ADVERTISING IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC: CZECH PERCEPTIONS OF EFFECTIVE ADVERTISING AND ADVERTISING CLUTTER

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Czech expectations of their advertising, the perceived intensity level of that advertising, and how various cultural factors affect the efficacy of that advertising. Findings suggest that the hypothesis that transitioning economies may be free of advertising clutter to no longer be true in the Czech Republic. Information gleaned from in-depth interviews and a survey suggests that effective Czech advertising reflects the collectivistic nature of the culture as well as the contextual level of communication. Simple, direct approaches that inform, along with the use of clever, humorous creative and group depictions, are often effective.

INTRODUCTION

The interest in transitional economies continues to be fueled by both external and internal pressures for growth. Multinational corporations view evolving
transitional economies as fertile ground to expand brand dominance. Years of pent up demand promise sales growth rates far exceeding those available in mature economies once the necessary economic infrastructure, wealth accumulation and domestic investment are in place. Similarly, local businesses are pushing to take advantage of rapidly expanding domestic opportunities and will not cede market dominance to multinationals without a fight. One of the marketing necessities to gain consumer acceptance in these evolving environments is to communicate product or service solutions effectively with potential consumers.

The transitional economies of Eastern and Central Europe have emerged from years of centrally planned rather than market-driven allocations of both resources and goods. Advertising had a minimal role in these planned economies and now, with the transition to a re-emergence of the market, advertising is again being utilized to communicate, persuade and build brand identity in the region. Numerous cultural, institutional and societal factors are posited to mediate the effectiveness of advertising. The purpose of this article is to examine perceptions of the intensity of advertising, to understand what is valued in advertising and to suggest what the cultural expectations are for advertising in the Czech Republic.

The study’s specific goals are to provide a better understanding of the current advertising environment in the Czech Republic and to provide a preliminary analysis of the nature of effective advertising in the country. On the latter point, a multi-method approach using the results of both an exploratory survey and depth interviews is used in order to outline key characteristics of effective advertising in the Czech Republic. As there has been very little research reported on Czech advertising, it is hoped that these findings will serve as a basis for hypotheses for future researchers.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

*Advertising in Transitional Economies*

An investigation into the role of advertising in transitional economies like the Czech Republic seems warranted given the importance of the communication process to the market development. Advertising can be conceptualized (Cheng & Schweitzer, 1996) as an evolutionary process based on its stage of development, and the efficacy of the advertising may vary across these four stages, production information, product image, personalization, and lifestyle (Leiss, Kline & Jhally, 1990), based on content and design features of the advertisement.
Understanding where a transitional economy lies on this evolutionary continuum has implications for those involved in the design of advertising programs in such economies. Batra (1997) suggests consumers in transitional economies may be more responsive to facts and information than image-related communications. Van Herpen et al. (2000) found that advertisements in transitional economies do, in fact, contain more product-related information. Further, the authors suggest that the exposure to increasing amounts of advertising may be at least partly responsible for advancing an economy along the sequence of stages. Research is required to understand where an economy currently lies because placement on the continuum should not be merely a function of time lapse since the initialization of widespread advertising. Consumers in those countries where advertising growth first occurred were not exposed to potential influences on attitude-toward-advertising-in-general from more communication-experienced external economies. The United States, for example, took seven decades to evolve through the four stages of advertising development suggested by Leiss et al. (1990). However, due to advertising spillover, exposure during travel, and the input of multinationals into domestic advertising practices, one may expect the evolution of the sequence of advertising stages to be more time-compressed in economies transitioning to a market economy at this time.

**Attitude Toward Advertising in General**

The attitude-toward-the-ad construct is viewed as mediating both brand attitudes and purchase intentions (Andrews, 1989; Lutz, 1985; Mitchell & Olson, 1981; Shimp, 1981). Further, attitude-toward-advertising-in-general is considered a key antecedent of attitude-toward-the-ad. If $A_{\text{ad-g}}$ does in fact mediate $A_{\text{ad}}$, which, in turn, affects advertising effectiveness, and, if $A_{\text{ad-g}}$ truly varies across cultures (economies), then it is important for communication practitioners to understand the magnitude of these differences. Andrews et al. (1994) found support for their hypothesis that Russian respondents will have a more favorable attitude-toward-advertising-in-general than respondents from the United States. Mehta (2000) found support for his hypotheses that individual attitudinal factors related to advertising in general do affect respondent recall and persuasion. These findings lend support to the importance of research in transitional markets that attempts to measure $A_{\text{ad-g}}$.

