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BLOGPOST: Do you speak international?



One hundred countries, one hundred languages, one hundred cultures: International communication is enormously complex with many hurdles and pitfalls to snare you. So how can public relations be successful in an international environment? What are the dos and don'ts? What are the specifics of the different cultures and countries? We provide successful public relations support to companies in more than 170 countries, showing what matters when communicating beyond national borders.

Avoid the traps

The biggest stumbling blocks everyone faces in international communication are cultural differences, language barriers and media landscapes. There is a fundamental principle that applies to cross-border communication: You have to know your target group. Whom you should be reaching, when, where and how. Only those that know whom to reach out to can target their research, for example, toward choosing the right language and communication channels.

To do this, the local media landscape has to be examined closer, especially during these currently changing times. Digital audiovisual services, transmission paths and end devices are allowing new communication channels to be created and having an incredible impact on media usage behaviour. The current Covid-19 pandemic just accelerated these changes even more rapidly. An example is China, where WeChat Messenger is now commonly used to contact journalists because of the strong digital dominance of communication. Such communication channels were hardly conceivable in Germany before now. In this climate, an up-to-date, detailed analysis of the media landscape, including modes or operation in the target countries or regions, is essential for optimal PR internationally.

From verbal to nonverbal language

To make the best possible use of the right channels, consult with a native speaker about language. Only someone with a command of the local language and knowledge of the target group's culture is going to find the right words, formulate them comprehensibly and convey emotions correctly.

Nonverbal language, values, norms and legalities may present additional hurdles, depending on the topic. This is often reflected in the use of images: While in Germany a small gesture like "thumbs up" says "super", it is an affront in Iran. Another example is alcohol, considered a drug in some countries and whose appearance should be avoided in PR images or texts aimed at a target region there. Accordingly, the story will have to be presented a little differently. Some places also have laws that prohibit the communication of certain things, such as the US's ban on the integration of toys with food. A chocolate egg with a surprise inside would cause trouble in the US.

International PR should always adapt

India provides a particular example of diverse requirements. There is a strong divide in this developing country, one of the world's leading IT nations, between rich and poor and so also between media equipment and how it is used. About 94% of Germany's population is connected to the internet, but this figure is only 45% in India. In addition, India has over 100 languages and more than 500 different dialects. Because of all the languages, communicating in English only reaches about 6% of all readers, while a

full 45% can be reached with Hindi. Caution should be taken concerning religion, too. Even though it is a major topic, the subject is usually taboo for foreign companies when it comes to communication.

To sum up: There is no general rule or recipe for a successful public relations campaign. Every country has its own media landscape and cultural differences, as individual as a person's fingerprints. Of course, a global campaign can be used for unified branding for certain values, but the differences between countries nevertheless needs to be considered very carefully when targeting a large swathe of the world's population.

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International PR checklist

- What objectives are you looking to achieve?
- Which target groups are you looking to reach?
- What themes and messages are you trying to send?
- What countries do you wish to target?
- How does the media landscape appear?
- Is the internet available everywhere for your communication channels?
- Which communication channels should you be using?
- What cultural differences have to be considered?
- When does the country have its holidays, what is the time difference and what is the last day before the weekend?
- Are translations necessary?
- What images do you have to be careful about?

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