

Communication: the key to East Asia

Few regions of the world are geographically or culturally further from the UK than East Asia, so it is little surprise that communications play such a key role in determining success or failure in its lucrative markets.

At the root of the challenge lie the varied cultures of the East Asian countries. If you seriously intend to do business in Asia you should invest some time in getting a grounding in where the people are coming from. Find a book about the target country, its history, politics and culture. You will find no end of self-styled cultural experts offering training in cultural and business etiquette, but they are of limited value if you lack a wider appreciation of what makes the country and its people tick.



Not many businesses can operate without written communications, and without something written in the local language you will have a hard time developing credibility and interest. At the very least you should produce some bilingual business cards and a single page intro to your company. Even if you're meeting only fluent English speakers, there's a good chance that there will be a decision-maker somewhere along the line who would prefer to read about you in his or her language.

Translated web pages are a cost-effective way of making your company information available to interested parties who you may never meet face to face, and avoid the pain of carrying around printed matter. For most websites it is quick and easy to tag on one or two translated pages, and the whole thing can generally be translated without too much investment unless it is particularly wordy. Watch out for the risks inherent in translating some pages and leaving others in English – you may well find that any saving is wiped out by the extra you spend on engineering

costs as you restructure the site to accommodate the mix of languages.

If you value your brand you should be extremely careful when considering

“You will obtain better prices, more generous credit terms, higher quality of product or service, and minimise risk if you communicate in a way that is linguistically and culturally appropriate.”

having it translated. In many East Asian markets it is quite acceptable to leave your company name in English, or to transliterate it (in Japan, for example). On the other hand, in markets where all successful, established foreign companies have localised names you will need to address the issue at some point.

Keeping in mind how long you spent thinking up your inspired English name, make sure that your localised name is provided by someone really good, and with a clear explanation of the literal meaning and cultural nuances. Ideally you will be offered 3 or 4 options so you can choose the brand name that is most in line with your intended image.

Your translation provider should be able to provide significant value above and beyond the translation. Engage with them and utilise their experience. If the project manager who is handling your projects has never left Europe perhaps you should consider working with someone who

has first hand experience of at least one Asian market. The provider should be able to navigate you around the variety of written languages, dialects and scripts in the region, as well as ensuring you don't fall foul of censorship and other legal pitfalls.

Oral communication throws up a whole host of additional challenges, as the cultural divide is all the wider when talking face to face. Nevertheless, it is possible to worry too much about these things. You should be fine if you follow universal principles of courtesy. Unscrupulous people may use the mysterious 'cultural differences' to excuse what is fundamentally bad behaviour. You don't need to put up with it.

Nevertheless, never trust an interpreter (or translator) provided by the local supplier / client. Like anyone, an interpreter is answerable to the person paying the bill, and if you attach importance to having an accurate understanding of what is being said (and whispered) you should bring your own.



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