

The importance of intercultural competence in the development of successful international businesses

– Winning entry in the 2004 John Payne Competition of the European Business School (ebs) London –

“The barbarian merchants of your country, if they wish to do business for a prolonged period, are required to obey our statutes respectfully and to cut off permanently the source of opium...” (Carr 1993: 15)

Thus were the words capable of triggering war. The words of Lin Zexu, commissioner of the Chinese Empire against the British opium trade, who warned the British queen Victoria of the consequences of continued British opium smuggle in 1839. Only weeks later, the infamous First Opium War had started.

How is this episode relevant to the topic of this essay?

A self-evidence to the Chinese rulers, the demands of Lin Zexu appeared an unacceptable impertinence to the representatives of the militarily superior British Empire. Both the British and Chinese established, in fact, the very model of how international business should not be conducted.

The British East India Merchant Company, which was chiefly responsible for the Opium smuggle at the time, held the single-most successful trade monopoly in Great Britain’s Southeast Asian colonies. It was backed by the strongest Imperialist power in the world, had access to any resources it required and controlled a highly organized infrastructure. With its own contingent of 24,000 men and excessive sovereign rights granted by the English crown, it was the most powerful company in the East Indies (“Ostindische Kompanie” 2000).

Ideal prerequisites for international success, one might assume.

However the Opium Wars demonstrated otherwise. Even though the British East India Company finally managed to force its conditions upon the Chinese market, it failed only some decades later due to the upheaval of another of its subjects. The Indian uprisings of 1857/58 irrevocably set an end to its 250 years of unconditional rule in East Asia (“Ostindische Kompanie” 2000).

So what did the British East India Merchant Company lack?

The answer is simple: It lacked the ‘ability to communicate across cultures’. For decades, the company did not have, as a case in point, a single interpreter for Chinese. The first British subject to be an acknowledged interpreter was James Flint, no earlier than 1736; 136 years after the East India Company had been founded. Even though Flint became a competent Chinese speaker, he never acquainted himself with the Chinese culture. He was bound to fail.

In 1753 he did so, when he signed a petition that went against Chinese protocol so much so that Flint was eventually expelled from the country. After Flint’s faux pas, no one was willing to take his place. Thus, “for a generation, the East India Company operated without cultural intermediaries in China” (Golden 2001). One of the first representatives of the company to actually recognise the benefits of “being able to communicate directly with Chinese officials in Chinese” (Golden 2001), was Lord MacCartney, who led several diplomatic missions after 1792. He even set up a school for Chinese. This sole impulse however was, of course, not enough to prevent the company from collapsing at last in the foreign (and, this should be added, hostile) environment.

Today the ‘ability to communicate across cultures’ is commonly referred to as “intercultural competence” and considered one of the key factors determining the measure of international success of any business venture.

As Hinner and Rülke note, “The global economy is a fact” (2002: 2). Already ten years ago, The Economist reported a number of 37,000 transnational corporations with 207,000 foreign affiliates (qtd. in Harris and Moran 1996: 18). Certainly the number is much greater today, after the EU expansion and the further development of the Internet in the past decade.

Any small or medium-size company today is offered the promising prospect of extending its target market with hardly any extra cost. With the plane, any place on Earth can be reached within a day or less, and the existing world-wide infrastructure maintained by delivery services like DHL, UPS and TNT relieves businesses from creating their own infrastructure at high expense. The Internet allows for quick, easy and cheap communication with any customer outside the regional market and the development of e-commerce drives the economic globalisation further. Cell phones and microtechnology account for the proverbial ‘mobile generation’. “Such communication and transportation opportunities have never existed before in human history” (Hinner and Rülke 2002: 2).

However, as national boundaries vanish, anxiety in the face of globalisation also grows: “People are afraid of losing their identity in global uniformity. [...] As the world appears to shrink, people seem to cling more to their ethnic identity as an anchor in times of change” (Hinner and Rülke 2002: 3). This is where intercultural competence proves valuable.

Intercultural competence is widely understood as the relative quality of someone’s communicative performance in a different cultural environment (Knapp 1995: 9). Hence evaluating the significance of intercultural competence is roughly tantamount to assessing the importance of language learning, understanding of other peoples, and cultural awareness.

