

Languages, Cultures, and Content: Creating Content for Global Customers and Employees

Position Paper

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This Paper Will Help Answer:

- **What are the various cultural drivers at work in different parts of the world?**
- **How are different kinds of products and content impacted by culture?**
- **How do I make sure that my material is appropriate for other cultural markets?**
- **What kinds of topics do not cross borders easily?**
- **How can diverse grammar and language use have an impact?**
- **What production model can I implement to achieve efficient global content?**
- **What processes, tools, and technology are available to help me?**

Introduction: What Is Content?

“Content” includes all material that informs, promotes, educates, entertains, or generally engages its users in a mediated relationship. It can be delivered via any media: text, audio, graphics, interactive media, hypertext, paper, and so forth. It may be in the form of a technical manual, a flash animation, a piece of news, a marketing blurb, an editorial piece, a course, packaging, instructions, or something else entirely.

Content can be a product of company activity designed to elicit a particular economic behavior, such as exchanging money for goods or services. This is often the case with marketing materials. Content can itself be a product, in which case the user expects to derive actual use/value from it, either in the form of entertainment, useful information, skills, knowledge, or other rewards. In many cases, such content may directly generate revenue.

Lastly, content can be the vector of a sustained commercial relationship, in which case it ought to provide extra value relative to other goods and services, and thus generate satisfaction in the user as a result of the purchasing decision. Content may also simply aid the user in obtaining the expected value from the items he or she has purchased. This is often found in client-support activities, documentation, and training materials.

Content encompasses all of the elements listed above, which, when taken collectively, form an overall “audience experience” as they interact with your company. The right definition, targeting, organization, and production of all these elements is therefore crucial to the relationship the user will develop with you and your products.



Given the impact that “content” can have on the success of your enterprise, it is important to consider how this material is conceived, designed, produced, and deployed. This is especially true when the content is targeted at a global audience as their response to your material and message will be shaped as much by their local social and cultural context, as much as the literal statements in your content. This paper aims to assist you in understanding this impact and how to not only manage through it, but how to leverage it to your advantage.

What Is Culture and What Is Its Impact on Content?

In order to achieve the desired economic effect, content must be relevant, useful, credible, and timely. Cultural locales are defined by a set of shared assumptions, knowledge, expectations, and environmental variables that determine what is perceived as being relevant, useful, credible, and timely. These variables are determined by common experiences during people’s life cycles. For example, a particular cultural group’s relationship to knowledge and learning will be strongly influenced by the prevailing school system and the values with which the culture’s population has been raised.

The saying goes that one feels closer to one's sibling than to one’s cousin, closer to one's cousin than to one's neighbor, and closer to one's neighbor than to a stranger in the street, yet closer to a national stranger than to a foreigner. In today’s globally connected world, however, traditional cultural markers seem to be shifting. Some demographic groups now display stronger affinity with similar groups on the other side of the world than with others in the same building. Teenagers spring to mind as a clichéd example of this emerging global affinity.

Economic globalization has had the beneficial effect of establishing a number of standards that constitute a common ground on which some level of universal understanding can be based. These form what can be called cultures (plural) or cultural groups. However, the experience of life in various parts of the world remains very heterogeneous, even among economically comparable countries. Moreover, the seemingly relentless global economic standardization has paradoxically generated more vocal requirements for culture- and identity-based differentiation. Culture (with a capital “C,” so to speak), is better understood as “national” (in the wide sense of nations) and will express itself in less deliberate, more implicit, and, ultimately, subconscious areas:

- Sociability: relationship codes and expectations, private and public boundaries, modesty, respect and offense.
- Time: the place of time in the value system, from commodity (“time is money”) to irrelevance (“only the present is worth enjoying”)
- Eating: simple nourishment and health versus art and pleasure



- Humor: social facilitator or irredeemable faux pas? Humor by nature relies on distance, shift of perception, and discrepancy of meaning between explicit and implicit, and therefore is the ultimate measure of familiarity with a culture.
- Education: how educational achievement is sanctioned, valued, or recognized; what kind of learning methods are familiar.
- Society: what society expects from the individual, in terms of personal contribution or in terms of allegiance; the value of personal initiative versus collective endeavor.

These elements express themselves across class, economic, and sociological boundaries, and are indeed the rules that govern relationships between all of the society's constituents. So, whereas affinity-based market segmentation will describe how groups of people behave, what they like or dislike, cultural segmentation will define what people know of life, what morals prevail, and what framework of normality they have to contend with. Individually or in segments, they may embrace, reject, bend, neglect, challenge, love, or hate any of the cultural reference points that they have been raised into; but whatever they do, these will be the reference points that they are up against. And regardless, so much of culture is so implicit that a lot of it makes it through to the surface of every individual, irrespective of his or her stated or subjectively perceived rejection or acceptance of the mainstream elements of his or her culture. This means that whatever segment you are addressing in a given culture, even if you cannot as readily infer any specific behavior from culture as you can from a sociologically defined market segment, you need to know what reference framework that segment's society operates in.

That said, there are cultural characteristics that can be identified, shared and leveraged in various regions of the world. Today, the Western World shares many cultural characteristics across world regions and incorporates many that are considered valid differentiators between regions. Where there is a bonding, it is usually facilitated by a common history of political, economic and cultural development.

