

# In Marketing Across Cultures: Are You Enlightening the World or are You Speaking in Tongues?

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You probably understand the title of this article if you are a Christian. If you are not, you probably do not. That is how important frame-of-reference is in communication. Humans internalize communications within their frame-of-reference and experience. If communication is conceived outside of that, it often is either misunderstood or not understood at all. Yet, today in marketing, communication mostly is conceived by a small minority for a vast majority of recipients. Recipients will either understand such communication, which means that it will achieve its core objectives to sell or persuade, or they will not understand it, resulting in marketers standing little chance of achieving their objectives. The opportunity cost of marketing therefore is huge: there often is only one chance to convince a market.

Despite years of talking about globalization, real global brands with significant market shares all around the world are few. In many places, notably Europe, Latin America, and South East Asia, local brands still do well in many fast-moving consumer goods categories. The implication has to be that many of these brands satisfy local needs, hence retain their local strengths. The global brands that have been dramatically successful mainly stem from the United States of America, Japan or selected European countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany, France, or Italy. Whereas the United States and Japan, tend to dominate with mass global brands including McDonalds, Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Microsoft, Sony, and Toyota, Europe tends to dominate the specialist areas of chemicals, pharmaceuticals, fashion, food, wine, tourism, and luxury goods.<sup>1</sup>

A major caveat for globalization is how to straddle, on the one hand, the economies of scale integral to international distribution with sales and local customs, needs and peculiarities on the other hand. It is fair to say that most international brands have achieved global status through sheer trade, distribution and marketing clout, rather than through excellence in matching local needs. In the process, these brands have attained the status of global icons, becoming cultural systems in their own right that speak a universal language from Lima to Jakarta. So, the globalization of business still faces a unique challenge: namely, to successfully customize a message to a specific market in a given socio-economic and cultural context, while retaining the appeal of a global cultural icon. For most fast-moving consumer or mass-consumer goods categories, greater

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<sup>1</sup> H. McRae, *The World in 2020* (London: Harper Collins, 1994).

market penetration is a function of the degree to which a global brand speaks successfully to the local community in a language and idiom it can relate to, and therefore find more appealing than local brands.

This can be achieved either by:

- 1 Creating marketing unique to every single society (the “bottom-up” approach); or
- 2 Creating marketing that looks at universal symbols and ideas, and customizes them to accentuate unique socio-economic and cultural differences (the “top-down” approach).

The former has the built-in potential to segregate and be inefficient in its application. The latter has the possibility to create great new brand concepts, ideas, and efficiencies in marketing, as well as its own “language systems.” Unfortunately, most brand communication to date has evolved to fall somewhere between these two approaches, it is neither fully “localized,” nor is it fully “globalized.” Although, numerically, not many brands can be called truly global, the trend towards globalization is real and accelerating, despite concerns evident in growing reactions to groups such as the World Trade Organization, and to particular icons such as McDonalds and other American brand icons.<sup>2</sup>

Global brand icons including Nike, Phillips, Sony, IBM, and Coca-Cola transcend cultures, and their names and imagery have become language systems in their own right. The imagery associated with Coca-Cola probably is the biggest common language system in the world. There are even debates concerning the relevance of conveying the name Coca-Cola in different languages! Brand iconography truly has resulted in a third dimension of speech and human interface. Yet, most graphic design and marketing communications for brands do not succeed on a multicultural level.

### **Globalization and an Approach That Communicates With the Lowest Common Denominator**

Many brands equate the term globalization with creating images that appeal to the lowest common denominator. Countless household goods and personal products are marketed in a pedestrian fashion in places from China and Hong Kong, to the United Arab Emirates and Latin America. The reality is that these brands not only miss an opportunity, they probably only “work” because of such marketing resources as trade backing and massive advertising budgets behind them. The mere fact that a product is globally marketed creates great desirability among “upwardly mobile” people around the world, regardless of race, creed, culture, or language.

Multinational companies, whose products must appeal to the mass-market and who therefore have to communicate across cultures, have the tendency to translate advertising and design

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2 N. Klein, *No Logo* (London: Flamingo, 2001).

piecemeal from one language to another, with a resultant loss of comprehension at the receiving end. Head-office-generated material for many multinationals often is badly translated into host languages, with a resultant loss of creative idiom, and without the addition of information content or emotional appeal that is of real value to regional consumers. If Irish humor is not understood nor appreciated, much of what would be a great advertisement in Ireland is wasted on a consumer in another country.

