

A Cultural Perspective of International Marketing

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One of the most pressing concerns facing contemporary managers is the globalization of markets. As local markets come into increasing contact, an interesting dialectic occurs. On the surface, cultures around the world appear to be growing more similar, with an apparent homogenization or convergence of consumer behaviors taking place. Simultaneously, cultures are individuating in response to the perceived threat of homogenization. We are witnessing the resurgence of cultural nationalism with a vengeance. Thus, in large measure in response to the forces of marketing, cultures are becoming more distinctly different from each other even as they share an increasingly common basket of goods and services.

This dialectic has important implications for marketing managers. Not only is it critical to have an "international" perspective of the global (or host country) marketplace that is sensitive to the nuances of national segments, it is increasingly crucial to have a multicultural perspective of the domestic (or home country) marketplace as well. The fragmentation of domestic markets into ethnic, regional, gender and age-based segments (among others) demands that marketers develop culturally appropriate understanding of these emerging groups. Further, we are witnessing the evolution of transnational segments (for example, among salaried females, teenagers, expatriate managers, etc.) whose members share more in common with each other across cultures than they do with other consumers drawn from within their own cultures.

The challenge for international marketers is to avoid mistaken standardization or misguided adaptation of the marketing mix variables as they introduce new products and services into new markets. We need to manage cultural diversity, not obliterate it. In that way, our understanding of differences in consumer preferences across markets will be synergized, and will lead to the discovery of new opportunities and the satisfaction of more precisely defined desires.

International marketers are learning to re-embed their understanding of "the economy" in a larger context of issues such as ecology, politics and morality. That is, they are realizing that those "externalities" once assumed away or viewed as uncontrollable are in fact fundamentally important in shaping, understanding and influencing consumer behaviors as they occur on the ground. In short, the central issues impacting managers today – core competence, strategic vision, relationship

management and the like – all converge upon a common discipline ; cultural risk management. Through cultural analysis at the level of strategic planning, and cultural propriety at the level of tactical implementation, international marketers are growing increasingly proficient at problem-finding as well as problem-solving.

By constantly comparing the behaviors of consumers and managers in cross-cultural perspective, international managers are learning to create flexible organizations that are sensitive to nuance and alive to synergies. Markets have always been and will always be infinitely segmentable. Identifying, creating, servicing and managing the stakeholders in all of our marketing transactions, international and domestic, will be facilitated to the extent that we recognize that all categorization and evaluation – truly human universals – are firmly grounded in culture.

