

## COLOR AND THE INTERNATIONAL MARKETPLACE

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### ABSTRACT

Marketers and certainly advertisers today understand the importance of color. For over 60 years, researchers have studied the effects of color on the consumer and most agree that color (packaging, branding, stimulation affects, etc.) helps facilitate the exchange process. Colors certainly exercise powerful affects and induce reaction based on human instincts, associations, and perceptions. Recent research has demonstrated that besides age, gender and ethnicity, other areas that “influence” the effectiveness of color are geographical heritage, culture, sunlight exposure and even economic development. In this presentation, the authors will examine the above and focus on the psychological and socio-cultural associations of the meaning and importance of color in the global marketplace.

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### WHAT IS COLOR AND HOW DO WE SEE IT?

The fact is, the physical world has no color – there are only light waves of different wave lengths. It is left to the retina cover of our eye to distinguish among the band of light that makes the world a rainbow for us.

The eye again is your complex receptor. Simply, the rods and cones in your retina respond to light whereby an electro- chemical process sends signals by way of the optic neurons to the visual center of the brain where seeing “really occurs”. The cones in your retina are of three types – those sensitive only to blue, to green and to red: but as you can assume, they work in complex combination to provide the many color variations we see. In fact, the human eye can see at least 7 million colors. You are born with most of your ability to take in color.

Interestingly, not all signals reach the brain’s visual center; about 20% stop at the pituitary gland. This gland is the gland that sends out chemicals that signal other glands in the body. They are our response to color. Our brain also sometimes gets confused with color.

### HOW INFLUENCES AFFECT COLOR

Our response to color is learned. Much of our learning is influenced by a number of variables. We know that demographic variables like age, gender, and ethnicity “influence” the effectiveness of color. In fact, several studies have demonstrated differences in color perception among people of differing geographical heritage, sunlight exposure and even economic development. These factors might provide a better

explanation for color preferences than the usual environmental influencers marketers first consider: that of a country’s culture.

For example, it has been proposed that in areas where sunlight is extremely bright, colors and contrasts decline in intensity. Consequently, people living closer to the equator have a more highly developed vision (a larger number of efficient rods in the retina). It has been documented that people living near the equator possess greater amounts of yellow intraocular pigmentation in the eye that causes a depression in color discrimination for example, a reduction in the perception of blueness. People from northern latitudes, where light is reflected less directly, have developed a more refined color vision.

This indicates that some fundamental physiological differences might help explain the need for differing chromatic stimulation to facilitate the perception of color when dealing with signage and advertising as well as corporate branding.

### COLOR AND MARKETING

Marketers and certainly advertisers today understand the importance of color. For over 60 years, researchers have studied the effects of color and we know that they are multifaceted in facilitating the exchange process.

We know that color can stimulate emotional response, affect persuasiveness, reflect prestige, and color can certainly affect a consumer’s overall perception of a product. In advertising, color has been shown to reinforce copy claims, improve learning and increase readership.

Colors exercise powerful affects and induce reactions based on both instincts and associations. Colors alter the meaning of the objects or situations with which they are associated, and color preferences can predict consumer behavior.

Thus, color is an integral element of corporate and marketing communications. It induces moods and emotions, influences perception and helps companies position or differentiate from the competition.

### **COLOR AND BRANDING**

The use of color in branding has taken on new importance as more companies go global. Global brands such as BP (British Petroleum) (green), Cadburys Chocolate (purple), Hershey's Chocolate (brown), and Kodak (yellow) use color to differentiate, but also to stand out.

Brands are fortified in memory by way of an "associative memory network." Marketers use color to strengthen associations. For example, we all have evoked sets. This is the set of brands that come into our head when we have a need for something (e.g., rent-a-car companies). What company do you associate with the colors red, yellow, blue, etc.? If consumers lack the motivation or ability to evaluate a product they may use signals or "extrinsic values" such as appearance or color to make a decision. In today's world of product parity and competition (with lots of options and brands), branding and perhaps color will be more important.

Color will have more importance in countries where illiteracy prevails or the use of symbolism is widespread. International brand and product names also are often plagued by problems of language, pronunciation, meaning, cultural considerations and legalities and as a result, non-verbal cues have become increasingly important in positioning international brands quickly and effectively.

