

What's in a name?

Nader Tavassoli, Professor of Marketing, has taken a look at how messages are processed differently by readers of Chinese and English. He offers some helpful advice.

“What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet”. Shakespeare's Juliet argues that a name is a meaningless convention, and that she loves the person called “Montague”, not the Montague name and not the Montague family.

Now imagine Romeo and Juliet written not in alphabetic English but penned using the Chinese logographs that are read by one quarter of the world's population – across China, Japan and Korea. Even a fluent bilingual will process, evaluate and recall Shakespeare's words differently in an alphabetic versus a logographic writing system, no matter how literal the translation.

Whereas English is a sound-rich but visually poor language, quite the opposite is true for Chinese. The over 10,000 Chinese logographs represent meaning; each corresponds to a single spoken syllable. Mandarin Chinese, which has only about 450 syllables available, is relatively sound starved. This results in an abundance of homophones: words that mean different things but are pronounced in the same way. Logographs are visually rich, each consisting of a unique stroke combination and modern Chinese words contain multiple logographs, some indicating meaning, others pronunciation.

The branding implications? Western marketers need to be aware of a logograph's meaning when trying to create a Chinese version of a brand name. Supposedly, the logographs originally used for the Chinese version of Coca-Cola sounded similar to the English original but resulted in the rather surreal sequence of “bite the wax tadpole” in terms of their meaning. Today, Coca-Cola's logographs have the more fortunate meaning of “brings happiness to your mouth” while still sounding like the English original. And this is a truly winning combination: translations that correspond to the original Western name both in terms of sound and category meaning are evaluated most favourably by proficient Chinese bilinguals.

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Marketers also need to construct Chinese messages differently for maximum impact:

1. Writing systems are processed with a different emphasis: reading logographs involves visual processes to a greater degree than does reading alphabetic words. This raises the significance of visual features, such as a brand name's colour. Colour is an important brand recognition cue, often used by providers of copycat brands. The greater reliance on visual processing in Chinese makes this copycat strategy more effective with readers of Chinese logographs.
2. Chinese consumers' more visual processing makes them more sensitive to the font used in marketing communications. For example, brand evaluations of Chinese consumers were more sensitive than those of American consumers to the match between the perceived femininity of fonts used for brand names of feminine products like lipstick and masculine products such as motorcycles.
3. Chinese consumers better remembered the spatial location of logographs that had been scattered on a single page than readers of English remembered the location of alphabetic words. Chinese consumers may, therefore, be more sensitive to spatial changes to visual brand identity, such as the reconfiguration of a website.
4. Advertisers use a variety of non-linguistic auditory and visual elements to capture and hold consumers' attention and to serve as memory cues for later recall. In Chinese ad copy, visual elements such as logos were more potent retrieval cues. Auditory elements such as music, sound effects and brand identifiers like Intel's trademarked 'Tune' were more potent retrieval cues in English ad copy.
5. Chinese readers are less sensitive to the order in which verbal information is presented. In English, it appears more important to “put your best foot forward” to create favourable attitudes. Mentioning a brand name in the first few seconds of an advertisement is also more critical in English, as this improves brand recall more than for Chinese consumers, whose memories are based less on a “first-in-first-out” format.

A “rose”, therefore, evokes different smells and thoughts when read in Chinese even for a bilingual consumer; and marketers who are aware of this could be transmitting much more effective messages about their companies and products. Thus, a rose in Chinese might smell as sweet. Or it might not.