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Cultural Variations in Non-Verbal Communications

Communication with the customer is the core of good customer service
Coming together is the beginning, keeping together is progress, working together is success.

People from different cultures behave differently and have different ways of conducting themselves and interacting with people. This chapter should be able to explain:

- *Variables in non-verbal communication*
- *Behaviours of people governed by culture*
- *Cultural values*
- *Marketing implication of culture*

Cultural Variations in Non-Verbal Communications

■ 5.1 Introduction

In a culture we have many variations in non-verbal communications. Each culture assigns a meaning to non-verbal signs utilised by it. There are some variables in non-verbal communication. These are:

- (a) Use of time
- (b) Use of space
- (c) Friendship
- (d) Agreements
- (e) Things
- (f) Symbols
- (g) Etiquette

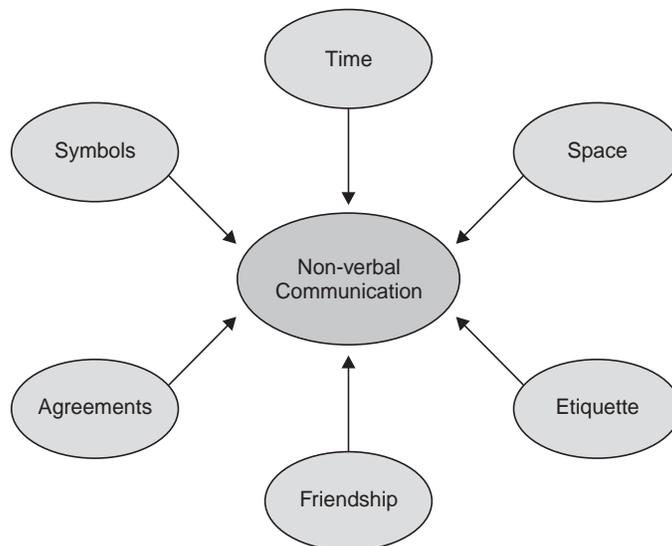


Fig. 5.1 Variables of non-verbal communication

Source: Adopted from Hawkins, Best, Coney.

Time

Time is a resource which is distributed equally amongst everybody. Every person has the same amount of time at his disposal. What view individuals and societies take of time makes them different. Some can be classified under monochronic culture and others in polychronic culture.

Some of the important differences between monochronic and polychronic culture are given in the table below:

Table 5.1

<i>Monochronic culture</i>	<i>Polychronic culture</i>
Do one thing at a time.	Do many things at once.
Concentrate on the job.	Highly distractible and subject to interruption.
Take deadlines and schedules seriously.	Consider deadlines and schedules secondary.
Committed to job.	Committed to people and relationships.
Adhere religiously to plans.	Change plan often and easily.
Emphasise promptness.	Base promptness on relationship.
Accustomed to short-term relationships.	Prefer long-term relationships.

Source: Adapted from Hawkins, Best and Coney.

The meaning of time may be different in different cultures. Some people take time in making decisions according to the importance of decisions. Some insist on coming to the point directly in business transactions and are well prepared.

Some keep appointments by the minute, others make people wait for a long time.

Space

Space may be related to prestige rather than the need. The higher the office, the bigger the office space and so on. Americans have the offices of executives on the top floor and tend to separate the office of subordinates whereas, the French like to put the executives in the midst of subordinates. Japanese have their discount stores on the upper floor. Some cultures and individuals maintain a fair distance while interacting with associates. Arabs stand very close to each other. This is known as the personal distance maintained by the people.

Friendship

Friendship plays an important role in business transactions. Good personal relationship and feelings matter most in a long-term agreement. Social contacts developed by parties gain priority over technical specifications. Americans make friends easily, and drop them easily as well, because of both social and geographical mobility. Some cultures like Indian or Latin Americans have lasting relationships that endure for a long time and so does the business. Personal ties, personal trust leads to cooperation and a lot of transaction can take place between parties. Some want to transact business only with those whom they get along and, making money is secondary.

