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Think local. Learn global. Act global.

By Mary T. Morgan

"Think global, act local" is the mantra for companies of all shapes and sizes that have global aspirations. Generally, if your brand(s) is available in major markets and some minor ones (keeping in mind that corporations have different financial parameters for defining global brands) and is perceived as being universal by your consumers, then you're competing globally. If not, you are a global wannabe. Acknowledge your state and focus your time and attention on succeeding in your current geography. A global future will only be achieved by succeeding locally first.

If you already are competing globally, is the "think global, act local" mantra helping you achieve better results? From our perspective on implementing processes and programs the answer is "yes" for most global companies. But it's time to evolve. Here are some thoughts about the strengths and vulnerabilities of global branding today and a new mantra to consider for tomorrow.

The Strengths

Clarity of purpose. Successful global brands strive to be unique, meaningful, and enduring to the target audience in current and potential markets. The right distinction establishes a powerful global foundation, which can be adapted to local wants and needs, resulting in a powerful localized message. With the world becoming smaller, a consistent global foundation allows consumers to easily find the brand they want wherever they are.

When a brand has identified its global difference, which can be defined as a distinctive benefit and a reason to believe the brand can deliver it, it has the foundation for consistent application. But market segmentation can reveal that the feelings consumers have about a promised benefit varies by target and geography. A brand can maximize its opportunity in virtually every locality by tailoring its message to the needs of local audiences.

Knowledge exchange. A global brand management system (GBMS) expands your geography and access to brand experts. Every geography counts as a test market for ideas and programs. Brand managers can assess what's working and not working around the world, and apply that information in their own territory. In a GBMS, the number of individuals who intimately know the brand is multiplied and can be deployed for the advancement of any part or the whole.

We are working with a brand that was launched internationally before launching in the US. A successful US launch is now underway, thanks to open information sharing by the brand managers in the other countries. The US team has returned the favor by offering some evolved approaches to product range and packaging graphics.

The Vulnerabilities

Group-think. In the spirit of collaboration and achieving satisfaction among all geographic representatives, too many key brand decisions end up being "by committee" acts. The success of brand management over the years is due to having an owner of the brand, one person whose voice counts more than others, one person who marries the art of branding with the science of branding. This person makes the tough decisions to try bold programming that could either bomb or dramatically build the brand.

An effective GBMS must keep group-think in check. Dissension is important for the ultimate good of distinctiveness. Not every voice can or should have equal importance. It

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is imperative to carefully define what decisions must be made globally and who is the ultimate global decision maker. Similarly identify what decisions are most appropriately made at the local level and who the ultimate decision maker is there. A good place to start is by determining the desired results (wants) and critical success factors (needs) both globally and locally.

Communication without comprehension. Certain statements can mean different things to different people, whether they speak the same primary language or not. It is critical to check for understanding and intent within and outside your organization. Watch for universals in body language. Never hesitate to ask for clarification on every nuance. These subtleties are crucial to an effective GBMS and to ensure your consumers understand and are motivated by your message, no matter where they reside.

The Mantra

Capitalizing on clarity of purpose and knowledge exchange while watching out for group-think and communication-without-comprehension can contribute to the success of not only global brands, but local brands. However, our analysis of the strengths and vulnerabilities of GBMS reveals the shortcomings of the current mantra, "think global, act local." The interrelationship and interdependence between global and local suggests a revision: "think local, learn global, act glocal." "Think local" because local is where every brand begins and ends. "Learn global" because a global view highlights what seems to be working and what needs to be improved. And finally, "act glocal," which reflects a critical facet of global brand management today: the ability of local successes to drive global success and global success to drive local successes.

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