

Embracing Culture in Our Global Economy

By Jennifer Van Vleet, CPSM,
with Mark Buckshon



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Every year, the pace of business and personal interactions seems to accelerate. As the world becomes more and more interconnected through technology, there's a sense that people are closer than ever. However, it's important to remember that significant cultural differences still underpin individuals' decision-making, even as technology draws the world into the idea that things are becoming homogenous.

This holds true in the A/E/C industries, especially in firms that operate across international borders. Companies may all be using Revit and red lining drawings, but how the end product is reached still requires nuance, cultural sensitivity, and a lot of communication.

Hal Gillam, a marketing manager with CDM Smith, in Boston, MA, has spent more than 20 years supporting the firm's global development assistance portfolio. "CDM Smith has worked internationally since 1960," he says. "We are fortunate to have early-, mid-, and long-term career employees with international experience to lead and guide our approach for working globally. He explains that CDM Smith's standard approach is to identify and work with highly qualified partners in the countries where it wants to work and who share the firm's values. These local partners—firms and individuals—offer counsel on regulatory requirements, cultural matters, and other important considerations. "With our partners, we develop tactics for addressing these considerations as we present our firm, prepare proposals, and deliver quality projects for our clients," he adds.

As more firms operate across country borders, the role of marketing and its influence on the business and business-development approach becomes more critical.

When Countries Are Neighbors: United States and Canada

It can be easy to overlook cultural nuances when countries are in close proximity. The United States-Canada border is less than an hour's drive for most Canadians, who alternatively can get right down to business by clearing customs at their nearest major Canadian airport, arriving at the domestic terminal. Yet, this geographical closeness should not be misinterpreted culturally; there are real differences in the ways in which each country approaches business, sometimes with shocking directness.

Steve Titus, president and CEO of Aercoustics Engineering Ltd., knows the differences well. He is a dual citizen, but has lived and conducted business in Toronto for more than 20 years. He wasn't quite ready for the cultural shift he would experience when he decided to expand the business to the states by opening a Chicago office. "When it comes to marketing and business development, the (Canadian) approach is understated," he explained. "It's very subtle. Canadians don't like to toot our own horns in a lot of ways."

Titus showed up for a meeting with a Chicago architect thinking he was well prepared. Aercoustics plans its business development carefully—its staff researches the potential clients to determine values, interests, and corporate culture. So, after the two-hour flight from Toronto to Chicago, Titus walked into the planned meeting, initially behaving like he would in Canada. "There's always a bit of banter," he said. "There's always a bit of time to get to



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know who you are, how you are doing ... and we sat down and tried to start that way." But, almost right away, he heard his U.S. counterpart say, "What are you here for?"

There was no small talk, no banter. "It caught me off guard initially—which doesn't happen that often," Titus remarks. He quickly caught his breath, realizing that the American wasn't being intentionally discourteous or abrupt; there was simply no need for the niceties. It was time to make the pitch, demonstrate Aercoustics' value, and get the deal done. "It's not that he didn't want to work with us," Titus said. "It's that the (meeting) was for a very specific purpose and he was trying to be as efficient as possible by conveying, 'I'm giving the time to meet so let's be very focused on what you can bring to the table.'"

Pelin Yeter-McKinnon, CPSM, president of SMPS Ontario, says, "Canadians tend to bring a much more multicultural perspective to their view of things, appreciating that within large nations, there can be major regional differences."

"Canada is not perfect, of course, nowhere is," she continues. "While we are open to differences and can embrace them, we experience a lot within our own country. We're not homogenous. A person in Vancouver will likely relate more to a person in Seattle or Portland than Winnipeg. Much like the United States, culture varies throughout Canada depending on the region. Research needs to be conducted to discover and recognize the cultural nuances as best as possible. For example, in a pitch to an Edmonton-based client, I'd think twice about mentioning Calgary—these cities have a well-known rivalry."

American firms really need to do their research when working with our neighbors to the north. Yeter-McKinnon illustrates, "I remember when I was

working at a global design firm, an American office sent the Toronto office a proposal for a project in Newfoundland like it was in our backyard. That's like flying to Europe for us! Not only are there cost and distance factors—because domestic air travel is expensive in Canada due to limited competition and the airport taxes are amongst the highest in the world—but there's an added layer of regional culture differences as well."

