

Understanding the Cultural Patterns of the World — An Imperative in Implementing Strategic International PR Programs

By Augustine Ihator

Globalization of business has created the need for international public relations practitioners to identify, study and understand the world views, mindsets, and habits of their global publics in order to effectively communicate. Communication styles and meaning, as well as realities, as perceived by individuals are culturally induced.

Adequate knowledge of language and culture is needed to effectively communicate in any society. Even in countries where English is spoken, the pattern and meaning of the English language may be different because of the cultural influence. Therefore, language fluency alone may be inadequate to practice PR abroad. It has to be combined with the knowledge of the culture of the native speakers.

Words do not often have shared common meaning, especially between native and non-native speakers. They are often associated with mental images, subtleties, and nuances. "Cultural assumptions always exist as shadows in the background,"



Augustine Ihator

said Shapard (1990). According to Gunnar Beeth (1997), if one learns a language and not the culture, one feels like a clumsy elephant in a dainty china shop — moving very carefully and still sending china crashing to the floor. Lack of cultural awareness can lead to communication devoid of essential emotional content which may be needed to effectively communicate in some societies.

Recognition of one's own culture, and awareness of how it is different from others are needed to successfully carry out PR functions abroad. According to R. S. Zaharna (1995), "without a conscious awareness of how another culture is different from one's own, there is a tendency to see the differences of another through the prism of one's culture."

There are examples of unintended cultural faux pas by corporations with unanticipated and undesired consequences. Despite Coca-Cola's many years of multicultural experience in its worldwide operations, during the 1994 World Soccer Cup, the company printed the flag of Saudi Arabia on its cans. The country did not expect its flag which contains sacred words in Arabic to be printed on a disposable can. (Beveridge, 1994). A popular French fashion house, Chanel, had the same experience when it printed Koranic verses on women's low-cut tops. This action is considered sacrilegious in the Arab world. (Toronto Star, 1994).

At present, the few studies on international PR have been, for the most part, country-specific with little theoretical underpinnings that serve as a guide. As it is often very difficult for a PR practitioner to be familiar with numerous world cultures, the only practical option sometimes is to transplant the U.S. PR practice. The domestic experience may not be helpful abroad. An understanding of world cultural patterns would enhance PR strategic planning and therefore ease the transition problems of the international PR practitioner.

Collection of pragmatic theories from disciplines such as anthropology, ethnography, folklore, sociology, and social psychology provides an overview and understanding of cultural patterns practitioners can use as a frame of reference in interacting with the various societies. Some cultural habits cut across national and regional boundaries. Countries can be placed on a continuum of cultural values, with the understanding there may exist some local particularities. This approach can lead to effective localizing of communication strategies.

The study of global cultural patterns also may lead to the understanding of what Martin J. Gannon (1994) called cultural metaphors. According to Gannon (1994, p.7), cultural metaphor identifies "some phenomenon or activity of a nation's

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culture that all or most of its members consider to be very important and with which they identify closely. The characteristics of the metaphor then become the basis for describing and understanding the essential features of the society." Some examples given of national metaphors include the Italian opera, German symphony, French wine, Russian ballet, Japanese garden, Spanish bullfight, American football, and Turkish coffeehouse. (Gannon, 1994, p.19).

Some of the approaches used in contrasting cultural values that may be helpful to the international PR practitioners are: individualism versus collectivism; high-context and low-context communication styles; degree of media independence and cultural impact on media content and channels; and orientation to time.

It has to be noted these cultural patterns and values are not written in stone. Even in the same culture, there are marked individual differences. There is innate individual personality, tempered with past experience and society's norm.

Individualism Versus Collectivism

Individuals' desire, aspiration, and perception of their place and role in society are culturally determined. What impresses, inspires and motivates individuals are different in the various human societies.

To be successful abroad, international PR practitioners have to recognize the strong belief in

rugged individualism is essentially an American trait which many other societies may not necessarily welcome. U.S. business culture embodies values such as self-determination, achievement, future orientation, optimism, curiosity, problem-solving and doing more than expected. (De Forest, 1998).

Individualistic culture fosters competitive spirit, change, and challenge, while collectivism tends towards the maintenance of the status quo, social symbols, harmony, and collaboration. In the United States, individuals are responsible for their failure or success in life. Self-help and self-determination is the mantra.

Freedom of the person predominates in individualistic culture. The First Amendment to the Constitution is highly regarded in the United States because it guarantees freedom of speech and the press. Some societies may regard these freedoms as divisive and disruptive.