In addition to $A_{\text{ad-g}}$, we are interested in Czech perceptions of clutter. Batra (1997) states:

> The low level of advertising clutter in most of these TEs (transitional economies) presents an opportunity to MNCs (multinational corporations) to build long-lasting reputational effects.
From an operational standpoint, potential advertisers need to understand if a low level of advertising clutter exists. Part of this research is designed to assess the level of clutter perceived by the Czech consumer based upon respondents’ perception of advertising intensity.

**Cultural Factors and Their Influence on Advertising**

Several authors have posited that specific cultural dimensions have an impact on the effectiveness of advertising (DeMooij, 1998). Among the key dimensions that have been posited to play a role in advertising effectiveness are Hall’s (1976) dimensions of time and level of context, as well as Hofstede’s (1980) five dimensions of culture: power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation. Prior research has clearly established that at least some of the dimensions play a role in what advertising approaches can be effective within specific countries.

While an exhaustive review of all cultural dimensions that have been examined is beyond the scope of this paper, two dimensions for which there have been convincing findings are reviewed below to illustrate the impact such factors can have.

Additionally, how these differences affect advertising practices in Japan and the U.S. will be discussed in order to show a specific case where such factors have been demonstrated to matter and to provide a baseline for comparison to the Czech Republic.

**Context**

Language is a central component of culture. As cultures and languages differ from each other, so do their communication practices. Hall (1976, 1987) developed the notion of cultures differing from each other in their contextual level, that is, the degree to which communication is direct and vested in the explicit code of the language. He describes the difference between high context and low context languages as follows:

A high context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is already in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low context (LC) communication is just the opposite; i.e. the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code (Hall, 1976, p. 79).

Thus, high context cultures require focus on the situation in which the communication is taking place and they tend to use indirect and ambiguous messages, whereas low-context cultures tend to use explicit, clearly articulated messages.
Contextual differences in cultures have been used to help explain differences in marketing and advertising practices. For example, contextual differences have been hypothesized to lead to differences in new product diffusion patterns (Takada & Jain, 1991), strategies for brand image creation (Roth, 1992), and advertising message strategies (Miracle, Chang & Taylor, 1992; Mueller, 1987; Taylor, Wilson & Miracle, 1994).

With respect to advertising, it has been found that Japanese consumers prefer ads that are less confrontational and take more of a “soft sell” approach (Mueller, 1987; Johanson, 1994). Moreover, Miracle, Taylor and Chang found that Japanese ads are less prone than U.S. ads to mention the brand name often or to show the brand name on screen for long periods of time. Instead, a higher proportion of the ad is typically devoted to building positive feelings toward the advertiser. Thus, in comparison to the U.S., consistent with a high context culture’s communication patterns, Japanese ads have been found to be less direct in their approach.

Individualism/Collectivism

Hofstede (1980, p. 87), defines individualism as “a preference for a loosely knit social structure in which individuals take care of themselves and their immediate families only,” and collectivism as “a tightly knit social organization in which individuals can expect other in-group persons to look after them.” Of the 53 countries he analyzed, the United States was the most individualistic. In contrast, Japan was found to be more collectivistic. Subsequently, researchers have also noted that the Czech Republic is also more collectivistic than the U.S. (Earley et al., 1999).

In relation to the information content of advertising, a high value on collectivistic behaviors may lead to a need for companies to develop some type of personal relationship with the audience. Miracle (1987) reports that the goal of advertising in Japan, which places a relatively higher value on collectivism than does the United States, is often to make friends with the consumers and to encourage them to depend on the seller. Japanese advertisements often begin by telling a story or entertaining the audience. The sequence is described as follows:

1. Make friends with the audience.
2. Prove that you understand their feelings.
3. Show that you are nice.
4. Consumers will then want to buy from you because they feel familiar with you and trust you.

Miracle (1987) proposed that Japanese consumers follow a “Feel-Do-Learn” (i.e. affect-conation, cognition) sequence in processing persuasive messages in
contrast to the traditional “learn-feel-do” proposed in U.S. advertising models. The logic behind Western advertising does appear to be essentially the opposite. The audience is often told how the product is different and why it is preferable to other brands to establish a clear justification for purchase. Then, if consumers are satisfied with the purchase, they will begin to develop trust in the company and prefer its products. Hence, approaches in which higher information content and more focus on showing the product and brand have been demonstrated to be correlated with effectiveness in U.S. advertising (Stewart & Furse, 1986; Miracle, Taylor & Chang, 1992; Taylor, Miracle & Wilson, 1997).

