

Blunder collection lesson to businessmen

Cultural differences, language barriers can cause problems in international marketing

United Press International
COLUMBUS, Ohio — Figuring students learn best by studying the mistakes of others, David Ricks, chairman of the Ohio State University International Business Program, has built what he calls a "rather novel collection."

For 10 years Ricks has been ferreting out blunders made by big businesses — mistakes the companies would rather forget but which show students "why it's important to pay attention to concepts that don't seem important."

Some samples from the nearly 200 documented blunders Ricks has uncovered:

— A baby food company tried unsuccessfully to peddle its product in a mostly illiterate African nation with a label showing a cuddly infant. It turned out Africans thought the jars contained ground-up babies.

— Chevrolet was puzzled when its Nova model, popular in this country, would not sell in Latin American markets. Firm officials finally figured out that in Spanish, Nova means "does not go."

— An airline advertised the "rendezvous lounges" on its 707 flights in Brazil and lost customers. Rendezvous in Portuguese is a place to have sex.

— Pepsodent's promise of white teeth bought no new customers in part of Southeast Asia — where people of status chew betelnuts, and black, discolored teeth are a symbol of prestige.

A blunder, as defined by Ricks, "is a mistake that could have been avoided, but because of carelessness it's not. It usually results in some type of loss."

For that reason he counts MacDonald's advertising of "Big Macs" in Canada as embarrassing, but not a blunder.

In French-Canadian slang big macs are big busts, but the giant hamburgers still are selling wonderfully.

Similarly, an American company that manufactures female sanitary napkins noticed an increase in sales in South American areas.

They soon discovered farmers were buying the napkins in quantity, and using them as dust masks.

While most of the blunders Ricks has found are marketing and advertising mistakes — the most noticeable and hardest to hide — blunders have also occurred in management, personnel and finance.

"There are a big variety and they occur in every area of business. If there's a way to make a blunder, a business has done it," said Ricks.

But most frequently, he added, errors occur when a business overlooks some cultural difference in the foreign market.

That's most likely to happen, he said, when the foreign customers are most alike, not the farthest

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removed from Americans. Britain has been the downfall of many an established American firm.

General Foods, for example, found that England had no room for Jell-O. The firm found out too late that British shoppers look for gelatin in cakes or wafers, not powdered form.

Campbell Soups languished on English shelves,

too. The trouble was the Campbell Soup cans looked so small next to the English cans selling for the same price. In England, soup is sold with the water already added.

Also culturally ignorant was the aircraft company that used ads in India picturing Pakistanis. Americans may not be able to tell the difference, Ricks said, but Indians can.

Or the firm that tried selling refrigerators to the mostly Moslem Middle East with an ad picturing their appliance chock full of food — including a giant ham on the middle shelf.

Colors are culturally significant, too, noted Ricks, who has collected the blunders made by firms that forgot when labeling their products that green is the color of disease in Africa and white the color of death in Japan.

Hiring translators can be tricky as well. Frenchmen working on advertising for French Canada and American-trained language students working on campaigns intended for overseas have blundered often.

"Body by Fisher" became "Corpse by Fisher" in a Belgian ad. Pepsi's familiar "Come Alive with Pepsi" became in a German translation "Come alive out of

the grave." A car wash turned into a "car wash

another of Ricks' blunders.

While some blunders are amusing, others are more serious and costly, said Ricks, who says every company involved in a blunder asking for information and for information on corrective action.

"Some companies deny it happened," Ricks said. "Some will say that it happened, but they're only making a few mistakes. And quite a few guys who made the mistake are no longer with the company."

"I can't confirm this, but it's not a good idea for the guys who make that bad decision."

Like the decision of a U.S. pineapple company to buy land in Mexico near a river. Company people were going to use the river to transport its produce. After building a plant, the firm found the river was dry — except at harvest time when it flooded.

Or the decision of a fast food chain to locate a German hamburger stand on a street that was heavily traveled. The hamburger stand was heavily traveled. The hamburger stand was heavily traveled.

Finally company officials checked out the next door. It was a bordello.

Mexican town booming again

United Press International
LAZARO CARDENAS, Mexico — Lazaro Cardenas, the sleepy fishing village that boomed and then went bust with an over-ambitious industrial development program, is about to boom again.

Some 20,000 workers already are pouring into the Pacific port to help build and operate a \$2.5 billion addition to the existing steel mill.

The influx will almost double the town's current population of 21,000 — and perhaps bring back many of the problems that once gave it a reputation as a lawless "frontier" town.

Back in 1971 Lazaro Cardenas' 3,000 fishermen and dirt-poor farmers lacked paved roads, telephones and electricity.

Then President Luis Echeverria introduced a plan to turn the port into the largest steelmaking complex in Latin America. Almost overnight, the village exploded to 70,000 people, most of them construction workers. Prostitutes and petty criminals followed them.

The boom came to a whimpering halt in 1976, when an economic slump forced the Mexican government to postpone indefinitely the multi-million dollar industrial development project.

Some 45,000 people evacuated Lazaro Cardenas, and local authorities began shutting down the worst bars and all but five of the houses of prostitution.

But even now, 25 of every 100 technicians and administrators quit SICARTSA every year, most of them complaining of the town's cultural isolation, overwhelmingly hot and humid weather and prices that average 20 percent higher than in Mexico City.

Last month the government of President Jose Lopez Portillo announced it would resurrect the second and third stages of the ambitious Lazaro Cardenas project.

Within two weeks most buses were arriving full and leaving empty.

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