

Avoiding PR Disaster: Cultural Customisation

Gary Muddyman at Conversis examines the importance of cultural customisation in foreign language communication materials, arguing that dealing with this successfully can have a crucial impact on the international rollout of healthcare products

Language and cultural differences are just two of the pressures facing the pharmaceutical, healthcare and medical device industries in the new global economy, and they are issues that companies cannot afford to fail to address adequately. These two issues alone can affect the successful international rollout of healthcare products. To obtain international compliance, packaging and supporting documentation have to be translated and culturally customised accurately across a range of languages.

Today, the global pharmaceutical industry is worth over \$550 billion (1). By 2020, PricewaterhouseCoopers estimates that the global pharmaceutical market will be worth \$1.3 trillion (2). This increase will be due to rising global demand for medicines as the population increases, ages and faces more disease. In order to take advantage of future growth opportunities, pharmaceutical companies must ensure that they successfully penetrate global markets by culturally customising all collateral related to their product.

GLOBAL CHALLENGES FACING THE PHARMACEUTICAL INDUSTRY

The challenges for pharmaceutical companies in a global, continuously expanding market are intense. There is pressure to increase revenue whilst ensuring compliance in each target market. Communication, information and understanding are the keys to success.

Reaching and engaging an increasingly sophisticated audience worldwide is a crucial challenge. Accuracy and timeliness are essential when documenting clinical trials, compiling internal and external communications and marketing collateral. The challenge of producing these materials is greatly increased when it is necessary to create them in multiple languages.

The product and its marketing must be presented to the buyer in a manner that shows a clear understanding of the market in which it is to be sold. It is imperative that all legal and regulatory requirements are followed as the consequences of a mistake can be extremely damaging. Accurate localisation is not just about translation. Done properly, it involves cultural customisation, which requires an understanding of the culture, customs, local laws and regulations of the target country.

CULTURAL COMPLICATIONS

Cultural differences in foreign markets can be difficult to identify. They range from the use of colour, images and gestures, to religion and social aspects, such as how you should greet somebody, conduct business and even on what side of a car the steering should be. Words, phrases and symbols can have entirely

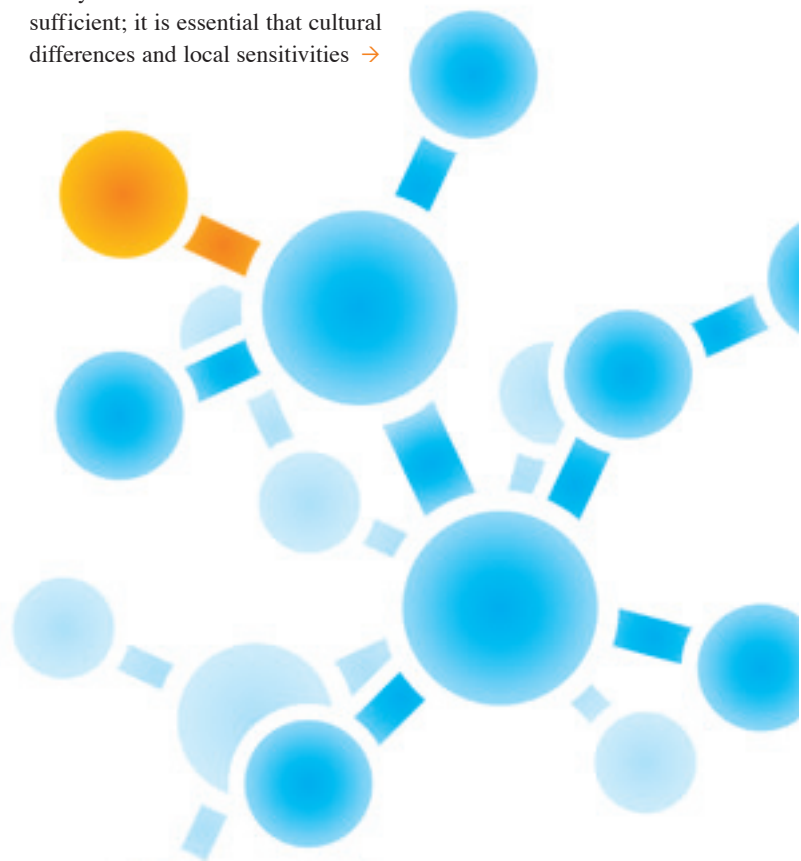
different meanings in different countries. It is imperative to have a complete understanding of each target market's culture in order to ensure that a product launch is successful in gaining the trust of the audience.

