

TRANSLATING TRADEMARKS: SPEAKING THE LOCAL LANGUAGE

As more Asian markets open up and brand owners start looking to Asia not only for production but for markets for their products, it is increasingly important for brand owners to understand the interface that their brand will have with the local language and culture.

The Asian region has over 20 languages/dialects and many cultures, religions and customs. I hope to provide some insights into the challenges facing brand owners entering the multi-linguistic, multi-cultural marketplace that is Asia. It goes well beyond the scope of this article to deal with all of them so I have focused on Singapore, which is home to many diverse languages and cultures.

Singapore started life as a fishing village, became a British colony and thereafter an independent nation in 1965. It is a major port and had as its early economic strategy the encouragement of foreign investment. With its socio-economic background and relative youth, Singapore is cosmopolitan, generally open to foreign culture and influences. Yet, there exists in its people a strong sense of ethnic roots, cultures and their own languages. How then does a trademark fare, trying to penetrate a diverse market such as this?

Language considerations are an obvious starting point and this is intertwined with culture, customs and practices. Translations and transliterations must inevitably take into account the cultural sensitivities of the target market. There are four national languages in Singapore – English, Mandarin, Malayu Riau (Malay) and Tamil - so brand owners must take this into account when transliterating or translating marks, or devising their marketing strategy.

English literacy in Singapore is high - it is the main medium of instruction in schools and is the working language for administration and business. It is the language spoken by the majority of young people and the well-educated members of society. Singapore is also generally receptive to the influx of Western pop culture. This is good news generally for foreign brands, particularly English language brands.

The ethnic Chinese form about 77% of the resident population and Chinese language literacy stands at about 65%. The Chinese language television channels enjoy mass viewership and there is an active Chinese press and radio. Brand owners entering the market would do well to take this area of advertising media into consideration.

Many brands have Chinese language translation or transliteration. In arriving at an appropriate translation/transliteration, it is important to realize that spoken Chinese is a tonal language, and changes in pitch will lead to changes in word meaning. An awareness of these differing tones is

important in ensuring that the Chinese mark when spoken cannot be distorted, particularly where it could lead to undesirable connotations.

Another relevant consideration is that many Chinese are also fluent in Chinese dialects. The three main dialects in Singapore are Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese. Brand owners must bear this in mind because marks have been known to be mistransliterated, often leading to undesirable results.

One example is the mark CONCERTO used for a car manufactured by Honda. There was no official Chinese transliteration. However it was mistransliterated to ‘*gong xi do*’ in Hokkien by certain sectors of the community, which literally means ‘business collapse’ or ‘business bankrupt’.

Another example is the Nissan BLUEBIRD for automobiles. There was no official translation, but the literal translation of BLUEBIRD has a vulgar meaning in Hokkien.

There are also positive examples. TAKASHIMAYA, which is the name of a Japanese-owned department store in Singapore is transliterated unofficially in Cantonese to ‘*tai ka sei mai yeh*’, which means ‘everybody, shop till you drop’.

Many companies choose to provide their official translation or transliteration, and it is important to exercise care in the choice of the Chinese character used as there could be a choice of different characters which while similar sounding may have different meanings and connotations.

14% of the resident population of Singapore is Malay. About 80% of Malays are literate in English and there is a 97% literacy rate among ethnic Malays of their mother tongue. The Malays in Singapore are very much a part of the mainstream society. However, they are almost without exception Muslim and they are therefore relatively more conservative. Any trademark or advertisement that has sexual connotations, or is suggestive of sexual intimacy may not be well accepted.

The Malay language found in Singapore and Malaysia is Malayu Riau. It is related to but not identical with Bahasa Indonesia, which is found in Brunei and Indonesia. There are some words, which may be acceptable in Malayu Riau but could be offensive in Bahasa Indonesia. One example is ‘*Pembangang*’, which means ‘opposition’ in Malayu Riau but has a vulgar meaning in Bahasa Indonesia. It is therefore important to run appropriate checks before using these languages.

Indians make up about 8% of the resident population and about 87% are literate in English. There is a 51% literacy rate among ethnic Indians of their mother tongue. There are also many Indian languages and some words have different meanings in these different languages. For example, the word 'chor' means 'rice' in Malayalam but in Hindi it means 'thief'. Another example is the Tamil word for 'hair', which has a vulgar meaning in Malayalam.

Another aspect to bear in mind is the local vernacular of the market. In Singapore, we have Singlish (Singapore Colloquial English), which is a result of our immigrant and colonial history and the wide variety of coexisting languages. Singlish contains many words borrowed from other languages especially Malay and Hokkien and some English words have acquired secondary meanings in Singlish. For example, the name Ali Baba, which is used as a trademark, means 'to steal or cheat' in Singlish.

There is no foolproof way of selecting a brand that will work in all languages. It is always important to understand the market, the brand, the interrelationship between them, and to seek appropriate advice when required.

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