



White paper

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: Translated slogans that made the grade (and those that didn't)

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Every slogan tells a story, but is it the right one? We take you on a quick tour through the Wild West of localised taglines, from brilliantly reworked messages adapted for new cultural contexts (the Good), through others which experienced a rougher ride (the Bad), to some which went down as well as an empty barrel in a gunfight (the Ugly).

Little phrases, big ideas

From the self-empowering mantra of Nike's "Just do it" to the ingeniously understated colloquialism of Tesco's "Every little helps", the greatest marketing slogans are synonymous with their brands and the values they represent. Indeed, some of these creative inspirations are so ingrained in our consciousness that they have become part of our linguistic cultural lexicon.

In the UK, for example, a wood-stain and wood-dye manufacturer originally ran its no-nonsense ad-line "It does exactly what it says on the tin" way back in 1994. More than 20 years later, the slogan is still in use – and not just by Ronseal. Across the UK and Ireland, people use "it does exactly what it says on the tin" as a shorthand way of saying something works just how you expect it to – a great example of how the most memorable lines become part of everyday idiom.

Very often, these lines rely on a degree of cultural familiarity and verbal dexterity to make their impact. For example, United Airline's "Fly the friendly skies" is catchy through its use of rhyme and alliteration; while Audi emphasises its German automotive heritage with the instantly recognisable "Vorsprung durch Technik", a slogan used in non-German-speaking markets around the world. As such, translating taglines into new languages is a complex and sometimes dangerous mission. If a very literal approach is applied, it can be akin to a tall, dark stranger swinging through the doors of the late-night saloon full of liquored-up, trigger-happy locals: a friendly welcome is not always guaranteed.

So, just as Clint Eastwood might, let's fix our gaze in unblinking concentration to take a look at how some campaigns have hit the target with deadly accuracy while others never even got the pistol out of their holster.

The Good

Intel: Sponsors of tomorrow

In 2009, Intel launched a new global marketing campaign based around the line "Intel: Sponsors of tomorrow". However, in a canny piece of localisation, the microprocessor giant realised that this would not work as well in a literal translation for the Brazilian market. In fact, to Latin American ears, the phrase "de mañana" [of tomorrow] has connotations of a casual, non-urgent approach to business which is clearly at odds with the intended message.

Instead, Intel decided to use a creative working (or "transcreation") of the line which became: "Apasionados pelo futuro" or "in love with the future". Appealing to the "passionate" nature of the Brazilian cultural identity, it keeps the spirit and message of the original but gives an authentic regional twist.

Volkswagen: Das Auto

In markets around the world, Volkswagen has used the classic strapline “Das Auto” to great effect. The original German is easily understandable by non-native audiences, but helps to emphasise the pedigree of one of the world’s most trusted car manufacturers. However, as Volkswagen soon realised, not all audiences share this perception.

When this strapline was introduced to Brazil – a major manufacturing centre for the Beetle – locals felt hurt and betrayed by a brand they treated as an “honorary Brazilian”, a part of their own cultural heritage. Volkswagen therefore adapted the strapline into the Portuguese “Você conhece, Você confia” or “You know, you trust” – re-establishing a much more personal connection with its Brazilian audience.

De Beers: Diamonds are forever

In 1948, De Beers introduced one of the most admired taglines of all time: “Diamonds are forever”. It has appeared in every one of the company’s engagement adverts since and was selected as slogan of the century by *Advertising Age*.

However, when the luxury jeweller wanted to open up the Chinese market in the 1990s, it realised that the classic phrase needed a little cultural adaptation. Translated literally, it lost its emotional resonance and suggested qualities of physical durability – “a diamond lasts forever” in contrast to the original sense of “a diamond can be forever treasured”.

In a masterpiece of transcreation, De Beers opted for a subtly different approach: 钻石恒久远，一颗永流传. Translated literally, this means “One diamond is forever, it can be passed from generation to generation”. As well as re-emphasising the original idea expressed in the English, it has a poetic ring to it in Mandarin, making it memorable and sophisticated for Chinese audiences.

The Bad

Pepsi: Bring your ancestors back from the grave

We all know that soft drink manufacturers like to think their particular brands have something unique to offer to consumers. An invigorating taste? Maybe. Supernatural powers? It seems unlikely. Unfortunately for Pepsi, the translation of its line “Pepsi brings you back to life” for the Chinese market has gone down as an infamous brand blunder in its claim of highly unlikely impacts.

By sticking too rigidly to a literal interpretation, the slogan in Mandarin ended up saying “Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the grave”. Powerful stuff, it seems.

HSBC: Do nothing

In the early 2000s, global banking HSBC giant positioned itself as industry leader through a highly successful campaign encapsulated in the slogan “Assume nothing”. It emphasised the bank’s forward-thinking and innovative mindset, but this wasn’t the message conveyed to all markets.

In fact, the bank which prided itself on its “local knowledge” (to use a line from a previous campaign) showed precious little of this when “Assume nothing” was translated as “Do nothing” across a number of non-English markets in 2009. In fact, such was the reaction to the mistranslation that HSBC moved swiftly to shift attention through the rebranding of global private banking operations, costing a cool \$10 million. Ouch.

The Ugly

California Milk Processing Board: Are you lactating?

Launched in 1993, the “Got milk?” campaign was an attempt by the California Milk Processing Board (CMPB) to reinvigorate sales and led to a TV ad chosen as one of the ten best commercials of all time in a 2002 poll in *USA Today*.

Whilst the English slogan is still in use today, the initial adaptation into Spanish for Mexican audiences didn’t share such longevity. “Tienes leche?” may seem an obvious translation, but to local ears it had very different connotations. In fact, particularly if addressed to a woman, this was a phrase that was more likely to be understood as “Are you lactating?”. It’s a rather personal question perhaps best avoided on billboards. CMPB quickly changed tack with the more conservative “Familia, Amor y Leche” (Family, Love and Milk) for its Spanish-speaking audience, but not without achieving its own entry into the Localisation Hall of Infamy.

KFC: Eat your fingers off

Back in 1987, Colonel Sanders launched its first KFC on the Chinese mainland – a massive market with huge opportunities. But all didn’t initially go to plan. Unfortunately for the fried chicken specialists, it seems that someone took less time to translate their catchy slogan than they did cooking up a chicken burger and fries. Rendered into Mandarin, “Finger lickin’ good” became “Eat your fingers off”. Needless to say, it didn’t take long before customer consternation prompted a swift search for a less cannibalistic alternative.

Frank Purdue: It takes a tough man to make a tender chicken

Last but not least, we turn our attention to another translation turkey of the feathered variety from Perdue Farms, one of the biggest chicken-producing companies in the US. In the 1970s, its owner, Frank Perdue decided to invest in TV advertising and so became the first well-known chicken brand with the slogan “It takes a tough man to make a tender chicken”.

A little cultural sensitivity, however, might have been useful when Perdue tried to enter the Latin American markets. Translating literally into Spanish, the logo was understood by local audiences as equivalent to “It takes a hard [read: sexually aroused] man to make a chicken affectionate”. As far as slogan localisation own goals go, we think this takes some beating.

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