

How Nike adapts 'Just Do It' to work across cultures

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This article reveals how Nike, the sportswear brand, successfully adapted its core brand proposition of 'Just Do It' to very diverse cultures.

- Globalisation means that brands seek growth by stretching across geographies, however, at the same time consumers expect brands to be more sensitive and 'speak their language' as never before.
- Aligning a global proposition to local requirements is fraught with difficulty and the problem of cultural difference is often misunderstood and under-estimated.
- TNS Qualitative developed a set of cultural codes for China, USA, UK and India that can be used as a framework for surfacing cultural differences and guiding brand communications.
- The article discusses how four Nike 'Just Do It' ads were successfully adapted to reflect cultural differences in China, USA, UK and India.

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This case study explores how a set of cultural codes that TNS Qualitative developed can surface cultural differences, and guide brand communications. We focus on a contrast between the US and China to help explain what the codes mean at a general level. Then we look at how Nike (a characteristically US brand) has managed to align itself to UK, Indian and Chinese cultures through brand advertising.

Brands lost in translation

Delivering a global proposition in a way that resonates locally is one of the most important and toughest challenges in marketing. Globalisation means that brands seek growth by stretching across geographies. At the same time consumers expect brands to be more sensitive and 'speak their language' as never before. Aligning a global proposition to local requirements is fraught with difficulty. Partly this is because of organisation issues. But it is also because the problem of cultural difference is veiled, misunderstood and under-estimated.

It can seem that nowadays, because everyone wears the same clothes, drinks the same coffee and uses the same computers, we are all converging. And in some ways we are. Yet each culture frames its implicit presumption about what life is, what it's for, and how people should orientate themselves to it. It then instils these presumptions into their children. These deep differences are not going to disappear any time soon.

Yet while we all have hunches and feelings about cultural difference, we often don't have the language for it, beyond the standard, superficial and sometimes offensive stereotypes. All of which makes it hard to talk about and harder to analyse.

The Ideal Man: A new tool for cultural alignment

The Ideal Man is a framework of qualitative codes that characterise the ways different cultures construct their 'Ideal Man'.

Each culture has its own set of interlocking ideas about what a man should be. Because these ideas need to be coherent with each other, each society evolves its own unique 'cultural logic'. We un-wrap this logic by a process of analysis, built around a series of deep questions drawn from Sociology and Social Anthropology which each culture answers in its own unique and characteristic ways.

The questions we ask are: How is he (the Ideal) embedded in society, i.e. what are the deepest values that describe his orientation to others around him, and them to him? What is his modus operandi, i.e. what does his 'embeddedness' mean about how he should operate in the world. What is his purpose of life? What kind of knowledge and skills are particularly honoured? How is he distinguished from women? And what characterises his engagement with other men?

In the following section we describe how the American Ideal Man contrasts with the Chinese. We then give a summary of the US, Chinese, Indian and British codes ('codes' = answers to the question). And from this we discuss four Nike ads, one from each market, to illustrate the way Nike and its agency Wieden+Kennedy have worked to align the core proposition to the distinct markets.

The grid below lays out the summary codes for China, USA, UK and India.

Lens	USA	China	India	UK
Embeddedness <i>Core orientation towards others in society</i>	Righteous purpose	Circumspect	Role-bound, dutiful	Decent, appropriate
Modus operandi <i>Way of approaching problems</i>	Honest endeavour	Strategic, prudent	Egotistic, proud	Moderate, good-natured
X factor <i>Mental secret of success</i>	Can-do optimism	Self-improving	Smart, innovative	Pragmatic, imaginative
Ultimate purpose <i>The meanings of life and death</i>	Leaves his mark on the world	Bank capital	Transcendence / dissolution	Lives a Good Life
Masculinity <i>As contrasted to femininity</i>	Rugged, romantic	Harmonious, caring	Macho	Respectful, ironic
Men together <i>Guys hanging with guys</i>	Supportive, back up	Ebullient excess	Unleashed	Witty banter

American Ideal versus Chinese Ideal

By looking a little more deeply at what the codes reflect in China and the US, we can better understand the challenge Nike addresses in those two markets.

