

Designing Across Borders

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Introduction

When discussion of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) began, I wondered how this trade relationship between Canada, the United States, and Mexico would impact the profession of graphic design in the United States and, thus, the education of graphic design. Since the United States, for the most part, is a unilingual country, I assumed that many American designers and educators were not familiar—at least at that time—with the demands of designing for a multi-lingual, and multi-cultural, environment. I wanted to establish some design guidelines.

From 1970 to 1976, I lived in Switzerland while a student at the Basel School of Design, and was, as a result, familiar with visual solutions designed to communicate in multiple languages and to various cultures. I felt, nonetheless, that it would be beneficial to observe firsthand the changes that had taken place in Europe since I had lived there. During the summer of 1994, I visited England, France, Germany, and Switzerland to document current work and meet with design professionals who had recently experienced the shift to a broad multi-lingual and multi-cultural economic base as a result of the European Union.

After that trip, I went to Canada and Mexico to observe design solutions in our NAFTA counterparts. Two years later in 1996, I traveled to Japan, Hong Kong, and Korea to pursue a similar study, this time looking at design solutions that incorporate the Roman alphabet in combination with other writing systems, including non-Roman alphabets. I focused primarily on consumer packaging because packaged goods constantly cross borders and a wide variety of cultural strata.

In this presentation I will show a variety of examples of multi-lingual, multi-cultural consumer packaging from Europe, North America, and Asia, including some amusing vernacular examples;

identify trends and culture traits that I have observed; and offer guidelines for multi-lingual and multi-cultural design. I will also share some student projects that I developed to provide students with opportunities to experience designing for multi-lingual and/or multi-cultural situations while at the same time drawing from their own personal cultural backgrounds.

Europe

Switzerland served as a valuable multi-lingual, multi-cultural resource to this study. Where many European countries are unilingual, Switzerland has four national languages—German, French, Italian, and Romansch—and German, French, and Italian are official languages. Within designated language areas, certain forms of visual communication design are found only in the official language of the region, like the poster shown here (1), which was photographed in Zürich in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. The poster features a strong visual image accompanied by a headline in only German. However, items intended for distribution throughout the country incorporate German, French, and Italian like the JuraSel salt package shown here (2).

North America: Canada

Canada also served as an important resource since Canada has long operated as a bilingual nation. French influence is particularly evident in the east as we see in this sign above the entrance to a Kentucky Fried Chicken in Montreal (3). English becomes more prevalent as one moves westward. Nonetheless, all government documents and signage, as in this stop sign (4), are required to be produced in both French and English; and many manufacturers of consumer goods follow the government's lead, as shown in the Nestlé KitKat packaging (5). The text on one side is in French and on the opposite side, it is in English.

North America: Mexico

When comparing American, Canadian, and Mexican consumer packaging in 1984, it was clear that Mexico needed to make great strides in design presentation, package construction, and print quality to compete for consumer confidence and market share outside of Mexico. In a grocery store in Tijuana, I found this package of Lagg's tea bags (6), shown here in an article that was published in the AIGA San Diego journal. An illustration of a woman holding a teacup is printed on the front of the box, which was printed four-color process. The registration on this particular box was off by 1/8" or about 3.5 millimeters.

Asia

Japan, Hong Kong, and Korea do face similar design challenges. The main difference, of course, is that Japanese, Chinese, and Korean are not written with the Roman alphabet. Designers in Japan and Chinese-speaking countries, such as Hong Kong, have more flexibility in layout since Japanese and Chinese can be typeset both horizontally and vertically. As shown in these two examples of snack food packaging from Japan, text can be set to read either from left to right (7), from right to left, or from top to bottom (8).