In terms of Czech advertising, one would expect the Czech approach to be somewhere in between the U.S. and Japanese styles, as the Czech Republic is more collectivistic than the U.S. but slightly less collectivistic than Japan. In terms of contextual level of the culture, prior studies show that Czech culture is toward the low context end of the scale, but not as low context as is the case in the U.S.

**METHOD**

In order to assess the impact of cultural influences on Czech advertising, a total of fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted. All fifteen of the individuals interviewed had business experience, eight were currently MBA students in the Czech Republic. The remaining seven consisted of four advertising agency personnel and three individuals working in marketing departments of manufactured good companies. In addition to the in-depth interviews, 52 students were asked to respond to the following written question: “What is your opinion of how Czech culture influences what advertising approaches are effective in the Czech Republic?” The students had been exposed to material on cultural influences on international advertising.

The second objective of this research was to attempt to identify how Czech consumers felt about their exposure to advertising in the media and what expectations they have for advertising. Marktest, a Prague-based agency, conducted a public opinion poll on a representative sample of 935 respondents in mid-2001. Respondents rated their exposure to advertisements in various media on a three-point scale anchored with “too many,” “adequate” and “may be more.” There was also a “Don’t know” response category. Data are taken from this poll to address this objective.

**RESULTS**

In general, the Czech informants reported that while they believed the Czech approach to advertising is somewhere between that used in the U.S. and Japan,
they believed it was closer to U.S. advertising. Three major recurring themes were evident both in the personal interviews and in responses to the specific written question about the nature of Czech advertising. These were: (1) Direct, simple messages are desirable in Czech advertising; (2) In comparison to the U.S., collectivistic themes are common and desirable in Czech advertising; and (3) Humor and clever creative approaches are a very important aspect of advertising in the Czech Republic. Each of these themes as well as some other observations are discussed below.

Collectivism The informants consistently mentioned that appeals to family happiness, togetherness, and friendship are common and often desirable in Czech advertising. One student respondent noted that popular beer commercials in the Czech Republic often show men drinking in groups at the pub and having a good time. Another observed that appeals such as “you are not alone,” and “you and your friends can have a good time” are common in beer advertising.

In terms of the influence of individualism/collectivism on Czech advertising, one student wrote:

In my opinion, Czech advertising is something between U.S. and Japanese advertising. Czech people are not as individualistic as Americans because they help each other in study-groups and when a Czech student gets information about an exam he would let the other students know and not gain the advantage by himself. On the other hand, Czechs are not as collectivistic as Japanese. Czechs would not care about smoking when sitting together with friends, however, some of them would ask: ‘Do you mind if I smoke here.’ In seeing ads, Czechs will like to see some group settings, yet to trust the company before they buy a product is mostly not necessary.

This thinking is consistent with the notion that, to some extent, Czech advertising can successfully make appeals to a sense of belonging to groups.

Direct, Simple Message Consistent with the Czech Republic being a relatively low context culture, the informants expressed a belief that simple, direct messages can be effective in the Czech Republic. Messages that simply describe how the consumer will benefit from using the product were commonly cited. For example, a very popular campaign by the mobile phone company Oskar was widely cited for its effectiveness as it made it clear that this was a service that everyone could afford. In the campaign, ordinary Czechs were seen using Oskar’s services in cleverly developed situations.

Notably, while the respondents agreed that direct messages are helpful, there was also consensus that overly aggressive approaches can be a turn-off. For example, one professional informant who had spent time in the U.S. indicated that he was taken aback by how spokespeople in car ads could so confidently
and boldly recommend that others purchase the product. Another observed that "aggressive and rude" approaches may conflict with the cultural sensibilities of the Czech people. Hence, respondents consistently agreed that Czech adverts are more direct than Japanese adverts, but not as direct as U.S. adverts.

It was also mentioned frequently that focusing on the needs of the common person may be effective. Adverts that Czechs can relate to as reflecting their everyday environment and how products can serve their needs were cited as good ones. Informative ads were cited as being effective, especially if the appeal was simple and to the point. Some respondents also indicated that emotional ads that show people in different types of real life situations are also positively received.