After the 2001 Cannes Advertising Festival, the editorial comment in *AdAge Global* pointed to the difficulty Western judges have in empathizing with concepts created in non-Western, third-world economies.<sup>3</sup> The editorial suggests that judges simply do not relate to these concepts and, hence, do not see the relevance of a particular advertisement's appeal to a given market. This argument also crops up when South African advertising awards are judged. South Africa, with its diverse history and eleven official languages, frequently poses a problem for judges. The marketing industry often is accused of Eurocentricity, unable to fairly evaluate marketing material conceptualized from the perspective of the indigenous peoples of this country, or even from the point of white Afrikaans speaking audiences.<sup>4</sup>

White South African creative personnel, likewise, find it difficult to create advertising or graphic design that appeals relevantly and motivationally across cultures. Even black creative people in marketing and design in South Africa, often are socioeconomically so removed from certain black markets, that they find it difficult to create material that appeals to the emotions of these audiences. Most conceptual approaches also assume greater synergy between market segments, which often is not correct. Mass-markets generally consist of numerous and diverse subsegments, each with their own languages and idioms. Yet, speak to many of the leading graphic designers in South Africa, and they will tell you that very few clients target their communications to truly appeal across cultural groupings or segments—resulting in a huge opportunity lost to engender stakeholder support and motivation. Not even in safety, health and environment reports, designed to be inclusive, is this principle properly practiced.

There is little difference if we compare how multinational agencies and marketers approach advertising targeted at consumers in places such as the United Arab Emirates, China, or South East Asia. Much of this advertising is devoid of any creative concept, so it lacks the ability to challenge and excite a consumer. This means marketers miss a huge opportunity, and thus under-leverage their communication.

In a new era of “universalism,” recognition of where customers come from will be as important as the simple appeal of universality. For marketers and designers, this is not difficult or impossible

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3 S. Hatfield, “Cannes must face up to its advertising prejudices,” *AdAge Global* (July 9, 2001).

4 J. Farquhar, “The Big Idea” *Advantage* (August 2000).

to do. In recognizing people for who they are, business also recognizes humanity in its great diversity of expression, yet similarity of emotions.

The “top-down” approach to marketing has the ability to generate global icons, while retaining relevance to local needs and affiliations.

### **What Makes Communication Work?**

Communication generally is a function of three things:

- 1 Relevance to target market needs (telling consumers what they believe they need to know to purchase a given product or brand);
- 2 Language (using a language the market understands); and
- 3 Empathy (employing a stylistic and idiomatic manner the market likes and finds appealing to its emotions, senses, and intellect).

These elements create a frame-of-reference within which communications are received and understood. Generally, most marketers and designers will agree with the importance of relevance to needs and the importance of choice of language. People do not buy that which they do not need, either emotionally or rationally, and they do not relate to what they do not comprehend. The area that causes most concern in global marketing is the area of empathy. This is the area most lost in the direct translation of marketing communications. Without empathy, the “magic” of shared meaning is not possible. This “magic” adds value to a brand.

The problem is not whether a piece of communication tells a story to the consumer, it is rather whether the consumer likes it and empathizes with it. Millward Brown, a South African company, has tested more than 20,000 television commercials, and has a larger database on the impact of likeability on the noting and retention of commercials than perhaps any company globally. Much of their work assesses the importance of empathy and emotional involvement in generating conviction.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, work done by Hofmeyer and Rice<sup>6</sup> underscores the importance of brand image on the impact of international marketing messages. Barbara Cooke, the only woman marketer in South Africa to date who has won the coveted Protea Award for marketing excellence, has done much research regarding the importance of language and emotional involvement in advertising. She has clearly highlighted the importance of emotional bonding in communicating successfully with a market.<sup>7</sup>

Historically, certain themes can cross cultural divides. A sporting event such as the Olympic games is a powerful unifying symbol. South Africa was emotionally united when it won the 1995 Rugby World Cup, and President Nelson Mandela appeared in the team captian’s number six rugby jersey.<sup>8</sup> Did every South African suddenly love rugby? No, but the appeal of pride in victory is a

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5 E. Du Plessis, “Understanding and Using Likeability,” *Journal of Advertising Research* (September/October, 1994).

