This is why we chose the name trans-creator: his job is not only translating, but also that of guiding the creative director in the process of creation, by providing background information, by interpreting feedback, by contributing creative ideas, by managing localisation consistency and by sharing responsibility for success and failures.

Which technology?

Having described the complex function that a trans-creator would have in an international campaign, we can wonder if there is any technology that could assist him in his numerous tasks.

First of all one should consider that international campaigns often involve a large number of languages, which implies that one creative leader is going to be working with several trans-creators. Managing a big team like that could prove difficult in a traditional environment, but if the whole creative team was connected to a computer network equipped with content and workflow management software and tools, the task would become easier and the whole process more transparent. Everyone could have access to brief, country reports and statistics, brand history, observations, studies, focus group reports, etc. A content management tool could also greatly improve consistency and possibly reduce costs (all departments responsible for a particular media could access the same localised copy and therefore avoid having to localise content once again). This approach could eventually incorporate a globalisation management solution. This kind of tool would help the advertising agency benefit from technologies that the software localisation industry has been using for the last 10 years. For instance, automating the translation process, using translation memory software and a terminology repository.

The total software make-up should include database type software facilitating data gathering and analysis that is relevant to the brand and the market. It would allow the country manager to supply data on the brand and on the market, but it would also allow access to relevant databases, owned either by the brand, the advertising agency or a service provider with whom the creative team holds a subscription.



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The trans-creator could also create a database of relevant articles found on the Internet, or a database of relevant legal regulations.

Once the creative comes up with an idea and he tries to develop it, trans-creators could upload their comments on the message boards of the workflow management tool, so that any issue and change can be followed in real time by the whole team, speeding up times and saving money and effort. These messages could also be collected for future reference. This kind of constant monitoring of the work in progress will prevent the development of untranslatable campaigns and the need for expensive corrective action.

The use of content management tools will also enable the pooling of all content for use on the most disparate media. First of all content will be created and translated in parallel and only once. It will then be used for any need from TV to brochures, from radio to the Internet, just by picking the needed elements and tweaking them where necessary, thus saving on duplicated material. TV ads can be recycled in interactive banners for the Internet, the same text can be used for a brochure, a press or an SMS campaign. Software applications like Adobe® Graphics Server 2 allow to automatically generate graphics from content stored in a database. This means that the designer need not cut and paste copy and create the graphic, thus avoiding possible mistakes; the application uses the localised copy produced by the translator.

When it comes to text translation and adaptation, consistency and speed can be greatly improved by using translation memory tools and terminology management systems. These will prove particularly useful in long-running campaigns, which reappear at regular intervals, or in corporate communication in the legal, financial and technical sector, where the quantity of information provided can be rather significant and where terminology and consistency are paramount. For short, small one-off campaigns, of course, their use would be a waste of time.

Other technologies and services that can be useful are the ones like Adslogans.co.uk where one can check if an endline or tagline has already been used before. If a similar service does not exist in his target market, a trans-creator could create a database with all taglines and endlines relevant to his product that he comes across in the press of the target market.

In short, modern technology has a huge role to play in the successful implementation of the trans-creator function within international creative teams and in helping the achievement of truly international campaigns.

Benefits

What are the benefits that this approach to international campaigns can have for all involved? Let us make a small list for each of the above-mentioned actors.

Benefits for the brand

- Greater brand consistency across markets
- Decreased risk of communication or branding issues
- Greater level of implementation of brand values
- Better understanding of the target audience
- Increased effectiveness of communication



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- Centralisation of campaign management
- Faster delivery (no need for corrective action; knowledge accumulation)
- More added value and ROI
- Better campaign monitoring
- Expansion into smaller markets made viable by decreased costs of advertising adaptation.

Benefits for the creative leader

- Retention of creative leadership
- Better understanding of target market
- Clearer briefs
- Decreased risk of error
- Judgement-free arena for debate and improvement

Benefits for the team

- More collaborative and inspiring work
- Better understanding of other cultures' point of view
- Increased effectiveness
- Clear leadership
- Clearer tasks and accountability

Benefits for the agency

- Retention of account leadership
- More consistent creative style and no *primadonna effect*
- Significant savings because of decreased errors
- Significant savings thanks to software tools
- More service and added value for the client
- More experienced and savvy staff in the long-term
- Perfect training ground for future creative leaders
- Greater client satisfaction
- Better control over the whole process
- Great selling point in pitches
- Ability to increase content output rate (esp. for New Media)
- Better campaign monitoring
- Etc...

Conclusions

The conclusions we can draw from this article is that international campaigns could greatly benefit from the integration of the language function within the creative team at an early stage of the creative process, not only because the dialogue with the consumer is now permanent,



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but also because it is two-way, and a dialogue implies that both interlocutors must understand the language.

Early involvement of the trans-creator and intelligent use of modern technology, especially technology traditionally associated with software localisation, can reduce costs dramatically, both in terms of averted duplications and mistakes, better exploitation of synergies and improved brand consistency.

There are also new opportunities opening up, since reduced localisation costs mean that previously unviable markets can now be exploited.

New technological solutions can be implemented which can yield great results, and more solutions could be developed around each client's need.

International campaigns offer a new niche in which language specialists with a good technological knowledge can make a great difference, and the first advertising agencies to notice this will have a significant competitive edge.



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