When we look at the core 'Embeddedness' code in the US, we have identified what we term 'Righteous Purpose'. What do we mean by that? The cultural codes describe tendencies which have arisen over the course of history. To understand them we need to look back in time.

From the Pilgrim Fathers to the opening up of the West, the US has been powered by a sense of Righteous Purpose, a journey to the Promised Land and on to the American Dream. Narratives framed by Righteous Purpose pervade American life at every level. It has had masterful exponents in Washington, Lincoln, JFK, Martin Luther King, Ronald Reagan and now with Obama. Today it explains the shrill polarisation of right and left as each side claims 'righteousness' to the exclusion of the other. But not just there: if one looks across American culture we can see it being expressed in its heroes from Dirty Harry to Superman.

Righteous Purpose is not naïve or innocent. It comes with a hard edge, the requirement to 'do what is necessary' to achieve that purpose. That can mean the necessity to take life. All societies justify violence but the gun has a special place in America because it is aligned to particularly central Righteous Purpose – defending individual freedom.

While the American Ideal Man is 'Righteous', his Chinese equivalent is 'Circumspect'. This to do with it being a vast collectivist society, one which for millennia has had a central State which asserted the primary importance of 'social harmony' to hold back the constant threat of anarchy. The Ideal Chinese is expected to be fully conscious of his ever changing situation, to be cautious and not to play his hand too early. To quote Confucius, 'The cautious seldom err'. He is required to be hyper aware of the forces playing out around him before he makes his move as current rank offers zero protection (witness the current wave of purges of senior government figures, and the way they echo those of the Cultural Revolution). The contrast between Circumspect and Righteous is core to the contrast between the American and Chinese Ideals.

The next question we ask is: how does he set about things, 'what is his modus operandi', to which the American answer is 'honest endeavour'. The Ideal American is expected to get stuck in, never quit, see things through to the end. He is a hard worker and there is nobility in that.

From an American point of view, 'honest endeavour' is an obvious expectation of the Ideal Man, but to other cultures, where there is lower trust in just outcomes, it can look hopelessly naïve. The Chinese modus operandi is 'strategic and prudent'. Sun Tzu, the military strategist, is famous for aphorisms such as "Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win". This prudence is very much the function of how one needs to be in a circumspect world where each person is keenly aware of how uncertain things are.

When we look at what we call the X Factor, the key mental attribute that is generally held to be vital to secure success, the American secret weapon is 'can do optimism', a combination of accepting personal responsibility and a complete faith in one's innate capability. No challenge is too great; indeed a challenge needs to be great in order for it to be worthwhile. That is the spirit which lay behind the Apollo programme, as defined by JFK. But it is also a spirit one sees in how problems are tackled in daily life in the US.

The contrast with China couldn't be starker, where one's X Factor is seen very much as a hardened mastery

derived from ultra-disciplined self-improvement. It's no accident that Tiger Mums originate in China. This distinction plays out in the differences in the Chinese and American approaches to education with a Chinese focus on 'accomplishment', while the US focuses more on being well rounded and 'dealing with situations'.

Of the other lenses we developed for unlocking the Ideal Man: the American ultimate purpose (to leave his mark – think of The Gates Foundation or Mount Rushmore; how he projects himself to women (rugged, romantic – think of Bradley Cooper); and with other men (supportive, back up) are all in stark contrast to the Chinese equivalent's ultimate purpose (bank capital – think gold Buddhas and lucky money), how he projects himself to women (harmonious, caring) and other men (ebullient), the point is that the set of codes in each market are at the same time wholly distinct to other cultures, but also internally cohesive. They form the cultural reality within which advertising has to operate.

The genius of Nike

The genius of Nike is that it has managed to land its single-minded brand thought across extremely diverse cultures. It has done so by expressing Just Do It in very different ways, ways that reflect the distinct cultural codes operating in each market. By taking some Nike ads, and looking at them through the lens of the Ideal Man, we can see precisely how Nike has done it.