One student cited a Coca-Cola ad transferred from the U.S. as being a mistake in that it did not reflect Czech reality. The ad depicted a family consuming the soft drink during lunch. The problem was that Czech cuisine is traditionally very heavy and Coca-Cola is not viewed as helpful in digesting food while eating a large meal. Hence, it was felt that the ad was ineffective as it did not reflect an everyday type of situation.

Another issue that has sparked controversy is the use of Santa Claus in adverts that run in the Czech Republic. Unlike in the U.S. and some other places, Baby Jesus, and not Santa Claus, is the primary symbol of Christmas. Many Czechs remain sensitive to being forced to use "Grandpa Frost," a traditional Russian symbol, prior to 1989. Some informants did indicate that while some Czechs are bothered by the use of Santa Claus, others are not, and one even mentioned he believed the advertising would eventually lead to Santa becoming a fixture in Czech holiday culture.

Humor One of the most striking aspects of the in-depth interviews was the unanimity of agreement that humor is a central feature of Czech advertisements. The informants consistently mentioned that the use of irony or clever/witty situations was an aspect of a high proportion of effective Czech adverts. One female ad agency employee suggested that, "you have to give the people clever, witty approaches." Funny stories were frequently mentioned as a way to increase the memorability of an ad. However, it was stressed that intelligent, as opposed to silly humorous approaches, tended to work the best.

One explanation that some informants gave for the importance of humor is that there is skepticism about specific claims such as "our product is of the highest quality," or "our prices are the lowest." On one hand, the informants cited the pessimism of the Czechs as a factor in this skepticism, while on the other, they noted that the Czech culture is a fun-loving one – another factor that may contribute to the success of clever, humorous approaches.
Other Issues Several respondents, especially students, were quick to point out the U.S. culture developed under heavy European influence and, hence it makes sense that Czech advertising would have more in common with the U.S. than with Japan. Others mentioned that because of heavy exposure to U.S. films and television media, young Czechs aspire to be like Americans and that future advertising may reflect this. For example, one student wrote:

...I want to say that if we are not now similar to Americans in advertising behavior, we will be in the future. It is because what we think about America and its people comes mainly from American films and soap operas. In these films, America seems to be the land everyone wants to live in, the people there are so nice and beautiful, everyone can sing very well, has a lot of money... so everyone wants to be like them, like the great Americans and everybody also likes what comes from America.

When asked, the informants consistently indicated that Czech advertising is closer to U.S advertising in nature than Japanese advertising. However, the specific responses suggest it is somewhere in between the two, albeit a bit closer to the U.S. side. Quite a few respondents also mentioned music as a prominent feature in Czech adverts, indicating that if used properly it could greatly enhance an ad’s appeal.

Advertising Intensity Czech consumers increasingly feel they are exposed to too many television advertisements. The Czech Republic has four national channels broadcasting in the Czech language (two public and two private) and more than twenty-five local channels available through cable networks. Since NOVA, the first privately owned/broadcast television channel, came on-line in 1994 (Secunda, 1994), the number of respondents reporting “too many” in response to number of exposures to television commercials has grown steadily. In 1994, 60% responded “too many,” 64% by 1996, 70.8% by 1998 and 78.7% in our current database, 2001.

Similarly, mass print mailing advertisements and direct market mailings are seen, at 73.1% responding “too many” exposures, to be far too voluminous in number. Church (1992) suggests television as the mass media with the greatest potential, and it appears that marketers have rushed like air into a vacuum to fill the Czech television airtime with advertisements. However, Church (1992) does cite direct mail as practically non-existent and in ten years this medium has grown in intensity to the point where about 3 out of 4 Czech respondents view themselves as receiving “too many” advertisements in the mailbox.

Other media receive responses of “too many” at much lower rates. Radio came in at 30.1% and one may hypothesize at least three reasons for the much lower perceived intensity level relative to television. First, there may be significantly less advertising time utilized on radio, although this needs to
measured in actual minutes since expenditure levels are misleading due to
different rate structures. Second, with 86 different radio stations in the Czech
Republic and audience demographics that indicate stations target to different
audiences, respondents may be more willing to accept/process advertisements
targeting their demographic profile and, consequently, view them as less
intrusive or intense. Third, similar to American FM radio (Church, 1992), Czech
radio stations cluster their commercials resulting in less total interruptions of
programming.