6 R. Hofmeyer and B. Rice, *Commitment-led Marketing* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2000).

7 B. Cooke, *The Case for Own Language Communication* (Johannesburg: National Media (internal research paper, 1991).

8 This image remains a potent symbol of unity for most South Africans.

universal thing anyone anywhere can understand and associate with. A comparable historical example demonstrating the ability to unite people was the Falklands War that brought pride back to the United Kingdom. A current one is the threat of terrorism uniting a politically divided United States behind President Bush.

Music is a universal symbol youth around the world relate to. Whether you walk into a club in London, Jakarta, Tokyo, New York, Paris, Sydney, Milan, Johannesburg, or Buenos Aires, the music is the same, the fashions will be comparable and, generally, many of the icons will be similar, as will be the emotional experience and feeling of belonging among the people. The entertainment industry in the United States has been called "imperialist" for setting the global "agenda" of what is "cool" and what is not. Yet, all it does is to create unifying symbols people around the world can relate to.

In marketing, universal appeal often is less evident. A good example of marketing crossing the cultural divides, was when various Budweiser "Wassup" advertisements, created from one central advertisement, successfully appealed to different market segments in the United States. Essentially, the campaign universalized an African-American colloquialism. The CNN approach to the American response to the events of September 11, paradoxically illustrates that the same message does not appeal to all people around the world. Whereas most people will agree with the threat of and response to terrorism, the importance of revealing all sides of the story is vital for many countries. Some brands themselves have created an inherent ability to represent cultures. Absolut Vodka and Camel are brands with universal appeal, but creative applications are adapted for countries, cities, cultures, or even subcultures.

The challenge is simple yet complex. It is to create global brand icons by elevating concepts and ideas from one culture or subsegment to global status, and by interpreting and appealing uniquely to individual cultures, similar to the way Budweiser, Camel cigarettes, and Absolut Vodka have done. This leads to the leveraging of a brand icon at the global level, creating efficiencies, and yet retaining local market appeal and uniqueness, which expands brand penetration into markets and forms a global front against purely local brands. Although this is conceptually simple, it remains the exception rather than the rule in marketing communications.

### **Diversity Remains the Most Important Ingredient of Future Creativity**

When people who work together are too alike, a phenomenon called "groupthink" emerges. This means they increasingly start thinking alike in a conditioned fashion. Generally, the more homogeneous a group, the less likely it is that one of its members will break the prevailing pattern of behavior.<sup>9</sup> When diverse persons or groups start cooperating, new paradigms of thinking emerge. This is a very powerful stimulus for creativity. So the reality is that, despite all the

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9 H.C. Marais, *Aspekte van Massakommunikasie* (Bloemfontein: P J de Villiers, 1980).

moves to the contrary such as cultural implosion and the disappearance of languages, one needs diversity to create fresh new products, brands, and thinking patterns. The convergence of such diversity generally means the new solution is more lateral, which is exactly the opposite of massification and standardization.

The United States and Europe still lead the headlines when it comes to marketing thinking, with few newcomers penetrating this group. Can the developing world offer assistance in how one speaks to a multicultural world? Yes, it certainly can, because it deals with this challenge daily. Brazil has become a global example of a country that uses its diversity to create great conceptual communications. Its emergence as a serious global challenger for advertising excellence is evident from its status at the last few Cannes Advertising Festivals.

The developed world probably has exhausted many of its sources of creativity, creative stimuli, and differentiation. In some instances, creativity has become an end in itself, resulting in communication that is exceedingly esoteric and intellectual. Product design has tended to gravitate towards the super-rich with form privileging function. The third world has the ability to generate new creative drivers in all facets of design, benefiting both the developed and developing world. On the one hand, the third world is grappling with problems that are real and tangible, evidenced, and experienced by ordinary people in their daily struggles to survive. Function at a low price prevails, and form needs to enhance function, nothing more. At this stage, design has to work towards the betterment of the community—the basic job it was designed to perform. On the other hand, the developing world also possesses qualities and creative canvasses with which to enrich, change, and stimulate design. It has a vast lexicon that can be tapped and incorporated into the resource, process, and discipline bases of the developed world.