Trends: American Presence

As I crossed borders in Europe and North America, one of the things that surprised me the most was the abundance of American products on supermarket shelves and the influence of American culture on local products compared to when I had lived and traveled in Europe during the '70s. Product categories that were dominated almost entirely by U.S. companies were dental care—toothpaste and all the accompanying paraphernalia; entertainment—music, video, and film; and breakfast cereal. Shown here is a series of Sugar Frosted Flakes packages adapted for Mexico (9), Korea (10), Hong Kong (11), and Switzerland (12)—where else but Switzerland would cereal be filled with chocolate?

Trends: Cultural Influence

Companies often emulate style and attitude that is imported from another country or culture to position and promote their own products. A familiar example is Häagen Dazs ice cream, a fabricated name and spelling intended to create a European flavor (13) as in this bilingual advertisement found in Holland. In 1994, I found a series of chocolate chip cookie products in Equisheim, a small town in eastern France near the border of Switzerland (14). The packaging appears to be from different manufacturers and all four products are identified on the front of each box by an English word and an American scene (15). Lu's Hello! brand features a chocolate Statue of Liberty in front of a chocolate skyline of New York City. The Coop brand features a 1950's style coffee shop on the front of its box. Rougier's Okay brand presents the product name in a personalized auto license plate like the ones that have become very popular in the U.S. The illustration of an Easy Rider-style road bike destined for Los Angeles sits in front of rock formations like those found in Arizona's Monument Valley. The Cookies package also has a New York theme with the addition of stars and stripes and a red vintage American automobile.

The ingredients have been translated into the language or languages required by the individual countries or trade agreements (16). The Coop brand was only in French. I counted five languages on the Hello! package—French, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, and Arabic. There were three on the Cookies box and the Okay box had seven—all of the previous with English and German added. So, here we have chocolate chip cookies with idealized images of America crossing borders on their way to households throughout the European community and beyond.

Guidelines for Multi-lingual and Multi-cultural Design

Based on design projects in which I have been personally involved, as well as interviews

with designers, ad agency representatives, and government officials, I compiled the following design guidelines:

1. The challenge when working with multiple languages is that all languages are not equal, as you can see here in the ingredients that are listed on the side of each package. Some languages require more layout area. For example, French, German, and Spanish can run as much as 10%–15% longer than English. Designers need to take care not to emphasize one language over the other, while maintaining a good sense of design and communicating effectively.

2. There are a couple of layout formats that work well when more than one language is required.

Side-by-Side Format: The side-by-side layout, also known as parallel or Swiss format, integrates the languages on the same page of a publication or on the same surface of a package, as in this milk carton from Hong Kong (17).

Single Surface Format: An alternative in packaging would be to allow one surface for each language, such as in the Bricellet package from Switzerland (18). French, German, and Italian each have their own side of the package so the language of a specific geographic area can face the buyer. The ingredients and other details are listed in all three languages in the side-by-side layout on the fourth side.

Tumble Format: Polo peppermints falls into this category too (19). Rotate the cylindrical package to reveal the product name in the second language. Here the Os are used as icons for "the mints with the hole." Note how the two Chinese characters carry the visual theme.

The tumble format is more often used with a bilingual publication when half of the publication can be dedicated to each language. When tumbled or flipped, the cover of the opposite language is revealed.

Depending on the requirements, sometimes it is better to produce

totally separate publications or packaging. This works well with split press runs when fewer units are needed of one language than another or when one design approach cannot fulfill the communication requirements of more than one audience.

Similarly, many web sites are designed for international audiences. Visitors to the site select a language from a list of choices before proceeding. This makes people feel welcomed and allows them to easily access information.

3. When designing for a language and culture other than one's own, it is best for designers to develop creative concepts in their own language and let a creative director who is comfortable in the other language and familiar with the other culture adapt the concepts. It is more than a verbatim translation; it is an adaptation of the concept into another language supported by awareness and understanding of cultural nuances.

4. Seek counsel from appropriate consultants with regard to language, humor, religion, and other cultural subtleties. Nothing is worse than insulting your audience or rendering your design ineffective with unsuitable images or copywriting. Many large companies hire employees from a variety of countries and/or cultures to avoid some of these pitfalls.