### **COLORS AND WORLD CULTURE**

So, if color is an integral part of a brand, logo, product, or package, let's look at some cross-cultural patterns of both similarity and dissimilarity in color preference and color meaning association. A number of studies have assessed the preferences of colors across cultural borders. The results have demonstrated that people of different cultures have various preferences for color. Cultural differences in color meanings and associations have also been identified.

In the Journal of International Marketing, Vol. 8, No. 4 2000, article entitled "Managing Images in Different Cultures: A Cross-National Study of Color, Meaning and Preferences" talks about semantic differential scale anchors, means for liking ratings, and principle coordinate analysis for color association by country. In the first chart the colors have been arranged from the most liked to least liked for each country. Overall blue was the most liked color with a mean of 6 on a 7-point scale. Blue was rated as the most liked color in 5 of the 8 countries and second most liked in the remaining three countries. As an aside – blue is the most frequently used color in corporate America – logos, brands and packaging. In the second chart; diagrams the various elements of color perception including physical and especially cultural. The bottom diagram depicts the basic interactions of color in marketing that supports earlier claims. Another chart entitled "The Cross-Culture Spectrum of Meaning and Associations of Color in Marketing" comes from a recent article which takes issue with some long held beliefs regarding color and contains some new findings. The article is entitled, "Are You Selling the Right Colors? A Cross-Cultural Review of Colors as a Marketing Cue", Journal of Marketing Communication, Vol. 12, No. 1, March 2006.

### **CROSS-CULTURAL MEANINGS AND ASSOCIATIONS OF INDIVIDUAL COLORS**

We live in a world of global products and while there are many efficiencies that can be realized through standardization of some or all aspects of a product, some of the subtleties of cultural difference may be lost in the quest for cost-efficiency. Marketers should be knowledgeable and flexible enough to understand that colors do not have universal meanings and associations.

**WHITE:** Symbolizes mourning or death in East Asia, but happiness and purity in Australia, New Zealand and USA.

**BLUE:** The most popular and most common corporate color in the U.S. is perceived as cold and evil in East Asia but stands for warmth in the Netherlands; interestingly coldness in Sweden; death in Iran and purity in India. Blue denotes femininity in Belgium and the Netherlands, but masculinity in Sweden and the USA.

**GREEN:** Represents danger or disease in Malaysia, envy in Belgium, love and happiness in Japan and sincerity, trustworthiness and dependability in China.

**RED:** Means unlucky in Nigeria and Germany, but lucky in China, Denmark and Argentina. It reflects ambition and desire in India and love in China, Korea and Japan.

**YELLOW:** Represents warmth in the USA, but infidelity in France. It is associated with jealousy in Russia, but pleasant, happy, good taste, royalty in China. In Brazil purple and yellow are perceived as symbolic of sorrow and despair.

**PURPLE:** Purple is the color of love in China and South Korea. Anger and envy in Mexico, sin and fear in Japan. Purple is considered expensive in China also. Many studies have attempted to evaluate the interaction between color and product, or packaging and product (woe to the grocery store that instead of clear cellophane would use a green shade to package their red meats). Having already reinforced the need for culturally accepted colors to go with particular products, one also has to realize that different hues (a light yellow to a sun burst yellow, for example) also have to be considered.

One study, rated colors on their “saturation” potency scale – that is the more saturated the color, the more potent the object becomes. More in-depth research is needed in a number of areas:

- Are color perceptions and associations stable over time?
- How do colors reflect a national personality and do color preferences change over time?
- Is color identification influenced by the coloring of existing products (Coke red, for example, or the color of a country flag – red is strongly identified with China)?
- Are there gender, age or other demographic differences that might cause a specific target market to react differently from the general population?

## CONCLUSION

For marketers, color has many uses. Many times it is the very first thing we notice. Color shapes the way we think in an immediate and visceral way. Color can be a primary tool in the hands of a marketer. In a society faced with information and stimulation overload, color communicates with refreshing simplicity and impact. Color has strong associative meaning, it can communicate quickly, and it can elicit a

powerful subconscious response. In the last couple of decades, globalization has become a general tendency of the overall market. Companies need to be aware of cultural color differences that exist among most nations worldwide. Color perception, meanings and preferences vary by culture and ethnicity. It is definitely a significant factor in global marketing.

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