An interesting comparison identifies some critical differences between Africa and the West:<sup>10</sup>

<b>West</b>	<b>Africa</b>
Outcome / results	Process
Cold climates / people	Warm climates / people
Laws / regulations	Consultation / negotiation
The contract	Trust

South Africa is truly a symbol of diversity and, like Brazil, could be an example of great creativity in communicating across cultures. Generally, South Africa does well creatively around the world, but it does not practice multiculturalism as a global example yet. Many of its winning communications could as easily have been conceptualized in London or New York. Yet there are some notable local exceptions. Advertising for the South African company Sasol Oil is a good example. This advertising is well-liked across language and cultural groupings in its home country. Expressions such as

10 Author unknown: *Wits Alumni Breakfast* (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand, 1994).

“amaglug-glug,” “windy-windy” and “woema”<sup>11</sup> have become icons for the brand. These icons cross cultural groupings, despite being conceived from a very specific cultural idiom. The idioms have become “universalized” in their applications, yet their applications still can be customized to appeal to subsegments of the market. Similarly, the term “Yebo-gogo”<sup>12</sup> has entered national consciousness and popular use through advertisements for the South African mobile telephone company Vodacom.

South Africans increasingly are grappling with the characteristics and problems of diversity and multicultural communication. Attempts are being made to arrive at a systematic understanding that could enhance lateral thinking and foster greater creativity.

### **Towards a Scheme to Aid Multiculturalism**

Historically, communication was created individually for all the racial and language groups in South Africa. Materials therefore were produced in English, Afrikaans, South Sotho, North Sotho, and so on. Language comprehension certainly is maximized if creative concepts are created separately, but this approach is largely impractical, costly, and divisive. Rarely were all such communications well conceptualized in terms of idiom. The result often was that some markets saw themselves presented in a derogatory or stereotypical manner, or that some communications were done well, and some badly. Conceptually, a brand can hardly become a global icon using an approach such as this. In my view, a better approach is to look at what frame-of-reference is shared by diverse target audiences. Such a shared meaning can be used very effectively when communicating across cultures or countries.

These thoughts led me, some years ago, to consider a scheme that could be applied when communicating across cultures without having to recreate marketing communications from scratch for different cultures, thereby dividing rather than unifying. The intention was to aid the formulation of marketing communication that appeals to different cultures, without losing the central strategic thread. The scheme links two theoretical approaches to create a new model of how such marketing can be approached. The two approaches used are Kurt Lewin’s field theory<sup>13</sup> and the Rokeach value theory.<sup>14</sup>

Lewin’s field theory states that a person is surrounded by a “life space” at any point in time. A person occupies a certain place in this life space and, within this space, moves towards goals that constantly affect behavior. A person therefore “floats” in a perceptual field, and this influences how he or she views things and behaves. Man thus is “a complex energy field, motivated by psychological forces, and behaving selectively and creatively.”<sup>15</sup> Rokeach, in turn, created a widely accepted ranking of values that impact on human behavior, and hence responses to products and brands.

My scheme marries the two concepts. Man existing within an energy field (here looked at as the proximity of sets of values)

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11 Colloquialisms adopted from indigenous words and descriptions.

12 Zulu for “Yes granny.”

13 K. Lewin, *Resolving Social Conflicts: Selected Papers on Group Dynamics* (New York: Harper Row, 1948).

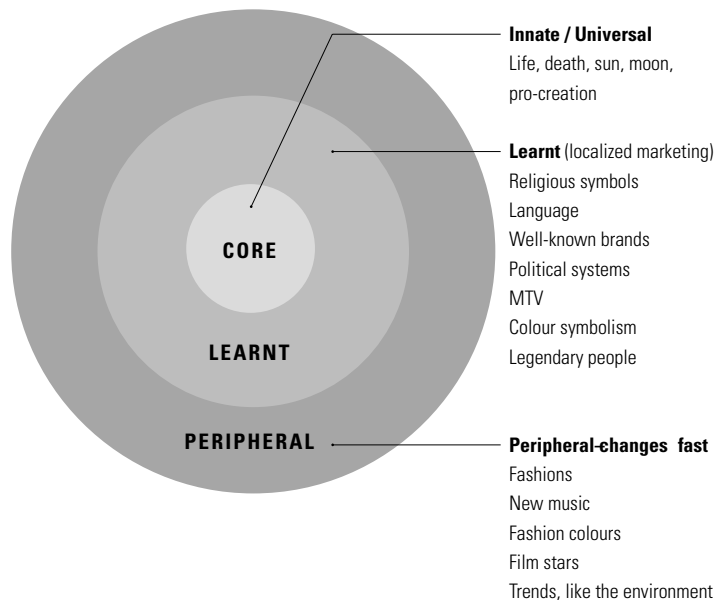
14 M. Rokeach, *Beliefs, Attitudes and Values: A Theory of Organization and Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1973).