In effect, the intercultural competence of a business is a descriptor for its ability to successfully communicate across national and cultural borders. That does not merely include very basic requirements such as translating its advertisements into the language of the respective market. Instead, according to Hinner and Rülke, there are three basic steps in the process of introducing a product (or a service) into a new market: adaptation, engineering and marketing (2002: 4–6). That is, the company (and its management) has to adapt any product to the needs of its prospective consumers, engineer it for the market the company wishes to enter and communicate the product’s benefits to the potential end users. In all of these processes, intercultural competence is a vital requirement without which the company is likely to fail in its new environment.

Having described where intercultural competence takes place, we have not yet precisely defined what it is. For knowing a language alone does not entail cultural competence. After all, James Flint was not culturally competent though the best British speaker of Chinese he was indeed.

Karlfried Knapp points out that cultural competence is a set of “cognitive schemes” that are shared between two interacting individuals. Usually, its existence is presumed without explicit mention of it (Knapp 1995: 11). As the modes of expression wherein intercultural competence is presumed, Knapp distinguishes verbal, non-verbal and paraverbal communication. A major part of human interaction, Knapp argues, is not explicit, but implicit (Knapp 1995: 11–12). Communicating with other individuals in almost any language requires knowledge of how to use loudness, intonation, silence (paraverbal), proxemics, haptics, oculosics, kinesics (non-verbal) and many other elements of language which a speaker is not usually aware of (Gesteland 1996: 68–71). Knapp continues by analysing how problems then arise in an intercultural interaction: if, for example, one of the speakers does not have the cultural knowledge that is assumed by the other, the dialogue may fail very quickly (Knapp 1995: 12–13).

Unsurprisingly, intercultural competence is not as straightforward as this. The mutual cultural awareness to which it is related requires quite some effort and is by no means easily obtainable.

A company entering into a new market is confronted with new conditions. A different culture does in fact imply more than just a different language: different values, attitudes and norms that may in some instances be the exact opposite of the ones the business had had to deal with to date.

As Ned Seeley remarks, “The human nervous system is structured in such a way that the patterns that

govern behavior and perception come into consciousness only when there is a deviation from the familiar. Intercultural encounters provide such situations of deviation from the familiar as individuals are faced with things that do not follow their hidden program” (Seeley 1996: 13). By all means, a new environment “deviates from the familiar”. The company has to be aware of cultural disparities and has to adapt its products; this applies to consumer goods much more than it does to industrial goods, Richard Gesteland adds (Gesteland 1996: 109).

Culture is an incredibly complex phenomenon and anthropologists have not yet come up with a purely analytical approach towards it. They do not even agree on a single definition. Gerhard Apfelthaler quotes eleven fundamentally different definitions of culture (1999: 30–31) and Ron Allison reports a total of at least 241 (1995: 92). According to Kiesel and Ulsamer, culture is composed of natural, political and social components (2000: 17), while Elashmawi and Harris put much more emphasis on cultural practices like art, food and the way of life (1993: 49). All sources, however, agree that cultural knowledge can hardly be acquired in theory. Instead, Kiesel and Ulsamer define ‘technical competence’ as a kind of cultural competence that is, however, merely based on theoretical knowledge (2000: 16). Therefore it is essential in the process of intercultural communication, but in itself not sufficient. As Michael Exterkamp, Manufacturing Manager at AMTC (AMD), put it: “The only way to really ‘get’ a culture is to live that culture.” (Exterkamp 2004)

The inconceivable complexity of culture and the immense efforts that have to be undertaken to be adequately ‘aware’ of only one foreign culture is demonstrated by the fact that Harris and Moran, to give just one example, spend 200 pages just basically outlining the chief cultural characteristics of the world’s main economic powers (Harris and Moran 1996: 192–392) Another author, Richard Gesteland, compiled a whole book of advice on how to behave when conducting businesses in other cultures. He outlines four basic patterns of ‘cross-cultural business behaviour’:

- Deal-Focus (DF) vs. Relationship-Focus (RF)
- Informal vs. Formal Cultures
- Rigid-Time vs. Fluid-Time Cultures
- Expressive vs. Reserved Cultures

Those are just four cultural characteristics one has to be aware of in the business sector. According to Gesteland, they are the ones which most often cause conflict in international business transactions (Gesteland 1996: 13–15). Just one example from Gesteland’s advice shall be quoted to illustrate how easily an irrevocable cultural blunder may be committed: “The left hand is considered unclean in Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist cultures. Avoid touching people or handing them objects such as your business card with the left hand. An American expatriate manager in Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country, learned that while he could sign letters and documents with his left hand he had to hand them to people with his right” (Gesteland 1996: 78).

