

How Durex Responds to Cultural Variations in International Business

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Multinational Business and the Cultural Challenge Facing Durex

Multinational Enterprises (MNEs) are organizations whose headquarters are usually located in one country but have operations in various countries in which they have significant economic influence. Given that these firms have assets and employees in many countries, their operations are sometimes hindered by cultural, geographic, legal, and political barriers, among other aspects of the host countries.

According to the quote, the success of any MNE largely depends on its ability to consider cultural differences between countries when attempting to enter new markets or launch and market a new product or service. The term 'culture' can be defined as a set of values, beliefs, and assumptions that are shared among a group of people, which then influence their attitudes and behaviors (Ghemawat & Reiche 2011, p. 1). In this case, culture is a group-related phenomenon that is acquired through socialization whereby people interact with others and decide on what constitutes acceptable and desirable behavior. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the manner in which national cultural variations have forced Durex to change its international activities to suit the culture of the host countries.

Durex is the world-leading condom-selling brand, occupying 30 percent of the global branded market for condoms. The Durex was originally known as the London Rubber Company (LRC) and was founded in 1915 by Lionel Alfred Jackson (Georjon 2004, p. 4). The Durex brand was registered in 1929, and by the 1970s, Durex had become the first condom brand in the world to advertise in many countries. During the 1990s, the LRC, which had been renamed to 'London International, ' merged with the Schmid brands it had acquired earlier to create the European brand known as Durex (Georjon 2004, p. 5). In 2010, the company was bought by Reckitt Benckiser, and all production shifted from the United Kingdom to China, Thailand, and India. However, despite having earned a reputation in most countries, Durex has had its fair share of problems when launching and advertising its condoms, especially in the most culturally conservative countries.

Sexual Norms and the Adaptation of Condom

Marketing

The marketing, promotion, and sale of condoms vary across different countries based on the perception of sex in these countries. For example, when dealing with the American and most European markets, condom-manufacturing companies such as Durex find it easier to launch and advertise their products in these markets because sex is an accepted social norm. For instance, Jensen (2015, p. 49) writes that in most Western countries, young people freely engage in unprotected sex because, according to them, condoms slow down and take the fun out of sexual intercourse. Ghemawat & Reiche (2011, p.) write that in such societies where people have low levels of uncertainty avoidance, meaning that they choose to engage in risky situations, there are few national cultures worth observing. As such, these youths would rather use birth control mechanisms such as the pill to prevent pregnancies than use condoms to prevent Sexually Transmitted Illnesses (STIs) and HIV. In such cases where the general population is more individualistic, by being open to sexual activities and caring more about their personal comfort and identity (Ghemawat & Reiche 2011, p. 3), Durex's main marketing concept is that of using condoms to enhance pleasure during sex as opposed to using condoms to prevent STIs.

However, in some countries, especially Asian, African, and Muslim-dominated countries, sexual morality is considered one of the most treasured national cultures. As a result, any product or service that is perceived by the government and the general population as being a causative factor for the erosion of morality is unwelcome. For example, Jensen (2015, p. 44) writes that in Asia, the level of condom advertising and awareness is still very low because sex is a taboo subject. Nonetheless, people living in these countries still engage in sexual activities, albeit with extra caution not to be found out for fear of social stigmatization. As a result, for a company like Durex, it would be unwise to try and market their condoms as a form of enhancing sexual pleasure. Instead, Durex markets its condoms as a way of practicing safe sex which prevents a person from contracting STIs and HIV because in such collectivistic countries where people have high levels of uncertainty avoidance and care more about maintaining group harmony (Ghemawat & Reiche 2011, p. 3), such infections would be a disgrace.

China is one of the countries in which Durex has had to alter its international operations to suit the national culture. According to Kwok (2007), despite China being the leading manufacturer and consumer of most goods, condoms are an exception because, unlike most countries in the Western world where the average age for first-time sex is 17 years, most people in China start having sex at the age of 22. Based on the need to preserve sexual morality in the country, in 1989, the Chinese government put in place a regulation prohibiting the advertisement of 'sex-life related products.' In effect, the regulation banned the advertisement of any medical equipment meant to treat sexual malfunction or help in bettering the sexual life of the Chinese population. As a result, such products as condoms could not be advertised. Consequently, before gaining its footing in China, the Durex Company faced a lot of opposition from government agencies, which refused to air Durex advertisements.

