

The impact of the exhibitor's cultural context on the use of forms of communication in the management process of the exhibitor's participation in fairs

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Abstract

The purpose of the article was to analyse the impact of the exhibitor's cultural context on forms of communication used by exhibitors participating in fairs on culturally different markets. The article characterizes contextuality as a criterion for division of national cultures according to the E.T. Hall model and fairs marketing communication tools. Next, the analysis covers impact of cultural context on communication forms applied by exhibitors. Examples of fairs presentations of exhibitors representing cultures of high, medium and low context have been described. The paper characterizes similarities and differences between the used forms of communication. Finally, strategic implications are indicated for entities including trade fairs in their communication process with their stakeholders.

Paper type: research article

Keywords: trade fairs, exhibitor, Hall's model, contextuality of culture, fairs marketing communication

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INTRODUCTION²

It is a significant element of fairs' presentation to plan various forms of marketing communication for use. For in order that communication tools can efficiently support achievement of set fairs objectives, their form should be adjusted to the expectations of the recipients. At the same time exhibitors must identify themselves with the chosen tools in order to apply them in a natural manner. The used content and forms of communication differ in many areas and cultural specification is one of the key determinants for introducing modifications in the communication process. Literature on this subject lists numerous available typologies of culture, yet the present work limited to presenting and analysing one of the culture dimensions which is the importance of context in reception of conveyed contents according to the Hall concept.

The issue drafted in the subject concerns three material scopes. The first one refers to the cultural context as an imminent quality defining each market entity, including exhibitors and visitors of fairs. The second area embraces forms of marketing communication used by exhibitors in the process of managing their participation in fairs. While the third scope covers the issue of communication at fairs in cultural context. In case of cultural differences the standardization of the message poses the threat of inadequate decoding of the communication by the recipient.

The given material scopes constitute components of the problem of coding fairs message of exhibitors including cultural conditions. The present problem contributes to the qualitative analysis of forms of marketing communication of exhibitors functioning in the area of national cultures of different contextual levels. The subject of cultural differences is quite often tackled in the literature of the subject and enjoys great interest among the recipients. However research results available in the literature prove further need to improve intercultural competencies in terms of business communication experienced by representatives of many cultures (Budzawska-Drzewiecka, 2014).

The purpose of the article is to analyse the importance of cultural context for communication forms applied in the process of management of participation in fairs. In the article contextuality of communication was characterized as a criterion for division of national cultures according to the Hall model and then its impact on communication forms applied by exhibitors was analysed. In the research process, examples of fairs presentations of exhibitors representing cultures of high, medium and low context have been demonstrated. What is more, similarities and differences between the used communication tools were characterized and implications were identified as strategic for entities managing their participation in trade fairs.

² AGH statue research; work no. 11/11.200.271.

1. Contextuality as criterion for division of national cultures

Culture is a very significant element of the process of reception of the surrounding reality for all subjects comprising it. Therefore, in the course of history it has been the subject of numerous analyses and studies. It was particularly challenging to find criteria allowing for more precise identification of culturally homogenous groups and to highlight the existing similarities and differences. Subsequent researchers systematized existing cultures improving previously functioning models. At present, there is a great number of them both in literature and market practice, yet as cultures keep evolving new models continue to be created. On the basis of prior classifications of cultures Winkler (2008) lists 25 dimensions of division. While in the Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner model the authors singled out seven such dimensions (2002) and in turn Gesteland (2000) identifies four main criteria of divisions and Hofstede writes about five dimensions of culture (Boski, 2010). Currently, the output of earlier models feeds into the continuously developing GLOBE model (Komor, 2013) where nine dimensions have been singled out. The wealth of these typologies mirrors the complexity of cultural aspects which can be encountered in the course of analysis of marketing communication. The present paper however is limited to the context of message as a dimension of culture presented in the Hall model.

Non-verbal behaviours are one of the typological dimensions proposed by Hall (Białas, 2013). As part of this division he distinguished two extreme dimensions of this parameter: high and low context.³ Hall noted that context is a very important barrier in the communication process for representatives of different cultures. It consists in the degree of use of symbols, metaphors, signs and saying which have certain significance for a specific cultural group (Bartosik-Purgat, 2010). The contextual model Hall put forward in 1960 presents two types of communication: communication of high importance of context in reception of message and communication of low importance of context in reception of message.

According to Hall in high-context cultures most of the information conveyed in the process of communication does not fit into the code of direct message but is included in indirect non-verbal message comprising many allusions and subtexts (Szymura-Tyc, 2012). While low-context cultures are characterized by open communication based on direct message and characterized by disambiguation and directness of content. Nomenclature of these forms of communication also uses terms unambiguous communication and ambiguous communication (Hall, 1984). Unambiguous communication is regarded as emotionally neutral, deprived of expressive intonation or various allusions. It is assumed that accurate presentation of facts is its purpose, while ambiguous communication refers to shared experience

³ When creating the new model he used the existing division into Western and Eastern culture with which he largely agreed. The model he authored was to develop and complete this concept.

and feelings, makes use of humour and vague verbal associations thus creating impression of wealth of emotional relations.