15 C. S. Hall, C S and G. Lindsey, “Lewin’s Field Theory” in *Themes of Personality* (New York: Wiley, 1970).

is linked to a different (my own) ranking of value systems. The ranking of values is based on their consistency over time and their dependency upon birth (core values), versus their dependence upon culture/socialization (secondary values), versus their dependency upon a specific time period (peripheral values). This merger, termed “the core value model,” serves a number of functions. It assists the adaptation of global brands to local markets and customers without losing the universality of approach needed to cross cultures. It aids the identification of elements that should be retained in brands when they are changed, and which should be updated. Finally, it highlights areas where cultural differences in branding are important and can be leveraged for greater market penetration.

The core value model systematically looks at symbols that can be used to communicate with people from any culture or from diverse cultures. “Core values” are universal values common to all cultures. “Learned/secondary or socialized values” are values true to certain cultures (e.g., religion), but also values that have been established through universal communications (e.g., by Coca-Cola, CNN, or MTV). “Peripheral” values change fast, and usually are connected to the trends of the day (e.g., fashion and music styles). Generally, core values and learned values are best used to discriminate between brands, whereas peripheral values are generic but add a contemporary dimension to a piece of communication.

Figure 1  
Core values can create a universal language.



According to many psychologists and anthropologists,<sup>16</sup> man always has had universal symbols that are understood by everyone, regardless of race, creed, language, level of education, or economic status. They represent values that are innate and include things such as life, death, birth, sex, food, the sun, the moon, rain, air, wind,

16 Notably Carl Jung. (C. G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (London: Aldus, 1964).





Figure 2  
South African Coat of Arms.

blood, the concepts “good” and “bad,” and the identity and roles of man and woman. They unify, regardless of where people come from. These symbols go back to the earliest of times, and were used, for example, by the ancient cultures of Mesopotamia and Egypt, the Mayans, the Incas, and the Aztecs. Depictions of these symbols are, among other things on bathroom doors across the world, and also on cultural items including the ancient calendar of the Aztecs. In the span of history, these symbols have retained their original meaning.

In the new South African coat of arms, designed by Iaan Bekker from the agency Foote Cone Belding South Africa, universal symbols are used powerfully to integrate a nation, and to create a sense of the future. The emblem is rooted in where South Africans come from, and their foundation and ascendance. It incorporates products of the earth, fauna, and flora such as elephant tusks, the protea, wheat sheath, and the secretary bird. The secretary bird protects, guards, and indicates vision. The sun conveys light and strength, it shows direction, it illuminates, and creates a future. Linton stone figures of prehistoric human beings in South Africa face each other, creating a sense of looking at heritage, but also towards the future. Although few people will understand the full scope of all of the symbols contained in the coat of arms, most South Africans can relate to some, or most of them. In fact, most people around the world will understand these symbols. Core values therefore serve to “earth” communications, since their meaning is relevant in all cultures.

Core brand appeals should contain core values in order to be universal. Examples of this often are visible in the interplay between sexes, used for decades to advertise deodorants or perfume, or in the universal promise of youth and sex appeal contained in most cosmetics and fashion marketing. Even James Bond used the interplay of “good” and “bad.” Core values appeal universally and therefore “ground” a brand, giving it meaning wherever it may be found, across the world and across cultures. A brand such as Marlboro is very successful in terms of its strong, universal masculine appeal. Coca-Cola relies on the universal appeal of life-giving refreshment when one is thirsty, and McDonalds banks on a sense of universal belonging or “family togetherness.” The Nike “swoosh” trades on what is “right” (versus what is “wrong”), and therefore, what is achievable (“just do it”). With the international launch of AngloGold, the world’s largest gold producer, core symbols were used extensively to appeal to different cultures and socio-economic groups in a universal manner. Although most of these are manifested in an African lexicon and context, their meaning is universal.

Often brand differentiation takes place on the next level, the learned value level. In a multicultural context, idiom and frame-of-reference differences are created at this level. Thus, this level offers a great opportunity to take a global message and localize

it. Learned values are not innate, they are learned in a process of cultural socialization. These values emerge from language, cultural norms, social practices, folklore and beliefs, fairy tales, legends, and the unique ways of nations around the world. Good examples are the finite linguistic differences in a given language, the idioms used in expression, for example Irish and British humor, the dollar sign as the prototypical symbol for capitalism, and the names Karl Marx and Hitler, and the emotions they evoke. Learned values distinguish between cultures, for instance the way the West and Middle East differ in how women are treated and exposed in marketing, or how explicitly products for birth control or sanitary protection are referred to. The localization of brands such as Camel and Absolut Vodka fosters acceptance because, beyond the universal icons they have created, they use local symbols of cities or customs to forge a more direct appeal.