Government Censorship and Advertising Restrictions in China

By December 2002, the Durex Company had been in negotiations with various Chinese governmental agencies for over half a year to have their advertisement on CCTV, but the government refused (Zheng 2010, p. 51). Later on, in 2003, CCTV agreed to broadcast a public interest advertisement that would show the brand name Durex, but when the advertisement was aired, the name flew by so quickly that it was impossible even to read it. The difficulty in advertising Durex persisted outside the Chinese national broadcaster as even newspapers and magazines were prohibited from running the advertisements by the Industrial and Commercial Bureau (Zheng 2010, p. 51). It is, however, ironic to note that the Chinese culture considered it more acceptable for women to procure abortions as compared to the use of condoms among sexual partners. According to Kwok (2007), studies carried out among unmarried urban women in China found that approximately 55 percent of them had procured an abortion. Another study by the Shanghai Family Planning Institute found that many young Chinese fail to use condoms because they believe that their partners do not have sexually transmitted diseases and also because there are numerous commercials advertising painless abortions in cases of unwanted pregnancies (Kwok, 2007).

In this case, despite the fact that Durex has been manufacturing its condoms in China since 1998, local consumption remained significantly low by 2010. As a result, the management at Durex realized that the use of mainstream media to market condoms was never going to work, and as such, the company turned to online marketing. According to Durex, it took advantage of the fact that hundreds of millions of Chinese use Weibo, China's equivalent of Twitter, to get information and buy goods online. In this case, Durex created Little Dudu, a fictional character that provided Weibo users with videos, pictures, and other content on sexual health (Piskorski, 2014). The result was that Durex became an instant hit among young people in China, and the company had managed to break through the national culture of treating sex as a taboo and instead offered young people engaging in sex a safer way of being sexually active. It also dawned on the management that the purchase of condoms was a deeply personal affair for most Chinese thus necessitating a different distribution method. As such, instead of forcing people to go to stores to buy the product, Durex partnered with such online companies as Alibaba Group and eBay to enable customers to buy condoms online and have them delivered to their preferred locations (Piskorski, 2014).

Durex faced a similar challenge when entering the Indian market where, according to, sex is considered taboo. In India, the concept of sex and anything related to sex is considered as being against the national culture meaning that a person who is seen selling or buying a condom would face significant social stigma (Venkatesh, 2016). As a result, the number of Indian men using condoms is significantly low, meaning that the advertisement and sale of Durex condoms have been hindered by this national culture. However, in other countries such as Dubai, which also values sexual morality, Durex has found a way to supply condoms to people without the need to go to stores to purchase

them. In Dubai, Venkatesh (2016) writes that Durex uses a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week mobile app known as 'SOS', which enables customers to make online orders for condoms, which are then delivered promptly. By using the mobile app to deliver condoms in Dubai, Durex found a way to penetrate the structural tightness of the common culture which influenced people to try and save face by refraining from buying condoms openly. According to (Jensen 2015, p. 39) structural tightness as related to culture, teaches group members to disprove deviant behavior, for example, that taught by marketing companies, and causes those who stray away from the cultural values to try and find ways of avoiding embarrassment.

Embarrassment, Media Timing, and Barriers to Public Health Communication

Moreover, because of the embarrassment surrounding the issue of condom use, most media houses only air condom adverts late at night, with very few making it prime time. As a result, the number of people who watch or listen to these advertisements is significantly reduced. However, on its part, Durex has turned to social media advertising, where the brand has used avenues such as Facebook and Twitter to create brand awareness. For example, according to Venkatesh (2016), Durex launched an online advertisement with Ranveer Singh dancing to the 'Do the Rex' song, which went viral, collecting over 3 million views. In this case, Durex was able to use social media to bypass the tough advertisement rules set by the national culture of adherence to sexual morality. Furthermore, the campaign depicted condom use as fun, passionate, and energetic, thus appealing to the primary users of social media, who are teenagers and youths, the two groups most likely to engage in unsafe sex.

In conclusion, even though Durex is the leading condom manufacturer and distributor in the world, it has been relatively easy for the company to enter and market its products in some countries as compared to others. The variations in the success rate of Durex in different countries are brought about by the differences in the national cultures of these countries regarding their perception of sex. In this case, in most Western countries where sexual morality is not a significant national culture and where levels of uncertainty avoidance are low, people are more individualistic and care more about their personal comfort as opposed to societal norms. In such cases, Durex markets its condoms as a means of enhancing sexual pleasure. It makes these condoms readily available in local stores and pharmacies where users have no problem buying them. On the contrary, in countries such as China and India, where sexual morality is prioritized, the levels of uncertainty avoidance are high, and people are more oriented towards collectivism, in which they care about societal norms more than their personal well-being. In such countries, the advertisement of condoms is highly restricted because they are perceived as key contributors to rising sexual immorality. However, Durex has been able to use social media to advertise its products to the young people in these countries, who are the primary consumers of condoms. Moreover, Durex has made it easier for consumers to access their condoms through online purchases, a channel that takes away the social stigma associated with the

purchase of condoms in these countries.

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