In many cultures of the world, individuals get their identity from an affiliated organization or immediate family. Collective value system, goals and aspiration take precedence over those of individuals. Individuals in group societies tend to be less assertive and be governed by the group norm. Geert Hofstede (1980, p.235) termed this as "low individualism" where emphasis is on belonging to a group and identity is derived from the social system.

Japan epitomizes such a society. Individuals are not encouraged to stand out or be assertive. "The nail that sticks up will be pounded down," is a popular proverb in Japan. (Varner & Beamer, 1995, p.91-92). Achievement is attributed not to individuals, but to an affiliated group. "Group is the most important part of society and is emphasized for motivation. Equity is more important than wealth." (Harris and Moran, 1991, p.394).

Collectivistic society avoids arguments or debates that have the potential to disrupt communication. On the contrary, debates are welcomed in North America because they provide an opportunity for all sides of an issue to be discussed. There is an open market of ideas.

The culture of competitiveness permeates the individualistic system. Politics, economics, and markets are all based on competition. Individuals, organizations, and ideas compete against each other. Individual leaders are praised or rebuked for the success or failure of an organization. In a collectivistic system, competition is managed and controlled, and there is collective success or failure, praise or blame.

High-context and Low-context Communication Styles

Every communication takes place in a social context and in verbal and non-verbal modes. Culture

determines which mode — verbal or non-verbal — predominates. In a communication transaction where the message sender and receiver come from the same linguistic group and social background, there is more likelihood both would ascribe nearly the same meaning to the message. In some cultures, the message is clearly articulated in the words, while in others, what was said and not said have to be considered to derive any substantive meaning.

Edward T. Hall (1976, p.79) termed this "high-context and low-context communication systems." He stated, "a high-context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low-context (LC) communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code."

According to Gary P. Ferraro (1994, p.50), cultures vary in terms of how explicitly they send and receive verbal messages. Based on the writings of Edward Hall and L. R. Kohls, Ferraro (1994, p.51), placed 12 nationalities on a high-context to low-context communication continuum. Countries such as Germany, Scandinavia, and the United States are on the low context while Japan, China, and Arab countries are on the high-context.

In low-context countries, great emphasis is placed on words. Every effort is made to communicate unambiguously through the use of words. The message receiver is expected to derive most of the

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meaning from the written or verbalized statements and not from non-verbal behavior cues, or social and physical contexts. Legal documents produced in the West epitomize this reality. To avoid the possibility of ambiguity and misinterpretation by all concerned parties, official and legal writings have literal meaning. This explicit communication culture permeates in low-context societies such as the United States, German, and the Scandinavian.

In high-context societies, the importance and power of words are de-emphasized. The meaning of a message is less on the words. The perception of the message sender, nonverbal cues, social and physical contexts, are used to ascribe meaning to a transmitted verbal message. Statements may not be explicit and categorical. Blanks have to be filled in mentally by the message decoder. Therefore a mes-

sage encoder who relies too much on words, without regard to external cues, may not quantitatively and qualitatively communicate.

Non-verbal communication and existing relationship between communication participants form a substantial part of the transaction. Unlike the United States for example, verbal communication accompanies non-verbal communication in Japan. Japanese "are very sensitive to the atmosphere pervading human relationships." (Doi, 1982, p.219).

In high-context cultures, there is the tendency to overuse verbs, metaphors, aphorisms, and anecdotes in communicating. Ambiguity and silence are routinely used to deliver a message. Ferraro (1994, p.54) pointed out that "frequently certain pronouns will be repeated in order to fully dramatize the message," and "highly graphic metaphors and similes are common." He added it is not uncommon for an Arabic speaker to use a long list of adjectives to modify a single noun in order to stress a point. A statement may be understated or overstated to bring out or stress a point and the message receiver is expected to easily pick up the cues and make meaning out of them.

While a direct question usually solicits a direct answer in North America, high-context societies intentionally give vague answers. Direct negative answer is considered impolite. A negative response may be in the form of non-verbal communication, such as folding of the hands with trepidation, silence, or lack of eye contact.

Expression of God's will and protection even may preface or end a message. In many cultures, such as the Arab, African, and Anglophone Caribbean countries, it is usually common to start a statement by thanking God, expecting God's blessing, or God's will. This is often used to seek a common ground and affirm the universal and omnipotent power of God among the participants in the communication transaction. This may sound strange to some Western PR practitioners who expect religion or belief in God to be outside the domain of business relationships.

In high-context culture, there may be profuse use of symbols, protocol and formal forms of address in a communication transaction, especially when there is substantial power distance between the participants.