Some try to develop mutual confidence and trust, so that a lasting business results.

Agreements

All business when transacted is done under some agreements. These agreements may be written or just on an understanding between the two parties. Most people enter into an agreement, but friendship and kinship are also given a lot of importance. Verbal commitments are also binding in some cultures, where signing a contract is just a mere formality.

Things

Different cultures attach different meaning to things. Things include products as well as gifts given in certain business and social situations. An appropriate product in the form of a gift is to be carefully chosen. The gifts can be big or small. They can be given openly or presented privately. This depends on the practices followed in that particular country. Some want to make a show of the gift, by giving it in front of others. Others are secretive about it.

Symbols and Colours

Different countries attach different meanings to symbols, numbers and colours. Symbols can be flowers, triangles, pictures and animals, etc. Some numbers are considered lucky, and others not so lucky, or even unlucky, like 13, 4, etc. Colours have different interpretations. Pink is associated with a female, and blue with the male in the US, whereas it is just the opposite in Holland.

A list of colours and their interpretations is given below:

White: Symbol of mourning or death in the Far East, happiness, purity and peace in the United States.

Purple: Associated with death in many Latin American countries.

Blue: Symbolises femininity in Holland and masculinity in the United States, Sweden, India, etc.

Red: Colour for brides and children in India. Sign of masculinity in the UK and France, negative in Nigeria, Germany and positive in Denmark, Rumania and Argentina.

Yellow: Sign of death in Mexico, infidelity in France, celebrations in many other countries including India.

White lilies: Suggestion of death in England.

Symbol of Numbers

No. 7 is lucky in India, USA, Morocco, Nicaragua and Czechoslovakia.

No. 13 is unlucky in many countries including India.

No. 4 is symbol of death in Japan. Packing in 4s is avoided.

Triangle is negative in Hong Kong and Taiwan positive in Columbia.

Owl predicts wisdom in the United States, bad luck in India.

Deer is a symbol of speed, grace in the United States; homosexuality in Brazil.

Etiquette

These are accepted norms of behaviour. Some behaviour may be rude or abusive in one culture and quite acceptable in other cultures, *e.g.*, sitting with legs crossed or sitting in a manner that

shows the sole of a shoe. In Japan it is considered impolite to say no directly to a business offer. They put it differently, by saying it is very difficult, which means no. The exchange of business cards in Japan is essential, and indicates the level of your status in your business.

Similarly, there are many different habits and ways of doing things socially that effect the making of advertisement. Eating with the fork in the right hand and the left hand kept under the table is quite common in America. Whereas, in European culture, the fork should be in the left hand and the right hand holding the knife or spoon.

These non-verbal communications in different countries of different languages have a direct bearing on the marketing activity and must be taken care of. As people recognise verbal languages, they act accordingly. In a similar manner, non-verbal communication must also be recognised and understood so that there is less misinterpretation. The advertisement of the communication we want to give should be appropriate and match with the culture of the country.

Cross-cultural marketing strategies specially advertising can be standardised to save cost. One campaign can be used in several countries *e.g.*, an Asian model for Asian countries in a low cut short dress. The appeals to youth, beauty and sophistication etc. This standardisation has to be appealed against cost and its impact. This is however a controversial issue.