Nowhere is this more critical than in naming. In Mexico there is a large manufacturer of baked goods named Bimbo (20). In Spanish, the word is derived from *bambino* meaning baby. In English, the word *bimbo* means a stupid or ineffectual person (usually used in reference to a female and always disparagingly). The bakery is so large and well established in Mexico, and parts of southern California, that as of now they have chosen to leave the name as is.

Another example is Pocari Sweat, a sports drink similar to Gatorade (21) that is manufactured in Japan. When introduced into the U.S. the drink did not attract customers because the thought

of drinking “sweat” after a sweaty workout was not appealing.

The evolution of this toothpaste brand is an interesting case study (22). Darkie toothpaste had been sold in Asia for 60 years when Colgate-Palmolive purchased half ownership of manufacturer Hawley and Hazel. The toothpaste was originally branded with “a black man in a top hat with a grin revealing dazzling white teeth” according to a September 1989 United Press International newspaper article. Colgate-Palmolive was “accused of promoting racial stereotypes through its marketing of the toothpaste,” so the company initiated a redesign and repackaging. In order not to confuse customers, an interim identity and package were issued that included an “invented word”—Darlie—and in the final version the image was changed to “a face so shadowed that it could represent any race. The bright white teeth remain.”

Student Assignments

It can all be very confusing, especially when the writing system is completely different, as in this case when I was in Tokyo (23). Not only could I not read the Japanese kanji, the buildings are not arranged in numerical order but based on the date that the building was built.

I wanted students to experience this same situation. I had a Japanese student in class that semester and I asked him if he would translate everyone’s name into kanji. The students then created a logotype using the kanji. No one else was familiar with the Japanese writing system so the Japanese student told students when a mark was misshapen or out of place and, thus, changed the

meaning: Rosa (24), Laura (25), Kara (26), and Joe (27).

Other ways to make students aware of cultural influences on design that I’ve experimented with are:

1. NAFTA identity (28 and 29) helped students understand the goals of the trade agreement.

2. Snack food packaging based on a cultural issue:

- a. This bilingual project (30) by Korean student Min Horne explores the struggle between Korea and Japan for an island off the coast of Korea, which is rich with seafood. Both countries claimed that it belonged to them. Packaged in a traditional Korean style, three gift boxes are revealed, which contain seafood-flavored crackers. A small package floats like an island on the top of each box. Inside is a hard candy that is manufactured by the local vendors on the island.

- b. The burlap wrapping labeled Forbidden Fruit (31) refers to the Cuban trade embargo. Simone Careaga, who is of Cuban heritage, redesigned a Cuban dried-fruit snack bar named La Cubanita. Inside the wrapper is information on how to speak out against the trade embargo.

- c. Filipino student Garry Gatchalian designed this product line of MisFortune cookies (32) as a way to comment on the cultural injustice in his community. The sale of this product seeks funding from one culture to assist the needs of another. The fortunes carry statistics about different social issues: abused children, battered women, and homelessness.

Susan Merritt: A Short Biography

Susan Merritt is a professor of Graphic Design at the School of Art, Design and Art History at San Diego State University and a design principal of CWA, Inc., a strategic and creative development firm whose mission “bridging the communication gap between cultures” guides solutions that meet the needs of their clients.

Merritt is cofounder with Calvin Woo of the nonprofit organization, the Design Innovation Institute, and coauthor with Jack Davis of *The Web Design Wow! Book*. She has served on the board of the San Diego chapter of the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) and was curriculum director of AIGA’s national Creativity Kits Project. She is founder and faculty advisor to the AIGA Student Group at San Diego State.

Merritt studied at the Basel School of Design with Armin Hofmann, Wolfgang Weingart, André Gürtler and Kurt Hauert. While living in Europe for six years and in Hawaii for five years, Merritt developed a deep appreciation for different cultures and their communities. She continues to travel and research the role of visual communication design within the context of culture.