While low-context culture follows the letter of the law, keeps job tasks separate from relationships, values individual initiative and decision-making, and presents facts, statistics, and other details, high-context culture believes laws can be shaped by circumstances, sees a task as a function of the relationship, expects decision-making within the relationship, and de-emphasizes detailed information. (Kenton & Valentine, 1997, p.121).

In some high-context culture languages, sounds give meaning to a statement. Different sounds of the same word may denote different meaning. Edward T. Hall (1976, p.80) pointed out no low-context communication system has ever been an art form, and added that a reader of English, French, German, Spanish, and Italian can understand the language without knowing how it is pronounced. In low-context societies, each word in a sentence has its meaning without regard to tone or tenor.

In order to enrich the rapport between parties in a communication transaction in a high-context society, a reference to an unrelated subject may begin a message. It is common in Japan to begin a business message with a reference to the season. "Now it is autumn and the red leaves are covering the ground with color," while in "Muslim countries, the opening paragraph of a business letter may invoke Allah's blessing on the reader and the reader's family members — particularly when the business is family-operated." (Varner & Beamer, 1995, p.120).

Communication in the high-context culture is not an isolated event. It may affirm the past warm and harmonious relationship. The message may demonstrate an expression of appreciation, humble obedience, respect, and eternal gratefulness. In the Arab culture, Zaharna (1995) stated the "emphasis is on form over function, affect over accuracy, and image over meaning." He also

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pointed out the Arabic language "appears to be a social conduit in which emotional resonance is stressed," rather than "as a means for transferring information with a stress on factual accuracy." To an unprepared international PR practitioner, this language style may seem superfluous and hinder communication effectiveness.

It has to be recognized that in a high-context communication environment, "harmony, face-giving and face-saving, status, and ambiguity" allows flexibility. (Varner & Beamer, 1995, p.133).

Information flow in high-context and low-context cultures is different. "In low-context countries, such as the United States, Germany, and Switzerland, information is highly focused, compartmentalized, and controlled, and therefore, not apt to flow freely. In high-context cultures, such as the French, the Japanese, and the Spanish, information spreads rapidly and moves almost as if it had a life of its

own." (Lane, DiStefano, and Maznevski 1997, p.73).

In high-context societies, there is multidirectional flow of information and open communication at all times among all members of an organization. In low-context culture, business information is usually directed to the concerned parties.

Degree of Media Independence and Cultural Impact on Media Content and Channels

As the mass media is one of the most important tools of communicating for PR practitioners, the understanding of the media's role and functions in a culture becomes very important.

The independence of the press may, to some extent, be assessed by the ownership and control of media channels. Many governments usually have the proclivity to control the content of the media channels they finance and/or operate. The few exceptions may be some European media organizations such as the British Broadcasting Corporation and Agence France Presse historically subsidized by the respective governments. However, in these two organizations, the ownership and operation are separated.

The political nature of a country also can be used to assess the workings and freedom of its press. An authoritarian and one-party government is unlikely to welcome a vibrant free media. The watchdog function of a free media may be at variance with the political ideology of a dictatorial government.

History and culture also may impact news value, judgment, and delivery systems. In the United States, news may be regarded as a report of a current event. (Halberstam, 1992, p.11). News, like any other product, is market-driven. Media's orientation may be more on the entertainment side because of the need to gain more media market share. In some societies, news and propaganda may not be differentiated. News may be used to inform, educate, and sometimes be used as a development tool.

The production of PR materials in other cultures has to be carefully considered. The rules that govern domestic mass media and PR writings have to be carefully reviewed for their validity abroad. In the United States, news reporting and editorial writing are usually separate. In European journalism, for example, one person can report a story and at the same time write an editorial comment on the same subject. "U.S. journalism imposes stronger measures to avoid subjective beliefs and preferences of individual reporters dominating the news...whereas in most European countries the individual journalist's subjective views are allowed to make their way through into media content." (Donsbach, 1995, p.28).

Traditionally, practitioners in the United States are advised to write clearly and to the point. Active

voice is often preferred to passive voice and complex sentences are to be avoided. Main points of a message are to be written first, and if necessary background information may be included later. The inverted pyramid style of news writing is the mantra. News reporters are expected to report straight facts devoid of emotional overtones. If a story stretches beyond simple reporting, the reader is sometimes told that it is news with background analysis. To avoid subjectivity, news writings are often without emotional overtones and dry to the bone.

The opposite may be the case in high-context societies. Writings, including news reports, are meant to be colorful, inspirational, and insightful. A message may contain ambiguous ideas in order to create a certain effect. Metaphors, indirectness, long sentences, vagueness, and exaggerations are legitimate communication forms.