Magazines (35.0% “too many”) and newspapers (36.1%) are viewed as
having intensity levels more in-line with expectations. Magazine and newspaper
advertising are much less intrusive than broadcast advertising in that the reader
can exercise direct control over exposure and processing time. Given this
control, for many respondents the “too many” threshold for the print ads may
not exist in a practical range. In fact, print media are often selected for ad
content and, at least some of the time, the ad content is the driving force in
the selection of the medium. Broadcast media, on the other hand, is almost
totally education or entertainment driven, with few people “tuning-in” to get
informational content from the advertisements. Therefore, these differences in
reported intensity levels are not outside the realm of expectation.

Czech expectations of advertising are consistent with earlier suggestions of
effective content for transitional economies. Czech advertising in the early
nineties brought highly exaggerated promises and respondents now expect
advertising to be true (57.7%). Informative (39.9%), credible (39.4) and
humorous (37.6) form the next cluster of expectations. Creative, original (25.6)
and expressive (20.4) are much lower among items that Czech respondents
expect of their advertising. These findings are consistent with suggestions (see
Heyder et al., 1992; Batra, 1997) that factual information content is more
effective than image-intensive advertising content in transitional economies.

**IMPLICATIONS**

Advertisers attempting to reach the Czech market would appear to be well
advised to use approaches that are simple and direct in terms of the selling
proposition. However, it is clear that relative to most countries, clever
approaches that incorporate humor are especially appreciated. Approaches that
consider the collectivistic nature of Czech culture should also be considered
as appropriate. Especially for products that are consumed in group settings,
persuasive communications that show groups having fun times are valued by
the Czech public.
Advertisers must also be aware that there is some level of skepticism about advertising in the Czech Republic. Consistent with our finding that many Czechs believe that there are too many television ads and direct mailings, Czech consumers do not unquestioningly believe that everything about advertising is positive. For example, exaggerated approaches incorporating puffery are not likely to be successful. Additionally, consistent with Czech culture, aggressive “hard-sell” approaches are not likely to be effective. While many Czechs admire U.S. popular culture and see their advertising as being relatively similar to American advertising, advertisers must be cautious to use approaches that are consistent with Czech culture. Certainly, some standardized approaches can be effective in the Czech Republic, and it is likely that the general theme of most global campaigns can be communicated to Czech audiences effectively. However, the decision as to whether the specific execution needs to be modified for the Czech market should be made on a case-by-case basis.

Finally, advertisers must recognize that clutter now exists in both the television and direct mail media. While techniques that creative uses to break through clutter may not transport effectively from other cultures to the Czech Republic, advertisers must now be aware that this need now exists. The challenge now is to provide information effectively while also using execution approaches that gain attention.

**LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH NEEDS**

One obvious limitation is the use of a secondary data source, the public opinion poll. While these data are current and the sample representative, the breadth and specificity of the information does not allow a number of issues to be addressed. While some insight has been provided on what the Czech public expects and desires of their advertising, few content studies exist which describe what the Czech advertising content actually is (see van Herpen et al. (2000) for a content analysis of magazine advertising in the Czech Republic). Similarly the in-depth interviews tended to focus responses relative to the United States and Japan advertising environments and to “place” the Czech advertising somewhere on a hypothesized continuum between the two. Since the United States is the largest advertising market in the world, most comparative advertising studies use the United States market as one of the data points. Further, multinationals tend to look at the transitioning economies of Eastern and Central Europe as “a” potential market.

In spite of it being not much more than a decade since the Revolution of 1989 in the Czech Republic, the relatively fast development of the advertising industry has led to most Czech’s actually believing that there are too many
television advertisements and pieces of direct mail. While this is not yet characteristic of other media, it does suggest that advertisers trying to reach the Czech Republic need to be aware of perceptions of clutter. Additional research on how the perception of clutter is affecting Czechs’ $A_{ad}$ would be useful not only for understanding Czech advertising, but also for better understanding the stages of advertising development in a transitional economy.

In terms of research on advertising executions, it is hoped that this research provides the basis for hypotheses for further research. However, in order to provide definitive evidence on which executional techniques tend to be effective in the Czech Republic, experimental research is needed. Through experimental research, we can gain empirical evidence that provides insight on what makes advertising effective by isolating the effect of very specific aspects of the ad. At the present time, a large scale survey of Czech advertising practitioners for their perceptions of what makes advertising effective would also be worthwhile. Of course, similar research in other transitional economies would be worthwhile.

REFERENCES


