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Translation Mistakes Equal Global Embarrassment

A recent survey of people who speak English as a second language has revealed that 57% had spotted advertising that was incorrectly translated from English into other languages. The result is that consumers are turned off if an advertisement is poorly translated or even worse, they may interpret bad translations as evidence that the advertiser doesn't care about the consumer.

The survey also revealed that although these translation mistakes are often humorous, some people are actually offended by some of the slip ups, especially when the incorrect translation has religious, political or cultural implications.

As corporations become more global, the importance of accurate translations increases, as does the potential for incorrect translations. Especially in new markets where translations are not handled by a local marketing team and instead handled from corporate headquarters that are ill equipped to deal with local culture.

In order to avoid any potential pitfalls, companies should translate advertising and marketing copy as if it were originally written in the local target language. This should in turn be written by a native speaker, who knows the culture in order to be able to correctly express the meaning of the message rather than a literal conversion of the message.

This sounds simple but according to a survey, companies are not putting the money into foreign language copy that it deserves. The issue stems from global campaigns investing more in the home country as compared to the same campaign being run in a foreign market.

There are examples everywhere about the brands involved and the potential embarrassment for both the individual involved and the companies associated with the mistakes.

Here are some examples:

1. The Dairy Association's huge success with the campaign 'Got Milk?' prompted them to expand advertising to Mexico. It was soon brought to their attention the Spanish translation read "Are you lactating?"
2. Coors put its slogan, 'Turn It Loose', into Spanish, where it was read as 'Suffer From Diarrhea'.
3. Scandinavian vacuum manufacturer Electrolux used the following in an American campaign: 'Nothing sucks like an Electrolux'.
4. Clairol introduced the 'Mist Stick', a curling iron, into Germany only to find out that 'mist' is slang for manure. Not too many people had use for the 'Manure Stick.'
5. When Gerber started selling baby food in Africa, they used the same packaging as in the US, with the smiling baby on the label. Later they learned that in Africa, companies routinely put pictures on the labels of what's inside, since many people can't read.
6. The Coca-Cola name in China was first read as 'Kekoukela', meaning 'Bite the wax tadpole' or 'female horse stuffed with wax', depending on the dialect. Coke then researched 40,000 characters to find a phonetic equivalent 'kokou kole', translating into 'happiness in the mouth'.
7. When American Airlines wanted to advertise its new leather first class seats in the Mexican market, they translated their 'Fly In Leather' campaign literally, which meant 'Fly Naked' (vuela en cuero) in Spanish.
8. KFC's famous 'finger lickin' good' strapline went terribly wrong in the Chinese market. It was literally translated as 'eat your fingers off'.

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