Most PR writings in the United States are persuasive in nature. In low-context culture, facts, evidence, and statistics are stressed. Arguments, debates, and discussions are based essentially on the merits of the case. Conscious efforts are made to draw a clear line between personal and business relationships.

In high-context societies, a PR message may be based more on moral authority, social status, or the need to maintain social harmony. Rather than focus on the facts and evidence of the case, it may reinforce existing relationship. Credibility may be placed more on emotional than factual appeals. According to Iris Varner and Linda Beamer (1995, p. 125), "facts alone seem cold and impersonal, and therefore unpersuasive, to people from cultures that value emotional involvement." Arguments, debates, and criticisms that may seem constructive to a Westerner may be counterproductive in a high-context society that cherishes harmony, status, and social order.

The cornerstone of American journalism is the First Amendment of the Constitution which declares Congress shall make no law abridging freedom of speech or of the press. In some societies, religious sources of law may be the only ones recognized and applicable.

Religious Practices Need Attention

Religious practice is another area where American culture may be different from many others. In many Islamic countries, for example, there is no clear separation of the sacred from the secular. Religion is interwoven into everyday life activities. Islam is a religious, political, and cultural way of life. The three areas overlap, interact, and imperceptibly affect and reflect on each other. (Yousef, 1982, p.95).

Western journalists are used to a combative style

during interaction with a news and information source. In some cultures, aggressive solicitation of information during business interaction or a news conference is not welcomed. It is seen as disrespectful. "Direct confrontation in the Japanese culture takes place in interpersonal settings, not during public communication events." (Neff, 1990).

Channels of communication and influence also are culturally determined. In a technologically advanced society, with many media channels, high literacy rate, and high standard of living, mass media may be effective in communicating. In some cultures, interpersonal communication may be more successful than mass media because of the high level of illiteracy and lack of many mass media channels. Communication through a third party, such as opinion leaders and molders, elite groups, and significant others, may be more practical and productive. In a traditional Ghanaian setting, for example, dance, songs, and storytelling have been among the important channels for conducting public communication campaigns in towns. (Riley, 1991, p.156). Immediate and extended family communication plays a vital role. Tribal chiefs and their lieutenants organize and lead community rituals and other group activities.

It has to be pointed out that English is not the media language in many societies. It is easy to assume English is a universal language perhaps because the United States is the dominant world power. Ninety-two percent of the world's 5.9 billion consumers do not speak or read English; and English is just one of 7,600 languages worldwide. (Poulin, 1997). Poulin added corporations "can't build business relationships within a global marketplace unless they publish ideas and concepts in multiple languages, taking into consideration cultural and socio-political norms of communications."

Catching Two Pigeons with One Bean

Direct translation of English-produced documents into other languages may not produce the intended meaning. To avoid this potential faux pas, it is necessary that native speakers be employed as translators. The expression "killing two birds with one stone" may be correctly translated to "catching two pigeons with one bean" in Italian; "hitting two flies with one swat" in German; or "catching two fish with one rod" in Korean. (Dempsey, 1992, p.22).

PR practitioners have to be careful using metaphors, jokes, aphorisms, and maxims in English or other languages when practicing abroad. Anecdotes, testimonies and examples that may illustrate certain points, or witty statements that may be appropriate in North America may be unsettling across the border. The use of unfamiliar abstractions, references, and mental images to a foreign

audience may confuse or create discomfort and therefore diminish the quality of communication. Cultural sensitiveness and the understanding of a group's communication nuances are needed to adequately and effectively communicate.

The meaning and significance of colors are also not universal. Color means different things to different people in the world. A color that may be appropriate for a media kit, annual report, magazine, or brochure in one country may have the opposite effect in others. According to Gerry Dempsey (1992, p.21-23), the color yellow carries religious and mystical overtones in India, while in China, it represents both the Emperor and pornography; in the United States, it can evoke cowardice (a yellow streak) or faithfulness (a yellow ribbon). The design of publicity materials also can have a heavy cultural overtone. Some societies are unicultural and ethnocentric. Therefore, the portrayal of multicultural or multiracial images, pictures, and illustrations may be offensive. The social roles of males and females, citizens and foreigners, poor and the rich, have to be considered in designing PR publicity materials in the various cultures of the world.

Orientation to Time

In the West, time is carefully measured and treated like a precious commodity which has to be conserved. PR activities in North America follow timetables. The production and distribution of news releases and the organizing of news conferences, among others, have to follow strict timelines. There are no excuses for not meeting mass media deadlines and scheduling. Time follows in sequential order — minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years. Some employees, including PR practitioners and journalists, are paid based on the actual time worked. Time cards are punched in and out, sometimes including lunchtime. The impact of time and timing is overreaching.