For example, the past several centuries of history, entertainment, consumer goods and other economic and cultural elements have created a cultural bond between Western Europe and Northern America. This common ground creates a layer of identity between these regions. But these affinities, however real, can hide other differences. Cultural identification is not monolithic, nor is it subject to clear-cut borders. Cultural affinity is defined on a sliding scale, from the general to the particular.

There are many factors that will influence the development of a culture in terms of customs, world view, values and so on. The sphere of influence of each individual factor will not be superimposed over that of other factors. Each point on the globe is in a web of multiple influences, creating an infinite number of local dilutions of any cultural set, on any scale considered (see Fig 1).



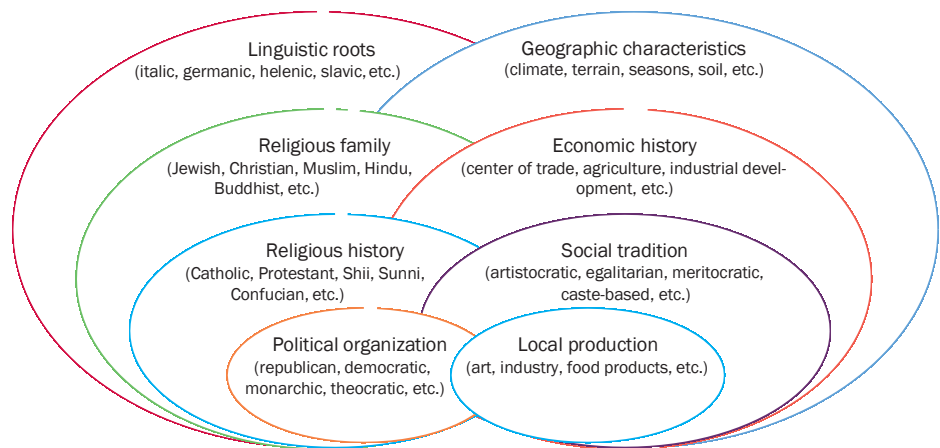


Figure 1

As a result, it is not possible to identify absolute and clear-cut borders of cultural areas that would lend themselves to complete description on a scale consistent with the requirement of a market. We must look for some workable compromise on which to base a segmentation of cultural areas for the purposes of doing business. Fortunately, the past few centuries have seen the emergence of the concept of nation-states, which eventually evolved into what we now refer to as countries.

Countries are very useful to global business, as they are based on some form of consensual understanding of the rules of society. This cultural consensus is embedded in the laws and regulations of the country. In countries that have been in existence for a long time, this framework has itself become part of the culture. So although a country does not exactly outline a monolithic cultural area, the cultural, linguistic and legal framework provided by such an entity makes it possible to target it as an area in which certain cultural rules can be relied upon as a common ground.

Language, in particular, is acknowledged as a key determinant of culture, and in some cases is quite closely identified with the area outlined by the borders of the country. However, it is important to bear in mind that this is by no means a general rule, and many countries have several living languages spoken by millions of people. For example, in Belgium there are two distinct communities, one French-based and the other Dutch-based, with very strong ties to France and the Netherlands respectively. A similar situation exists in Switzerland, where three distinct languages (German, French and Italian) and, therefore, communities coexist. Such countries require slightly more challenging approaches to cultural adaptation, and need to be considered in conjunction with the other countries that are host to some of the languages spoken.

So, as the essential medium through which ideas and culture are carried, language remains the first level of cultural affinity, but this rule is strongly balanced by the political, historical and economic context that has organized cultural groups along lines that are often distinct from the language influence.



How Do I Address Cultural Context when Developing and Deploying Content?

It is very difficult to make general rules that will hold true for all situations, but listed below are some general guidelines to keep in mind regarding various types of content:

Marketing and Communications Content:

In the case of relational content, such as marketing and advertising material, and sales and negotiation training modules, global corporations usually produce the content at a corporate level. Therefore, the process should include an editorial review, as some locale-specific issues are bound to arise as the content is localized or adapted for use in other language markets. Things such as interpersonal address codes (gender, titles, politeness, signs of respect and disrespect, customs, etc.), lifestyle and cultural references, humor and colloquialisms must be addressed to ensure they're appropriate for the target audience. The criteria to determine this should not be left for a translator to decide. A decision process involving data and requirements gathering should be established beforehand.

Product-specific Content:

Notwithstanding the above, in the case of product-specific material (customer support, product-features training, etc.), the level of sensitivity to locale is typically minor. However, we do recommend that you get locale-specific input in order to assess product success factors.

Technical Documentation and Training Content:

For material supporting the use of tools and apparatus, sensitivity to locale is negligible. For software, there can sometimes be the need for a technical review of the content against the underlying product to ensure that local versions are the same as the source versions.

Regulatory Content

Content related to regulatory issues must adhere to important locale-specific requirements. Often substantial rewriting or development of content to cover the local regulations, customs and practices is necessary. This will require the involvement of a domain expert (i.e. pharmaceutical) to review the existing material and plan the transition to other markets.

An Approach:

Cultures and languages are fluid concepts, they grow and evolve with their populations. Ensuring your products and messaging remain current amid these shifts can often overwhelm your organization and impede your competitive position and growth in each of your target markets.



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