To illustrate Gesteland’s fourth cultural descriptor (expressive vs. reserved), Die Zeit (15th January 1988) cites a really quite entertaining anecdote: The riding club of Sao Paolo is used frequently for formal business receptions. However, when European or North American guests were involved in a conversation with their South American partners, they felt uncomfortable with the proximity maintained by the latter and, consequently, kept withdrawing throughout the conversation. As a consequence, so many businessmen fell off the terrace that ultimately the balustrade had to be adjusted so to avoid further victims of this cultural clash (qtd. in Kiesel and Ulsamer 2000: 51)...

After considering the terminology and noteworthy cultural concepts in general, let us now take a closer look at how intercultural competence is actually practised in international business.

Above, we defined three steps in introducing a product into a new market. But before this can actually happen, major rearrangements within the company concerned are of crucial importance. Both the administration and the workforce of the business have to undergo a symbiotic relationship with their new environment and its peoples. A successful communication process has to be initiated both within the company (say, with new employees from the respective culture) and in the company’s external relations. All too often cultural discrepancies provide considerable difficulties during the interpretation process.

Richard Gesteland gives an example of a gesture (i.e. a non-verbal means of communication) that clearly demonstrates both the discrepancies that may occur in interpreting a communicated message and the arbitrariness of the meanings that are assigned to certain symbols in different cultures (Gesteland

1996: 80). The sign that is used in the USA to signify “OK” (the thumb-forefinger-circle) may in other cultures mean completely different things: from the innocuous “Let’s talk about money!” (in Japan, where the circle is likened to a coin) and its exact opposite “worthless” (in France, where the circle is seen as a zero) to much more offensive meanings in much of Latin America and great parts of Europe (where it either reminds people of the anus or is used as a very vulgar sexual expression). According to Robert Gibson, a Tunisian would even understand the very same gesture as a threat to his life (2000: 37).

Of course, the paraverbal and most of the non-verbal expressions can only be used (and thus misused) in personal communication. However, managers do spend most of their time doing just this, so both non-verbal and paraverbal communication are at least as important for successful business as the purely verbal (and, as we will see later, visual) communication used in marketing to address the consumers.

Of course, intercultural communicative skills are not only important in the top echelons, they are also imperative among the personnel and employees of an intercultural business venture. Intercultural competence may even be more substantial at this level than at all others, Michael Exterkamp suggested (Exterkamp 2004). Not being acquainted with cultural habits may turn into a major problem especially for employees that have just been transferred to a new workplace (where they regularly have to interact with local workers). Business groups Degussa and Shell, for instance, recognise this issue by providing linguistic and cultural education for their staff. Like many other firms they also involve their employees in job rotation programmes (Jahnke 1996: 142).

With the company thus prepared, it can start introducing its products – generally by the three processes outlined above (adaptation, engineering, marketing).

As for the first step, cultural values are a most vital issue in adapting a product to the desires of its prospective consumers. Jürgen Schrempp brought the issue to the point in 1999: “One thing is certain: A company can be successful in the long term only if it weaves different national cultures and traditions into its own fabric and adapts to local market conditions” (Schrempp 1999: 60).

There is any number of examples in any sector of business marketing. After, for example, Procter & Gamble had entered the Japanese market with their original American products in 1973, they lost 200 million dollars by 1987. Only three years later, after adapting their products and marketing strategies to the Japanese market, they had over one billion dollars in sales (Brake, Walker and Walker 1995: 29).

While McDonald’s does not change its fast food concept anywhere on earth, it does adapt its menu to local preferences. Hence, one may find “kiasuburgers” in Singapore, “teriyaki burgers” in Japan, black currant milk shakes in Poland, “veggie burgers” in the Netherlands and salmon burgers in Norway. “All these local variations on a global theme have helped McDonald’s become the number one fast food provider just about everywhere” (Gesteland 1996: 111–112). Euro Disney in Paris, in contrast, was not yielding as eagerly to the local circumstances. The group lost almost one billion dollars and was on the verge of bankruptcy in 1993 before it finally decided to adapt its US-style food service formula to the new European environment. They complied with their customer’s plea for alcoholic drinks, adjusted the seating capacities to suit European standards and “finally moved into the black” (Gesteland 1996: 110).