What would seem normal in one country may not be acceptable in another. In China, red symbolises good luck, whilst the colours white, blue and black symbolise death, as do clocks, storks and cranes. These colours and images should certainly be avoided in any communication relating to a pharmaceutical product, especially if it is aimed at clinical trial recruitment.

In India, the head is considered to be the seat of the soul and it is not advisable to pat a child's head. Any promotional materials must not portray such an image. In Western society, however, such an image would be acceptable.

It is becoming increasingly common for pharmaceutical companies to conduct clinical trials in developing regions such as China, India and sub-Saharan Africa. This is a cost-effective option and there exists an abundance of potential patients with varied diseases.

In order to successfully recruit participants for clinical trials, all patient-facing collateral must be specifically adapted to the language and culture in every respect. A basic, literal translation of key documents and fact sheets is not sufficient; it is essential that cultural differences and local sensitivities →



are captured as well. It is just as imperative to get clinician-facing communication materials right.

LOCALISATION TIPS

Chinese localisation is the most daunting, according to a commissioned research study by the Localization Program at California State University at Chico. With a population of 1.3 billion people making up 23 per cent of the world's population, China's buying power is second only to that of the US, and its economy is expected to surpass that of the US by 2025. This makes it an attractive market to penetrate. There are, however, many challenges involved in expanding into the Chinese market, including the tricky translation into Chinese, which uses double byte characters, instead of the more common single byte. China's multiple languages also further complicate the creation and cultural adaptation of business communications.

In terms of marketing to the Chinese, pharmaceutical companies not only need to ensure that all colours and images respect the culture, but also that the relevant communication channels are used to market the product. For example, the Chinese will not build relationships via email and do not tend to respond to direct mail. The most effective way of promoting a product is by attending large pharmaceutical industry events. In China, the relationship that an individual develops with a person represents the relationship with his or her entire company, so personal interactions are just as important as written communications – and you must ensure none of it can offend.

When communicating in South American countries, it is essential that pharmaceutical companies do not overlook the differences between, for example, European and Brazilian Portuguese. There are in fact many differences between the two which include spelling and the use of verb tenses and terminology. When targeting a Brazilian audience, it is not advisable for a pharmaceutical company to use European Portuguese – the consumer will know that the communication is not specifically targeted at them. In Portugal, Brazilian Portuguese would likewise be unacceptable.

The same can be said for Spanish, a language which is spoken all over the world. An estimated 400 million people speak it as a first or second language. Hundreds of millions of Spanish speakers communicate with each other via dozens of regional variations, some of which differ significantly. No doubt, if a pharmaceutical company mistakenly translates a brochure meant for the Madrid market into Mexican Spanish, it will not be well received. Using the wrong Spanish at the wrong time will not only ruin the quality of communication materials, it will insult the target audience.

In terms of advertising, there are many cultural differences. For example, when targeting a pharmaceutical product to the Americans, it is best to take a more direct approach. American advertising tends to rely on words to explain a product, its benefits and unique selling points. The Japanese, on the other hand, respond better to non-verbal advertising, using music and scenery to sell products. Overlooking these cultural factors can prove costly.

OPPORTUNITIES

Approximately 74 per cent of Russia's pharmaceutical market is made up of imports. This provides pharmaceutical companies

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with a significant opportunity to enter the Russian market. It is imperative that all communications are accurately localised into Russian. Even if the recipient speaks English, you will gain credibility by translating. The incentive for most clinical trial participants – in both Western and other countries – is that they benefit from free doctors' consultations and treatment. Due to a relatively poor free healthcare system in emerging economies such as India and Russia, this incentive should be accurately conveyed: the prospect of gaining access to qualified physicians is a welcome one. Patient compliance for clinical trials also tends to be higher in developing countries than in the west, providing important clinical data for pharmaceutical companies.

CONCLUSION

As pharmaceutical companies continue to extend their global reach, communication will remain a tough challenge. An obvious difficulty is ensuring compliance with the regulations, patents and certification of drugs in various countries. With differing sales and distribution channels across the globe, and the coordination of integrated marketing communications in multiple languages worldwide, the pharmaceutical industry must ensure the accuracy of information at all times.

In order to combat these challenges, pharmaceutical companies must adhere to the linguistic, cultural, technical and other locale-specific requirements of the countries in which their communication materials are to appear. A PR disaster could result in a healthcare catastrophe.

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