Colors have a rich significance in cultures, such as red for the Chinese and the earthy colors of Africa in the South African coat of arms. Mexico and Spain globally “own” bright colors, and Northern Europe generally is associated with more subdued colors. The Christian cross, the Koran, and the hammer and sickle all are symbols that have attained very particular meanings for groups of people. Elvis Presley, the Beatles, the Statue of Liberty, James Bond, and Walt Disney all are examples of learned meaning. Similarly, most brand icons fall in this category—the meaning of Coca-Cola, Nike, Benetton, Diesel, Sony, and Disney were acquired. Empathy in multicultural communication is difficult to achieve if marketers and designers do not possess a clear understanding of the significance of symbolic distinctions in various cultures. Some obvious contradictions create comical outrage, such as calling a computer company Apple or a mobile network Orange. So it is possible to create a personal lexicon!

The third tier comprises peripheral values that are fast-changing and transient, typically contained in the examples of sport stars who are famous for short periods of time, film stars, and types of music. These examples symbolize a given time and context. They appeal universally to markets around the world for a limited time, until the next trend surfaces. Fashions are another good example of this value set. Peripheral values drive evolution, like the adaptations to the Shell logo and identity, and the changes in style for the brand Betty Crocker. A brand has to periodically update its appeal to markets. Peripheral symbols help to modernize and rejuvenate a brand, for instance the petroleum company BP is capturing the global trend towards “greening” by literally turning green into its property and further expanding the idea through the new “sunflower” logo Laundor launched for them a few years ago. Some brands use peripheral values almost as if they were core values. The importance of the latest research and development, and thus new product design, have become core values for Apple computers and Nokia

mobile telephones. As a trendsetter, retaining the initiative is critical if a brand embarks on such a course. It is easy to lose this initiative and, once lost, it may be very difficult to regain.

### **Conclusion**

Graphic design always has had the power to create powerful images that are able to ignite excitement, exuberance, and a fresh perspective. Through the striking images of dancers and the can-can, the artist Toulouse-Lautrec conveyed the brilliance, excitement, and dynamism that evokes the Moulin Rouge to this day. The images that Andy Warhol created of Brillo boxes and Campbell soup cans, elevated these ordinary products to legendary status, far beyond anything mere marketing could do. The reality is that good graphic design has the capability to transcend culture, background, economic status, and language. Despite this, one sees little of the brilliance that graphic design is capable of emerging today. Too often, graphic design practitioners apply low budgets to the creation of pedestrian communications.

Most multicultural design operates from a base of lowest common denominator images. Such communication probably is understandable to consumers and meets their needs, but is not really successful in engendering consumer empathy—leveraging this third dimension is what creates real brand or communication power. Not utilizing design's potential is a great opportunity lost for business, resulting in a profound "undersell" of products and services. Marketers often do not demand that designers be sensitive and authoritative when devising communications for diverse cultures. A major opportunity today is to create new global icons that transcend cultures, yet retain unique appeal to local markets. This could be called the "top-down approach" to global marketing. To aid this approach, greater insight and consumer understanding on the part of design and marketing agencies is urgently needed.

The developing world has the ability to help design and marketing communication by introducing an understanding of diversity that could enhance lateral thinking and foster greater creativity. South Africa often has been called a racial microcosm of the world. Here one communicates, even within one's own company, with many different cultures and socioeconomic groups on a daily basis. One can either grasp this huge opportunity and create a common set of values within one's company and among one's customers and stakeholders, or one can simply see it as a rote task that needs to be done. Worse, one can be insensitive to the challenges and opportunities cross-cultural communications pose.

Tapping into a shared frame-of-reference is vital in communicating across cultures. In this regard, this article proposes a three-tier core value model to aid marketing and brand communication. The core value model provides insight and understanding into how brands are launched, and how they evolved. It suggests that

a brand should appeal to innate, learned or peripheral values. Core values unify through the use of universal symbols. Learned values identify cultural idiosyncrasies. Peripheral values are trend—and context—specific, yet they offer powerful tactics with which to draw diverse peoples together.