Hinner and Rülke (2002: 14) quote another example, put forward by Steffi Gründel:

“When VW first introduced an American built successor to the Beetle, the American built Rabbit was not very popular. Subsequent research showed that Americans did not want an American style subcompact from Volkswagen. Volkswagen closed the Westmoreland plant and imported the car from Wolfsburg under the original German name Golf. In addition, Volkswagen started an ad campaign highlighting the car’s high quality German precision engineering; a message that was reinforced by using German names for the various Golf editions, such as the *Autobahn* and *Fahrvergnügen* editions. The result was an increase in sales.”

Let that suffice. The above examples very clearly demonstrate the significance of intercultural competence in the process of adapting a product to the preferences of a new market. In this context, it is not so much the communicative quality of intercultural competence that is important, but the cultural awareness instead. The mutual “understanding of other peoples” is thus an essential prerequisite to conducting international business successfully. It is, to speak figuratively, the reason why one cannot find hamburgers in any Indian subsidiary of McDonald’s...

Another very important factor that, in some measure, links adaptation and marketing is the product’s brand name. “Names are in the most literal sense big business. With the increasing globalisation of

commerce, it is becoming harder and harder to find brand names that are both inoffensive and pronounceable throughout the world” (Bryson 1991: 206).

For instance, the Italian version of “Schweppes tonic water” had to be renamed into “Schweppes tonica” because *il water* signifies “bathroom” in Italian (Kiesel and Ulsamer 2000: 48). General Motors made similarly negative experiences with brand names in Latin America, where their “Nova” car would literally “not go” (*no va*) (Allison 1995: 97)...

Bill Bryson (1991: 206–207) quotes yet another perfect example of how cultural (and thereby linguistic) ignorance in naming a product may prohibit sales:

“Some idea of the scope of the problem can be seen in the experience of a British company when it decided to sell its vintage port, Cockburn’s Dry Tang, in Scandinavia. When it didn’t sell well in Sweden, the company investigated and learned that *‘tang’* means ‘seaweed’ in Swedish [...] the company changed the name on the label to Dry Cock, which sounds very silly to English speakers, but which was a big hit with the Swedes. However, sales immediately plummeted in Denmark. Urgent investigations showed that *cock* there signifies, of all things, the female genitalia. Such are the hazards of international marketing.”

In his last ironic remark, Bryson already leads us into the third and final stage of introducing a product into a new market as defined by Hinner and Rülke (see page 2 of this paper): marketing. Here, intercultural competence is not only an essential prerequisite, it also takes peculiar forms.

The marketing sector is all about communicating to the potential end user of a product (or a service) and the most remarkable misunderstandings have sprung from it. According to Kiesel and Ulsamer, when Pepsi transferred its slogan “Come alive with Pepsi” to Asia, its translation read “Revive your ancestors with Pepsi” (Kiesel and Ulsamer 2000: 48). Irrespective of whether this would enhance or impede successful sales, it obviously mutilates the advertising message and inhibits successful communication between the business and its clients. Similarly, KFC’s slogan “It’s finger licking good!” was interpreted quite differently in Iran, where it read “It’s so good you will eat your fingers!” (Allison 1995: 94)

Let me ultimately return into the abyss of non-verbal communication which accounts for “over half of our communication” (Gardenswartz and Rowe 1993: 25) and which is increasingly promoted by the growing influence of multimedia. In TV advertisements – as just one example –, the role of the actual verbal message is steadily decreasing in favour of non-verbal means of expression. Primarily this refers to pictures or images which may well be misinterpreted in other cultures. Had, for instance, the Johnny Walker advertising department known that in Japan only poor whisky is decanted, they would certainly not have used the popular Western image showing whisky in a decanter in their Japanese advertisings...

Apart from images, marketing consultants also have to take care of the different cultural implications of symbols, music or even something as innocuous as colours. Take green as a case in point. While it is the colour of faithfulness in Germany, it is identified with anxiety in France and envy in Italy. It is the colour of luck in Pakistan (Kiesel and Ulsamer 2000: 50), but conversely a symbol for bad luck in neighbouring India (Allison 1995: 95). In parts of Indonesia, the use of green is even forbidden (Gibson 2000: 96).

Symbols are similarly ambiguous. If the American potato chip manufacturer Wise were to sell its products unchangedly in India, it would certainly not be very successful. The icon of an owl that goes with the company’s slogan “It’s wise to eat Wise” may signify wisdom in Western traditions, yet in India it is a symbol for bad luck and death (Hinner and Rülke 2002: 11). So obviously Indian consumers would have to be addressed by means of a different symbolism than American consumers.