PR practice across the border may not lend itself to this strict time culture. There is no universal meaning of time. Culture plays a part in how time

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is perceived, defined and used. It is very important that the cultural variables be recognized. This recognition may reduce frustration and confusion on the part of the international PR practitioner who has to alter an entrenched Western time habit.

Time has different meaning for high-context and low-context societies. High information culture may not see time as a very serious commodity. Human activities are not tied to the rigidities of timeliness. The flow of social interactions determine the timing, without serious regard to the ticking of the time clock.

At a microphone assembly plant in Mexico, a new American plant manager vented his frustration by loudly pounding his desk because his middle-level managers always failed to appear at the scheduled daily 10 o'clock staff meeting. The American manager later noticed his Mexican colleagues did not usually have their watches on. The gold watches given by the company, Mexican colleagues said, was for special occasions not for daily use in the factory. (DeForest, 1998).

In high-context societies, social and natural harmony takes precedence over strict time control in communication transaction. The future is to shape itself without human intervention. Time belongs to God. Therefore, God's will, with regard to the past, present and future, has to be recognized and respected, they assert.

Use of time by world cultures has been classified as either monochronic or polychronic. Monochronic time is paying "attention to and doing only one thing at a time," while polychronic time is involvement with many things at once. (Lane, DiStefano and Maznevski 1997, p.68). High-context societies tend to be polychronic, while low-context societies are monochronic.

In polychronic time, many activities, private and official, may be scheduled at the same time. No time priority may be placed on work assignments. Business and social events are allowed to evolve without regard to the strict restriction of timing and scheduling and prior planning. A PR practitioner who tries to strictly keep appointments, meet schedules and deadlines in such a culture may be seen as arrogant and insensitive. The creation and nurturing of relationship is more important than the strict obedience to the time clock.

Many African, Latin American, and Arab countries are polychronic. It has to be pointed out however that some educated individuals in polychronic societies are adopting Western time culture, especially those who have to work with expatriates or acquired their education in the West.

In a monochronic society, such as the United States, business activities are timed at every stage of the implementation. Goals, objectives, strategies, and tactics are all timed. Deadlines and appointments are usually kept. Other countries in the monochronic system include Switzerland, Germany, and Scandinavia.

Another element international PR practitioners

have to recognize is cultural differences in business and family relationships. Monochronic culture "separates work from family and social life," while polychronic culture "views work, family, and social life as one." (Kenton & Valentine, 1997, p.121).

Conclusion

With the demise of communism, many countries are adopting the democratic system of government and an open-market economy. The result of this new global political and economic landscape is the rapid privatization of economic activities, internationalization of technology and investments. This has led to keen global market competition. Very few businesses are now purely domestic. A North American-based corporation may be competing for customers who live in other continents.

Historically, there has always been a symbiotic relationship between business expansion and the need for PR. Every business has to find ways to effectively communicate and interact with its various stakeholders. With the expanding international business and publics, such interaction becomes more complex and involved. PR functions therefore become more challenging. In addition to the usual professional skills, the knowledge of world cultures, including language, has become one of the PR functions.

The ethnocentric nature of communication models and paradigms developed in North America may be inadequate, or even irrelevant, abroad. The foreign publics are obviously different because of their own tradition, history, world view, and realities of life.

The recognition of the cultural patterns of the world may be one positive step in the understanding of the global publics. It behooves, therefore, international PR practitioners and researchers to use knowledge gained from various academic disciplines to adequately and effectively communicate with global constituencies.

No doubt, it is a challenge for the North American PR practitioner used to careful planning, communicating clearly, meeting deadlines, and controlling information flow to do the opposite. R. S. Zaharna (1995) referred to the North American business style as a "parts' approach" because work is broken down into steps, phases, and tasks. He described an Arab's approach as "holistic" because the focus is on the "bigger picture."

Adequate preparation and a sense of optimism are needed beforehand. Cultural differences are bridged by sensitiveness, flexibility, and being nonjudgmental. It is better for differences to be seen as strength and not weakness. Practitioners have no option but to face this "New World" challenge.

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Augustine Ihator, Ph.D. teaches public relations in the School of Journalism and Broadcasting, Western Kentucky University. His research involves national and international public relations. He has served institutions such as the World Bank and the U.S. Army Headquarters as a public relations practitioner. He received his Ph.D. from Howard University, Washington, D.C. Western Kentucky University, School of Journalism and Broadcasting, 1 Big Red Way, Bowling Green, KY 42101. Phone: (270) 745-5836; Fax: (270) 745-5835 E-mail: augustine.ihator@wku.edu.