“No really, my market is different!”

By Niraj Dawar

Speak to enough brand managers of a global brand in countries around the world and you’ll soon come to expect the all too common refrain: “…but my market is different.”
Ask them to elaborate, and you’ll get the low down on how consumer habits in their market are different, their consumers’ purchase behaviour is different, preferences and tastes are different, how the media and the retail trade are different, and how their consumers and customers require unique, tailored, and delicate handling.

And while you’re wondering “different from what?”, the brand manager will be on to her next refrain: “why do the folks at HQ just not get it?” “How can they not see, or choose not to see the differences?”; “why do they prefer a standardized, cookie-cutter approach, when a tailored approach would put us miles ahead of our competitors….”   In the eyes of the HQ manager responsible for the global brand (and, yes, for global standardization), these protestations are either irrelevant, or they are merely ways for local managers to justify (magnify?) their crucial role as interpreters of the global brand for the local market.   Fact is, it’s a bit of both – local differences exist, and local brand managers love to dwell on them.   We can all agree that there are some differences you have to adapt to: McDonald’s must advertise in French in Quebec, and will not serve beef patties in India. These aspects require localization or you can’t play in the local market.   But the friction inside the multinational tends to be about the more subtle differences: the Kellogg’s brand manager who says Raisin Bran is too bland a breakfast choice in Korea; or the chocolate company brand manager who says that black is not the right packaging colour choice in China.   Of course, both HQ and the local managers are really trying to assess:

- How large are these local differences, and do they “matter”?

- In other words, should they affect how the brand is positioned and presented?
- Are the differences sufficiently important to undermine the central premise of the brand?

The tricky part is that the answers to the questions are subjective. Local managers see these differences up close, so they seem big; global managers see plenty of such differences in local markets, so they seem trivial. How the company responds to them depends on the culture of the company and the extent to which local managers have a say. Over the next couple of decades global brands expect a good chunk of their growth to come from China, India, and other emerging economies.

As these markets grow in size and importance, so will the influence that local brand managers in those markets have on the direction of the global brand and product portfolio.

If the multinationals are savvy, they will take new product ideas and even brand propositions from China and India, and bring them to the rest of the world through their global networks.

McCain Foods, the world's largest frozen French fry maker, finds that there's a large market for *aloo tikki* (Indian potato patties) in India. But since no one in India sells them frozen, McCain seizes the opportunity. As the global specialist in frozen potatoes, the company develops and launches the popular snack in India. Its a success, and it even wins the SIAL d'OR (at one of the world's largest food trade shows, the *Salon international de L'alimentation*) prize in Paris. And eventually, the company may even find that there is **a global market for a well-positioned *aloo tikki***.

In that not too distant scenario, the local brand manager in India may be placed in the unfamiliar position of arguing that consumer preferences worldwide are in fact similar: "everyone'll love an aloo tikki!".

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