As a result of a similar cultural reservation towards specific symbols, products like “8x4” deodorant or “Chanel No. 4” would hardly sell well in Japan, where the word for “4” (*shi*) reads the same as the word for “death” (Kiesel and Ulsamer 2000: 49). IBM was faced with this issue when introducing their series 44 computers in Japan; the computers had to be renamed. Mercedes, in contrast, swiftly exploited a similar superstition in China, where 8 is the number of luck and it is also considered lucky to have a double number: the company simply “chose the C88 for one of its cars” (Gibson 2000: 93).

One last comment on the value of cultural awareness in the marketing sector: It may seem paradoxical, but only goes to demonstrate the significance of intercultural competence, that Ron Allison notes that the process of adapting marketing strategies to foreign markets is already regarded in reverse as an indicator of cultural values: “an hour of television advertising provides more information about the culture of a country than a shelf full of books” (Allison 1995: 92).

I introduced my essay with a case study, so let me conclude it by another one. More than one hundred years ago, the British East India Merchant Company collapsed because of a lack of cultural awareness. Today, another international cooperation aims at extending its influence across the globe – and it does so much more successfully.

In 1999, a small company by the name of Infineon Technologies AG emerged from the semiconductor branch of the German technology manufacturer Siemens. Within no more than five years, Infineon has become a global enterprise with more than 32,000 employees working in facilities located in some forty different countries around the globe. Today Infineon is among the top six semiconductor businesses, with its target firmly set on fourth place (Infineon 2004).

Because of Infineon's varied experience on Asian markets, the company is very well aware of cultural barriers and everything is done to surpass them. As Bernd Vollmer, Senior Director at Infineon's Dresden manufactory, pointed out, Infineon does, for example, recognize the "large difference with respect to electronic devices" (Vollmer 2004, April) between the European and Asian markets. Cell phones, as just one instance, are valued much higher in Asia than they are in Europe. Unlike the European-style use of cell phones mainly as a means of communication, Asians often consider a cell phone fashionable and even wear it like a necklace. Additionally, in Asia most short messages are stored permanently (unlike in Europe). Infineon takes care of such subtle differences so that Infineon memory chips on the Asian cell phone market reveal a distinctly different segmentation from their European counterparts.

Of course intercultural management goes further than just adapting products to foreign markets. Most importantly, it extends to the way the company treats its personnel: "the thing that's important is [...] how people deal with each other" (Exterkamp 2004). "Promoting diversity" (Infineon 2004) requires a lot of sensibility towards foreign cultures and an innovative system of both managerial and staff training. When, for instance, Infineon started a joint venture called INTA (Infineon Nanya Trench Alliance) together with Nanya Technology in late 2003, Taiwanese employees from Nanya's headquarters were brought in to work in Germany. However, before the cooperative actually took action, team members and managers participated in bicultural workshops to "experience together the similarities and also any bicultural differences" (Scheibe 2003).

In fact, before initiating any new project (other examples being related to the new design centre in Xian Nich Heijan, China, that is currently in the making), Infineon allows a phase of several weeks at least in which the prospective team members get to know each other and prepare for the teamwork to come. In Mr. Vollmer's words, Infineon considers that phase "an essential prerequisite" (2004, May).

Another aspect Infineon is concerned about is the integration of families from abroad into the local culture and the social fabric of the host country. "It's important for families to be accepted and integrated" (Vollmer 2004, May). A few years ago, Infineon initiated an event that has yet become a traditional custom and proved tremendously successful at eliminating cultural restraints. At the so-called "Ladies' Dinners", the wives of employees meet in a relaxed, personal atmosphere. By this process alone, intercultural differences are reduced significantly while diversity is emphasised.

The implications of Infineon's cultural policy are stated very clearly in their Shareholder Report 2003: "Infineon will, therefore, in a process of decentralization, gradually shift business responsibility to the individual regions [...] combining German chip architecture design, Indian software expertise, and the American service culture. In the end, Infineon will no longer be a purely German company, but a group active all over the world, making decisions wherever its customers may be" (Infineon 2004: 12).

I think that the development that has taken place in the conduct of international business throughout the last one hundred years is evident. As the awareness of cultural issues grew, so did the willingness of companies to consider multiculturalism a form of synergy rather than an impediment to success. Infineon is only one of many intercultural ventures that are successfully integrating different market environments into each other. Doubtlessly, intercultural competence is an important ingredient to long-term international business success. An incredibly important, if not *the* most important ingredient.

"... because minor cultural differences are often the making or breaking of a good business relationship." (Exterkamp 2004)

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