Just Do It: Righteous Can-Do in the USA

'Snowday' is about a bunch of extremely muscular individuals (sports stars) who each wake up to the first snow, pleased to realise that it's a 'snowday'. We don't know what this means at first but we come to see it's about playing ball in a local parking lot against another team of even more meaty-looking adversaries. Without being too serious about it, they are top full of 'Righteous Purpose', the square-jawed, gleeful virtue of playing football all out against a potent adversary, in the snow. There's 'Can Do' in the way the gang coalesces like a gang of superheroes, playfully crushing any obstacle in their way. 'Supportive, back up' is expressed in the way each performs individual body crunching feats, laughs it off and drops in behind the leader. The leader asks 'Touch?' the adversary growls 'Tackle' to tell us it's going to be full on 'Endeavour'. 'The Rugged Romantic' code comes in the way the brute musculature of the men sits in contrast to the svelte athleticism of the women, one of whom does the kick off. Watching this film, Nike is on its home turf, delivering Just Do It, the unmistakably full-blooded American way.

Just Do It: with ironic banter in the UK

Rooney appears in a Nike Champion's League film that featured five other world famous players. The clips with Rooney flip to a dream sequence where he loses the ball and his life then unravels. After a string of humiliations he ends up in a caravan site with a huge beard and a string vest. He then snaps out of his reverie, sprints the length of the field, does a gritty sliding tackle to save the day. What makes the vignette so uniquely British is the ironic way it references his rough Liverpool background and also reflects deep British class consciousness. It shows that he has a sense of humour, doesn't take himself too seriously (even though he is England's highest ever goal scorer) that he can engage in the art of 'banter'. This is Rooney being completely true to both Just Do It and his indelibly British character.

Just Do It: with inventiveness and unleashed machismo in India

Nike's launch ad for Just Do It in India featured a bunch of cricketers stuck in city traffic, who start playing cricket

on the roofs of their bus, which then cascades as other local guys join in. Watching the ad it immediately feels very Indian. But by looking at the codes we can see how this actually works. The most obvious is the smart way the cricketers come up with a solution to being in a traffic jam (playing to Indian reverence for the smart 'work around'). Then there is the chaotic recklessness with which the game is played, almost relishing the dangers involved as bystanders and players get hit by flying balls, and just finding their balance as the buses judder and rev in the traffic. This scenario expresses a proud male egotism, a sense that boys will be boys (and there are no girls in sight), on top of a skill at improvisation that are characteristically Indian. These are the structural elements that give Just Do It an authentically Indian flavour in this ad.

Just Do It: for a compelling set of benefits in China

Nike is an American brand, and 'Just Do It' is a sentiment that is infused with democratic entitlement and individualism. It translates readily into UK and Indian codes because both of those markets are relatively individualistic. But in China there is a greater leap to make. The core code we identified in China for the Ideal Man was 'Circumspect'. The Chinese guy has to be constantly aware of the ever shifting social power plays. He is expected to look before he leaps and to ensure tangible gains for any transaction. In its pure (American) sense the impulsiveness of 'Just Do it' is out of kilter with how a man should behave in China. It would be foolhardy and naïve.

This should be a really fundamental problem for Nike – that its core proposition is in a deep sense misaligned with the Chinese culture. But the Chinese execution of Just Do It worked around this brilliantly, by using explicit statements of why you should 'Just Do It': to make friends, stay out late, to meet your heroes. By signposting tangible benefits, it aligns Nike's Just Do It to the Chinese code around being Strategic and Prudent. True this is a long way from the endorsement of impetuous can-do in Just Do It, but it is Just Do It as expressed for a circumspect culture.

How do these codes help?

Nike is exceptional, and not every brand can afford locally made creative on high budgets. But whether consciously or not it has succeeded brilliantly in expressing what is in fact an individualistic, indeed righteous, American cultural proposition, into diverse markets around the world. The learning from this is that by surfacing the ways that cultures differ, one can manage the issues more explicitly, enhance understanding between global and local teams, and seize opportunities as they arise. Whatever approach brands take, the reality is that cultural difference is out there and has to be navigated whether brands like it or not. A cultural framework such as this can help brands do this in a more conscious and effective manner.

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