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Thinking Globally and Acting Locally: The Art of Accommodation

by Toshio Naito
Dentsu Advertising, Japan

Communications professionals, distinguished colleagues, ladies and gentlemen: It is a great honor to be here this morning, discussing an issue of such importance to all those involved in international communications. Since the theme of today's session involves accommodation, I would be most pleased if you would kindly make an effort to accommodate my less than perfect English.

The title of this session, "Thinking Globally and Acting Locally: The Art of Accommodation," has tremendous relevance to the advertising industry. To explain this relevance, let me take a moment to define the phrase in advertising terms. To "think globally" is to set a goal for a product or service that transcends national boundaries. Success in the world market is the objective, and in order to achieve this, individual national markets must be won over.

Which brings us to "thinking locally." As we all know, the form of a message, particularly an advertising message, is determined by its intended audience. Demographics and psychographics play a fundamental role in how the message is shaped and delivered. And it is a general to specific determination. By this I mean that the broadest unifying characteristic is first determined — in this case nationality — followed by increasingly specific characteristics of the group. Ideally, we are left with a clearly defined target audience. The message must then be shaped to fit this target.

And this brings us to "accommodation." This word has a variety of related meanings, but in terms of its relationship to advertising, I will define it simply as "adaptation." In other words, to accommodate is to adapt to the target audience, to take into consideration all the factors
that define this segment of the population, and then to craft the message as specifically as possible to these consumers. This being the case, it stands to reason that on an international scale, advertising can seldom be at its most effective if it does not accommodate individual national markets.

Now that we have an idea of the role accommodation plays in international advertising, I'd like to cite some examples of how it works. However, before I move on to its international aspects, I'm going to relate an instance of advertising accommodation that took place within my own country. You see, even though our subject is international in scope, accommodation also takes place on a regional level, and in this example, in response to an event that profoundly transformed the region.

Early on the morning of January 17, 1995, the Kansai region of Japan was awakened by one of the most powerful natural disasters of the century: the Great Hanshin Earthquake. Although the actual quake lasted only about twenty seconds, by the time the ground stopped shaking the city of Kobe had been devastated. Over six thousand people lost their lives, and countless homes and buildings were completely destroyed. The city's infrastructure was dealt a severe blow. The transportation system — highways, railways, and the sea port — ground to a halt. Gas and water supplies were cut off. Though some telephone service was available, it was limited, hampered by the incredible demand for usage. As I stated earlier, the region had been transformed by a horrible disaster. Certainly, the role of advertising had also been transformed, and the art of accommodation became more essential than ever.

In the wake of a disaster, accurate information is often a matter of life and death; unfortunately, such information is extremely hard to
obtain. As a means of accommodation, advertising must revert to its simplest form: a conduit for information. While all advertising conveys at least some information, it is almost certainly tempered with a healthy dose of persuasion. But in mid-January of last year, the survivors in Kobe were not in need of persuasion. They were in need of information: where to find shelter; where they could get food and water; where they could receive medical attention; where they could obtain information on a missing relative or friend; where they could make a phone call to calm others who might be worried about them; where they could take a hot bath; where students could find out about entrance exam schedules; plus a thousand other things of great importance to the citizens of Kobe — important to their survival, important to their lives.

So advertising became an information conduit, and public service announcements filled the pages of newspapers, and later the airwaves, to accommodate the people of Kobe. However, this was not the only form of accommodation that took place after the earthquake. As the need for information brought more PSAs, the nature of the tragedy itself made much of traditional advertising less relevant to the survivors. In some cases, it might even have been viewed as exploitative. Thus, advertisements that were deemed inappropriate, insensitive, or simply unnecessary were pulled from the airwaves and the pages of newspapers. In this manner, advertising continued to transform itself as it practiced the art of accommodation.

For example, Toyota, Mazda, Mercedes-Benz and Ford all stopped running commercials in the Kansai area immediately after the disaster; these were replaced with messages of sympathy and encouragement; instead of advertising housing loans, many banks communicated when and where branches were open so survivors could
universality. What are some "universal themes?" One might consider such widely shared concepts as quality, value, comfort, ease of use, and new and improved. But beyond even the most universal concept, there rides the Marlboro Man.