Beyond Neighbors: Holding It Together Across the Miles ... or Kilometers

Beyond geographic considerations lies the marketing space spanning multiple time zones and numerous languages. Nancy Gruwell, marketing services director, vice president at HDR in Omaha, NE, is responsible for marketing information, materials, brand, and communications across the organization. She explains, "Culture is extremely important for marketing and business development. It drives our approach to what we do and how we do it. Our clients are at the center of everything we do. It's important that this belief is at the core of all our internal and external communications and activities." Gruwell adds that marketing helps influence the culture through client interactions, as well as internal trainings and communications. She thinks of it as the glue that holds everything together.

And, there is much to hold together, as all marketers know. Marketers often work with colleagues across proposal preparation, branding, communications, public relations, conferences, events, collateral design, websites, and much more. Now, take these tasks and factor in time-zone differences by as much as 12 to 15 hours, multiple languages, and cultural organizational structures, and you'll see the shape of marketing internationally begin to form.

For example, any marketer programming a corporate social media campaign to celebrate a global awareness day should ensure everything is prepared at least 48 hours in advance, as the celebration is already half over in Australia when California is waking up. The timing of prepopulated posts must be thought through. Listening and communicating are critical in adjusting and adapting in all these situations.

“Listening to client needs, thinking about the right solution for the unique situation, and delivering high-quality results are our passion and commitment,” Gillam says. “To meet this commitment for clients and stakeholders worldwide, CDM Smith must be sensitive to local cultures and perspectives.”

HDR’s Gruwell notes, “Listening to how business is done first and then determining how that works with existing business processes or guidelines eliminates barriers that can exist without conversations. It is important to listen and then adjust if needed.” For example, the company has four geographic areas currently represented on its external website. “We do that so the information is in the native language but also so the geographies can highlight what is important to their clients and employees on their site,” she says.

Telling a Multicultural Story

It’s the listening that helps marketers tell the story, whether on a website, in a proposal, or during a meeting. “Culture plays a huge part in our marketing efforts because, at the end of the day, being able to tell a story in a way that’s effective for all target audiences is what marketing is all about. If the effectiveness of the message is hampered because of cultural differences, it’s an uphill battle at best. Having professionals throughout our business in the regions with an intimate knowledge of the clients, the market, the culture, the political backdrop, etc., is pivotal,” says Jeanine Wright, vice president and global director of corporate marketing and communications at Black & Veatch in Overland, KS.



Wright goes on to say that content strategy is critical to marketing across cultures. Black & Veatch transcreates stories for cultural relevance and pays particular attention to cross-cultural differences in language. The company market-tests branding activities and campaigns in target segments to quickly learn and adjust to audience needs before deploying. “Having the ability to have some flex, depending on audience needs, is key, while remaining true to your brand and your values,” she adds.

Stantec, a Canadian-owned firm, operates around the globe and routinely deals with cultural variances. The company maintains a corporate website in English that speaks to the global business, but also has native language sites, including Dutch, Turkish, Italian, Spanish, and Chinese, for the same reasons as HDR cited previously. Furthermore, the company maintains proprietary, homegrown marketing tracking systems. Every update and development to these systems requires a process to ensure that any change is captured in multiple languages. Corporate processes and systems can become challenging when dealing across countries.

Nicole Lang, Stantec’s public relations manager for the company’s international Energy and Resources Business Operating Unit in Denver, CO, says her biggest cultural adjustment occurred when Stantec acquired the previous 7,500-employee MWH Global business. Lang discovered she now

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Indiana, Indianapolis, IN. Rowland Design. ©Michael Firsich Photography, LLC, michaelfirsichphotography.com.



worked for a Canadian-owned, publicly traded, 22,000-employee firm, which represented even more cultural diversity than before.

Lang stresses that in a large organization operating around the world, it's important to use a matrix system to see the big picture, making appropriate adaptations for cultural sensitivities. "You really have to address the unique needs of each of the communities, while still being a global company that is providing our expertise for these projects."

Gruwell's experience has been similar. She notes, "The time difference is a big factor. People need to be willing to flex and participate in activities when it may not always be convenient. Because we have more employees in the United States, it's important to make sure we reflect what is happening globally and make sure all locations (regardless of where they are) feel represented and included."

