

The language of luxury

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Virtually every population in the world has at least one thing in common: multinational companies are vying for their attention. From General Mills in India to Godiva Chocolate in Paraguay, advertising is one of the most significant expenditures companies make the world over.

University of Minnesota researcher Rohini Ahluwalia asks... "to get the most bang for their buck, how should these corporations talk to consumers - in English, their native language, or both?"

Several countries in Southeast Asia, Europe and North America, among others, have bilingual populations that are fairly fluent in a "foreign" language (typically English or French) as well as at least one local or native language. In new research, Ahluwalia, an associate professor of marketing at the Carlson School of Management and Aradhna Krishna of the University of Michigan look at the complexity and benefits of advertising to these populations.

"The issue of bilingual consumers is increasingly crucial for multinational corporations," said Ahluwalia. "To someone in Spain, an advertisement for a luxury item from a foreign firm could have a more positive impact if delivered in English or "Spanglish" than if it were delivered in only Spanish. Conversely, if the advertised product was a necessity, the native language may be more persuasive."

Advertising language will affect slogan evaluation for foreign corporations, but not for local companies, Ahluwalia shows. To demonstrate the effect, the researchers conducted a study in India where much of the population is fluent in English and Hindi, with both

languages viewed favorably. They found that while the Hindi language is associated with "belongingness" (close, friendly, familiar), English is associated with "sophistication" (global, hip, upper class). For a necessary item like laundry detergent, advertisers are better off using the native language for its relativity. But for luxury items, which can range from chocolate to a brand new car, a mixed-language approach will be more effective.

"People expect mixed language from local companies. But from multinationals, it is unexpected, so a customer's attention is grabbed by the second language in the ad. It makes the ad's language stand out," explained Ahluwalia. "The consumer's focus on the language makes them think about the associations of the language used that is, what does it seem to convey? Sophistication, modernity or closeness? This effect could be very favorable for a foreign company selling a discretionary or luxury product."

The implications for multinational firms are immense. "From a foreign firm, English-only ads may not be as effective, and ads in the local language may backfire, invoking skepticism in the consumer. The safest bet is to use mixed-language ads when working with bilingual markets," states Ahluwalia. From French and English advertisements in Canada to Spanglish ads across Latin America, firms will be able to target global bilingual markets by showing off their language savvy and insights into local culture.

Source: University of Minnesota

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