Marlboro is one of the few truly global brands with a truly global image. In fact, it has virtually the same image anywhere in the world, with creative execution more or less consistent in all markets. Does the success of Marlboro then undermine the significance of accommodation? I think not. First of all, Marlboro is the exception rather than the rule. Second, and more importantly, the image of the American West — the cowboy — has itself become a universal image, through movies, television programs, books and other forms of pop culture. Though not quite as popular as in its heyday, the cowboy-Western image remains universal. At least in this sense, the world was and is just homogenous enough for the Marlboro Man to succeed. In effect, the Marlboro campaign was an example of global accommodation. Would accommodation on a national level been more effective? It's difficult to say, but the global success of the Marlboro Man cannot be denied, and the hooves of his horse can still be heard clopping on the roads of Tokyo, the promenades of Paris, the avenues of New York, and even the streets of Singapore.

But this is exceptional. Let me give you an example where the art of accommodation was clearly required. For several years, Fuji Film ran a successful campaign in Japan featuring a popular and eccentric Japanese rock star named Kogurei, or "Demon" in English. Kogurei is well known throughout Japan for his bizarre look and outlandish behavior. Dentsu developed a campaign which featured Kogurei not as a rock and roll star, but as a devoted father and husband. Wearing his familiar makeup, he dresses in ordinary clothes and attends to the day-
These are but a few of the many examples of accommodation that took place after a tragic disaster, when the need to accommodate was so clear. In fact, this clarity is why I chose to include this example. Keep in mind that in other parts of Japan, commercials were aired that were not shown in the Kansai area. You might call this, "think nationally, act locally." In fact, I'm very proud of the way agencies and advertisers responded to the Great Hanshin Earthquake, but quite honestly, anything less would have been a disappointment. Advertising did the decent thing by playing the best role it could. But in the international arena, the role of advertising, and thus of accommodation, is not always so clear. In fact, it becomes much more difficult to practice accommodation at the level suggested by the title of this session: as an art.

Why is the art of accommodation so difficult? Precisely because it is so difficult to understand the true nature of a culture. In Japan, we often think of ourselves as a homogenous culture, which makes the job of advertising quite a bit easier than in countries rich in ethnic diversity. Because with ethnic diversity you also have cultural diversity, so even within a nation, or for that matter, a region, you can have great differences in language, attitudes, beliefs, needs, and aspirations. While this yields a dynamic and stimulating environment, it also makes the art of accommodation that much more difficult, for now it is necessary to accommodate cultures within cultures.

One of the ways to maximize accommodation efforts is by picking themes that have a more "universal" appeal. I realize that by invoking the "U" word I seem to be contradicting myself. But of course some themes and ideas are more universal than others, and since it is impossible to accommodate each person on an individual basis, we must sometimes expand the boundaries that define a group until we approach
withdraw much-needed cash. Other corporations announced emergency fund-raising operations.

Here are some other, more specific examples:

A housing company, Ube House, changed the concept of its new commercial which focused on the fire-resistant qualities of its building materials. The commercial featured Godzilla unsuccessfully trying to burn an Ube House by breathing fire on it. Considering that much of Kobe was still burning days after the earthquake, it was clear that the spot was inappropriate.

Japanese Railway stopped its "Yes, let's go to Kyoto," campaign, as Kyoto is located very near Kobe.

Shiseido, a manufacturer of toiletry products, halted its shampoo commercial that said to consumers, "Let's shampoo every day." Because of the water shortage, many of the survivors weren't even able to bathe.

Nissin pulled one of its Cup Noodle commercials since it showed the roof of a house collapsing.

Asahi Kasei, a housing company, kept a low profile. To communicate the strength of their structures, they had been running a campaign in which an elephant was perched on the roof of a house.
to-day needs of his family. The Japanese found this irony memorable and charming, and the campaign proved to be very successful.

However, both the charm, and the point, were lost outside Japan. An explanation into the commercial's background helps non-Japanese understand why it worked so well in Japan. But commercials that require explanation are seldom successful, just as a joke that requires explanation is seldom funny. So for our pan-Asia campaigns, we accommodated by employing more universal themes, in this case, "new and improved," which was set against an exciting backdrop.

In fact, few popular Japanese commercials are exported, because nearly 70% utilize celebrities, the majority of whom are Japanese. Since few Japanese celebrities enjoy sufficient international popularity, it is necessary to develop alternative approaches to accommodate markets outside Japan.

