

### Cracking the culture code

14/06/2011

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Brands can tap into the differing, colourful cultural codes of consumers  
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#### Scope

No matter how globalised we become, it's increasingly clear that consumers aren't one amorphous cloud mass. Instead, they are products of their own unique cultures. Understanding the approaches and attitudes that differ from country to country, from city to city, and even from street to street, can help brands to discover what works where - and why.

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From all levels of society there's concern over the growing standardisation and uniformity in the world, whether it involves bemoaning the Starbucks on every second street corner or deriding the latest EU regulations. "Act globally, think locally" reads like a redundant tagline today.

Clotilde Rapaille, author of *The Culture Code: An Ingenious Way To Understand Why People Around The World Live And Buy As They Do* believes we acquire a silent system of codes as we grow up within our culture and that these codes invisibly shape how we behave.

Rapaille argues that the French cultural code for shopping is 'learning your culture.' Shopping is an educational experience where older family members pass knowledge down through the generations via the consumption process. For example, the mother takes the daughter shopping, teaching her how to buy things like bread, wine and cheese at the same time, as they'll be consumed together. The mother teaches her daughter how the culture operates through shopping.

Conversely in the U.S., the cultural code for shopping is 'reconnecting with life.' Shopping is about discovery, revelation, surprise and a myriad of choices. Buying equates to completion of a specific task, and signals the end of shopping. This is why so many U.S. retailers attempt to turn shopping into an open-ended experience by taking items back 'no questions asked.'

In Paris each *arrondissement* has its own strict social, cultural and dress codes and these codes are entrenched in children from a young age (as most attend schools in their district). Life becomes a constant subtext of reading and understanding the codes. Strong cultural references and identities run through each *arrondissement* - far deeper than the gross generalisation of the left bank being all about artsy chic and the right bank representing the domain of money and business.

Young children learn from the culture to stick with the group - to be safe - and carry a variation of this theme into adulthood as 'same, but different.' It's one of the reasons brands like Louis Vuitton do so well in cultures with strong group orientation like France and Japan, where the phrase "the nail that sticks out gets hammered down" is oft-quoted. Louis Vuitton handbags give an identity, link consumers to a group and provide a (false) sense of belonging, yet allow the individual to choose a shape and style according to their personal preference.

Another French brand that understands hidden cultural codes is the leather and luxury goods company Longchamp. It touches many consumer groups - grandmother, mother, daughter and granddaughter - while perfectly expressing the codes of the bourgeois 16th *arrondissement*. What makes it such a success is its across-the-board customer segmentation. For the traveller it's the perfect tote bag, while for the fashionista, Longchamp is seen to work with the right people, like [Jeremy Scott](#) (referred to as the 'Jeff Koons of fashion').

One cultural code that pervades French life is that beauty involves slight imperfections. Quirkiness and idiosyncrasies are to be appreciated. True beauty is something a little out of time, something you catch or disturb. [Vanessa Bruno](#), known for her 'easy clothes for difficult girls,' played on this code when partnering with Lou Doillon to make a [visual poem](#). The film was released instead of a catalogue and was both timeless and contemporary, and Doillon was the perfect muse - Parisienne, sensual and with that something a little odd about her.

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A few years back Philippe Starck examined the difficulty of achieving perfection with his *Un Parfait* boxed set for Baccarat – one perfect goblet and five others, each with a subtle flaw. Products and brand messages that embrace so-called flaws are especially difficult to sell in other cultures like Germany where precision and exactness are demanded.

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The arts have always been an incredibly strong influence on fashion and design. In Paris, art has historically centred on the Louvre and the traditional museums and galleries. It typically meant big exhibitions at the big museums, or generating sensationalist press by reporting on unlikely collaborations like Jeff Koons at Versailles. Paris was concerned with 'big moment art' – not art in culture.

This is unlike New York City, where mass consumers excitedly follow contemporary artists. A visitor to NYC walks away with the impression that art is the general economy. The city relies heavily on the artistic community for its innovation, creativity, energy and commerce. The Whitney Museum of American Art even runs 'Whitney Wees' for families (with kids aged four to five), where they and the museum's educator explore various themes in different works. The museum sets out to prove you're never too young to start getting into art!

The situation is changing in Paris, as there's an emerging demand to see new techniques and artists – to push art further, to thrust past its boundaries. New art and photography fairs that parallel the influence of Frieze Art Fair in London or The Armory Show in NYC are being created. As Johan Tamer-Morael, co-founder of SLICK, a new contemporary art fair in Paris said, "We've chosen to organise this art fair very naturally because we needed something different in Paris. Yes, Paris is waking up."

#### Insights & opportunities

In the age of globalisation, understanding cultural codes becomes key for global consumer brands. They must not only clearly define their own conventions, but also communicate how they align with the cultural codes in which their businesses operate.

One way to do this is through artistic collaborations; art is part of a city's social fabric and is for all ages and all parts of society. Put simply, mythologies and iconographies are fundamental to life, and they identify and link many disciplines, specialties and talents.

It's essential that brands understand the relevant obvious (and discreet) cultural codes before blindly collaborating with artists. Successful collaborations are those that breathe life into existing cultural codes, invent modern, contemporary ones and make the brand meaningful to individual markets. Brands can't enter new markets – geographical or otherwise – without this understanding.

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