There are seven considerations for approaching a Foreign Market:

- (i) **Is the geographical area having a** homogeneous or a heterogeneous culture? Marketing efforts are usually directed on geographical area mostly an economic and political entities. Sometimes, one area is considered as a single cultured unit but this may not be true. The culture of Kashmir is different from the culture in South India. Similarly, Canada may have English Canadian and French Canadian who have different buying habits and different attitudes towards products. Therefore, the marketing campaign should be directed on cultural groups rather than countries in geographical areas.
- (ii) What NEED the product can fulfil in a culture? For example, the bicycle and motor cycle may satisfy recreational needs in many countries whereas these products fill the transportation needs in India and other developing countries.
- (iii) **Affordability of the product:** Whether the groups or individuals can afford the product. It becomes difficult due to economic constraints or recession. Marketeers therefore resort to credit strategy or exchange of old goods with new products.
- (iv) **VALUES** for owning or purchasing the product: The value system must be investigated for influencing the purchase of the product.
- (v) **CONSIDERATION OF DISTRIBUTION, Political and Legal Structures:** Some products are distributed through general stores in one country while the same products may be distributed through medicine stores. *e.g.*, Vanilla is considered a chemical and is distributed through chemical stores in many countries. Similarly, political and legal constraints have to be considered for formulating market strategies.
- (vi) **COMMUNICATION** about the product: Communication should be based on the (i) Media availability (ii) Need that the product fulfils (iii) Values associated with the product (iv) Verbal and non-verbal communication systems in culture. Communication can be made effective through promotion mix. Consideration of the culture is important and the marketing mix has to be juggled to cater to different cultural

needs while developing and marketing programmes ethical issue should be kept in mind. These issues relate to credibility of the benefits provided by the product. Proper cost charged from the customer and giving due importance to legal constraint meeting the expectation of the customer and fixing due importance to legal constraints imposed by the government.

Marketing Implications

Cultural values are not fixed or static but keep changing and are dynamic. They come slowly but surely. One of the factors that leads to the cultural change is the increased craving for fun excitement and enjoyment which open more opportunities for travel, thrills, fun oriented, entertainment and leisure-oriented products. Other factors could be the paucity of time that people have. Most people are so busy and want to save time on travel, on cooking, on marketing and on repairs of items etc. The urge of saving time leads to the fast moving and safer moving vehicle etc. Fast food centres, convenience foods, cooking aids, microwave ovens, disposable diapers, telemarketing, E-business etc. The services are now being delivered at home by just a phone-call in servicing of cars, the cars are taken from your place and an alternative car provided for use till your car is delivered.

The urge for spending more time at home also known as *cocooning* has also brought a new dimension in purchasing of products like exercise machines, swimming pools, sauna bath in the house, owning of computers and video cassette and recorders. People also want to make use of the money they get as a golden handshake or as retirement benefits and want to live a healthier life. Comprehensive health care and direct housing. Many consumers want to live an inner-directed life and spend on improving themselves—improving their looks, vigour, vitality and well being and live life to the fullest. Another change that is taking place is that consumers want to live a more natural and healthier life by using natural products *i.e.*, rejection of the artificial and acceptance of the natural material. This can be done in many areas of pharmaceuticals: Use of natural herbs.

Cosmetics—natural herbs and not chemicals, household items and plants.

Clothes—Pure cotton, pure silk.

Furnishing—Change synthetic to natural fibres.

These cultural changes leads the marketer to rethink his strategies of products mix, promotion, pricing and distribution for the targeted consumer. They try to offer more than what the customer expects, offering products that truly perform giving more guarantees building stranger relationships. The market is to be segmented in terms of cultural values. Environment-oriented values, self-oriented values are other values and accordingly the products are to be tailored to their needs and products be positioned to appeal to this target segment. Distribution methods may include in home catalogue shopping, toll-free telephone shopping. Latest are the drive in churches and funeral parlours for short of time consumers.

The promotion can have a new approach and stress more on realistic aspects and acknowledging the women's role in our society. Advertising focussed on the desired segment and more and accurate information delivered to the consumer.

Questions

1. Explain the term culture.
2. How are behaviours of groups and individuals governed by culture?
3. What are the characteristics of culture? Explain the function of culture.
4. What are the 3 forms of cultural values?
5. What are the factors influencing non-verbal communications? Explain with reference to time and symbols.
6. What are marketing implications of culture? What is the role of a marketeer in this connection?