Here are more examples of the art of accommodation:

(Include examples for at least two products)

So far, I've discussed the importance of accommodation and showed you some examples. Now I'd like to talk about how to ensure that a given market is best accommodated. As I stated earlier, the art of accommodation is so difficult simply because cultures are so complex. Even members of a culture sometimes have difficulty understanding it. Being Japanese, I know this first hand. So of course, any culture is a great challenge for non-members to decipher. One common-sense means of lessening this "culture gap" is to establish direct links with the culture. By this I mean employ members of that culture or of that nationality to work or consult on the account. Better still, establish a relationship with an agency in that culture or nation. Dentsu is very
fortunate to have a network of agencies throughout Asia and much of the rest of the world. Thus, when we create a Pan-Asia advertising campaign for a client, we will consult with our agencies in various countries to ensure that no *faux pas*, however unintentional, diminishes the favorable impression and good will the ad is trying to create.

As many of you know, there is a myriad of images that might be perceived unfavorably in a given market. In the advertising industry, it's said that you can't lose if your advertisement includes animals or children. This, however, can get you into a lot of trouble. In fact, certain animals are considered offensive in some cultures, and to associate a product with this type of animal would be very unwise. Other animals are so venerated that to show them in an advertisement would be equally unwise.

With respect to commercials or ads featuring people, one must determine what type of person to show. If a spot is to be aired in markets throughout Asia, do you feature a Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Malaysian, Korean, Thai, or a Saudi Arabian? Or do you show a blond-haired, blue-eyed person, equally "foreign" to all? Once you do decide on what type of person, you must consider gender. Regardless of the target audience, gender may be determined by some cultural aspect of the market. Is it wise or even permissible to show a man and a woman interacting in some way, however innocently? Indeed, the nature of the relationship between individuals in an ad or commercial is extremely important. A man and a woman laughing and holding hands as they walk their dog through a park may be a perfectly natural scene in some cultures, but to others this might be an unbelievable, unacceptable, or even illegal image. The art of accommodation considers all these factors; in fact, accommodation takes nothing for granted.
Another element in the art of accommodation is consideration of the level of familiarity with the language of advertising. Though it varies from culture to culture, advertising images constitute a kind of language that becomes increasingly understandable the more one is exposed to it. In some countries, an individual may be exposed to hundreds or even thousands of advertising messages each day. In other countries, the level of exposure is significantly less, particularly where the television industry is still getting off the ground. Thus, advertising symbols and metaphors easily understood in some countries may be totally foreign to another. In countries less exposed to advertising, a more direct approach might be preferable, one that states directly the benefits of a product; in countries more "fluent" in the language of advertising, a more symbolic approach might better communicate the message and hold viewer interest. In order to ensure accommodation, this gap must be considered. The solution might be a compromise, one that thoughtfully considers what mathematicians call "the lowest common denominator"; or, ideally, separate advertisements will be developed.

Language is another element in the art of accommodation. Some countries, as Singaporeans know very well, are made up of individuals speaking a variety of languages. In some cases, there may be hundreds of dialects. How does one accommodate? More often than not, the answer is English. But what kind of English? American English? British English? And what level of English should be employed? Is English a first language? A second language? A third? What kinds of idioms are familiar to the local population? Or should the ad appear in one or several "native" languages. All these factors must be considered in the art of accommodation.
One other consideration is technical in nature. Some countries have very advanced communications technologies. Others have not yet achieved this level of sophistication. Therefore, if an ad is to be produced or printed locally, it is wise to accommodate your demands to the technical capabilities of the market.

All things considered, you might be asking yourselves, "In order to best accommodate a market, why don't manufacturers simply hire a local agency to do their advertising rather than relying on one at home?" In fact, there is a trend to do just this. Many companies are utilizing an agency within that country to handle their advertising. Of course, this has advantages in that it helps ensure accommodation. On the other hand, it makes it more difficult for a client to coordinate overall advertising efforts, to ensure that the advertising maintains continuity and a consistent corporate identity throughout the world. In fact, it makes it very difficult to maintain a unified global perspective. As Dentsu and other agencies have tried to do, it is perhaps most effective to have international advertising coordinated by an agency with many affiliates in the local markets. This helps ensure both accommodation and continuity, that we think globally and act locally.

That brings me to the conclusion of my talk. I want to thank you for so graciously accommodating me this morning. In closing, I would like to add this: as important as the art of accommodation is to advertising, it is even more important to international relations in general. Knowledge and understanding of a culture and the desire to respect and accommodate it are fundamental to peaceful coexistence. If we can successfully practice the art of accommodation in advertising, then we can certainly practice it in our lives. It can only lead to a better, more peaceful, more prosperous world for all. Thank you.