Learning From One Another and Having Fun

Despite the challenges of a global workplace, employees also appreciate the many rewards. HDR's Gruwell says, "I think one of the most fun things is while we know things are different, we can all appreciate how similar things may be as well. Our culture truly drives what we do, and everyone is working toward the same goal. It's interesting to understand how different holidays or events are celebrated and why. This truly helps connect all the cultures and geographies in ways project work can't."

Wright agrees, "It has been fun to learn about different cultures and see how various groups go about work, all in the name of execution and delivering. It's fun to be a part of a culture of diversity and inclusion and recognize that all members of the team can bring a unique viewpoint and add value." Wright adds that building diverse teams from a wide range of cultures can help to keep them all functioning at a high level. She says it's fun to network with others in other parts of the world and build a rapport."

Additionally, there's a lot of learning and differentiation that can happen for businesses in North America that are influenced by ideas coming in from abroad. Wright continues, "We've seen innovations on projects in all parts of the world from our global technology subject-matter leads that have been shared within the group and then can be applied on similar projects in other parts of the world. In a nutshell, when you open the collaborative mind-set and break down barriers or boundaries, you can really see just how big of a team you play on."

Regarding sharing and innovation, Gruwell notes, "I think that sustainability and reuse is stronger in some other cultures, which allows us to bring those ideas to our clients. Also, some areas are more advanced in transit or moving people, and that allows us to see where we need to go." She explains that these items allow HDR to bring ideas and additional expertise to U.S. clients. And in turn, the company can bring expertise from the states to its global clients.

Working internationally offers marketers plenty of excitement, with opportunities for growth and challenge. It also allows for high engagement and influence across the business. Marketers can help others in the business be aware of filters. "Everyone sees things differently, and so it's a great opportunity to challenge ourselves to think wider, globally. It's an opportunity to push beyond the boundaries that you may know from your home country and really consider the wider world," notes Wright. Despite seeing things differently, it's vital that Black & Veatch's marketing teams collaborate to gain insights and help shape an approach into integrating with wider audiences. "It's important to understand the cultural customs and norms in order to develop an effective marketing strategy and ultimately be successful as a business," she says.

"We try to be as collaborative as possible," adds Gillam. "We reflect on what we hear from clients and local partners. We demonstrate what we learn in our proposals, marketing materials, and conference

displays. Successful adaptation depends on being situationally aware and making the right resources available.”

So, whether a firm is dealing across international borders that geographically touch, like the United States and Canada, or across oceans, marketing plays a vital cultural role. On a day-to-day basis this can mean ensuring meetings are conducted in local languages to ease communication challenges or flexing across time zones and meeting outside normal business hours. But, in the big picture, it’s marketing’s job to help us remember the commonalities that bind us, and realize that humans have a lot more in common than it might first appear—especially when driving toward common business goals. ■



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What Are Some Cultural Design Considerations?

By Jennifer Van Vleet, CPSM

It can often be the little things in marketing that cause big ripples. Branded collateral will need extra layers of review. For example, a simple holiday card will need to be created in several languages, with nuances for appropriate seasonal decoration.

It’s also important to consider layout for design. A five-letter word in English may be a nine-letter word in Spanish and a 12-letter word in Dutch. A standard layout suddenly doesn’t fit when translating content, as one page of English may be a page and a half in another language. Arabic reads right to left and Chinese characters and romance-language accents can challenge the programming of your standard layouts and scripts for automated marketing software programs. Paper size differs, as much of the world uses A4 (8.27” x 11.75”) versus the U.S. standard 8.5” x 11.” “Serif fonts are more popular in the United States,” said Hartmut Schmid, marketing director for CDM Smith operations in Europe, based in the Rhine-Main Germany office.

Imagery can also pose challenges. If a company is selling transportation services, the brochure that shows all the vehicles on the right side of the road doesn’t work for countries where cars drive on the left. “The entire communication must be considered. Colors work differently and images that show hard hats, security gear, or cars clearly denoted from a specific region can contradict trustworthy messages to regional clients,” says Schmid.

When Stantec was looking to refresh its brand, a new mailing envelope design involved placing a black line across the piece. Yet, the Italian response was that black lines were typical on mailings that signified death. Similarly, in Taiwan, the firm was looking to incorporate more black and white imagery to help build on the iconic image it wanted to portray. But in Taiwanese culture, black and white imagery is also commonly associated with death.

Avoiding these cultural design missteps goes back to careful listening and relying on experts within the company to carefully review all collateral before it’s released.