According to Hall the level of contextuality concerns not only the manner of communication but also forms foundation for all behaviours. Therefore as part of high-context cultures the content of a given culture is recorded in its customs, strangers are clearly separated from members of own group, more is expected from others and communication is based on intuition. Representatives of low-context culture express individualistic message with the use of unambiguous words and gestures (Mikułowski-Pomorski, 1999). Among high-context states Hall listed above all South American countries and considered United States, Germany, Holland and Sweden low-context countries. Later, researchers distinguish also intermediate cultures (Mikułowski-Pomorski, 1999), also called medium-context cultures (Chlipała, 2010). Among them there are Central American countries, France, Great Britain, Italy or Spain.⁴

High-context communication accompanies pro-partnership cultures. In these cultures it is of great importance not to offend interlocutors, or even by accident make them feel perplexed. High-context communication is entirely subjected to the principle of harmony so significant for members of pro-partnership cultures that they almost resigned from demonstrating negative feelings.⁵ High-context serves to camouflage irritation, anger or impatience demonstration of which is here substantially tactless. Low-context cultures in turn with regard to the communication dimension are identified with pro-transactional cultures where honest and direct manner of expression is something natural serving good understanding of both sides.⁶

In high-context cultures much emphasis is on aspects related to professional and social position. Moreover, high degree of ritualisation of interpersonal relationships can be noticed there. Typically, professional and academic titles are used. In these cultures social interactions are to a certain extent conservative. While low-context cultures are characterized by a far lesser ceremonialism and ritualisation. Social and professional positions are not stressed so much. Representatives of low-context cultures relatively quickly start calling their business partners with their first name.

Business practitioners believe that communication process with members of high and low context cultures require thorough preparations. One of the areas is se-

⁴ Naturally, this division is very conventional as the level of contextuality of each national culture is different and it is difficult to clearly divide them into two or three groups, therefore both Hall in his model and later researchers of the subject create a continuum of national cultures due to their contextuality. The second argument partially question validity of the given examples is evolution of national cultures and necessity to include their changes in subsequent schemes while the given examples are often automatically quoted after first Hall's concept in later works on cultural contextuality when in fact reality undergoes some changes.

⁵ By Zenderowski and Koziński called "broad" (2012).

⁶ By the above given authors called "cultures of open expression" (Zenderowski & Koziński, 2012).

lection of experienced interpreters who not only proficiently know languages of the interlocutors but who can reflect the context of given statements so that the interlocutor receives the actual message instead of literal translation of reply.

When analysing the Hall model, it can be concluded that communication of representatives of various types of cultures will be hindered as interlocutors will continuously face differences resulting from domination of different contexts (Mikułowski-Pomorski, 2012).

2. Marketing communication tools used by exhibitors

Each enterprise undertaking participation in fairs sets different fairs objectives depending on the market situation it operates in.⁷ It is not possible without professional communication. Company presentation at trade fairs means not only product offer but also, or rather above all, marketing communication tools allowing to accurately impact all stakeholders.

It is obvious that in order to achieve set objectives companies must use a series of different tools. The most popular tools for marketing communication applied in the process of management of participation in fairs are (Søilen, 2013):

- forms of writing,
- multimedia materials,
- activities undertaken in connection with company's participation in fairs.

Forms of writing accompanying participation of an organization in fairs can be divided into periodical materials prepared for a specific trade show. Among periodical publications there are, inter alia, annual reports, prospectuses, product catalogues, price lists, etc. At the same time, the mere presence at fairs must be strengthened with media presence and participation in fairs events, i.e. forms of writing dedicated for a given show must appear, that is: advertising articles (sponsored), press releases, letters, invitations and most ordinary fliers inviting to fairs events organized by a company etc.

Multimedia materials are another significant element supporting company's presence at fairs. These materials can be presented at a stand or in other points of fairs space; they can be given to the visitors or published in various media when presenting the fairs. It will take place before, during and immediately after company's participation in fairs. Content of multimedia materials may go beyond core production or services activities of a company or corporate social responsibility and present various employees' initiatives etc.

⁷ A number of proposed objectives to achieve at fairs is included in monographs on trade fairs such as (Gębarowski, 2010) and fairs manuals (Izba Rzemieślnicza oraz Małej i Średniej Przedsiębiorczości w Katowicach, 2000).

Measures taken by a company on occasion of participating in fairs, both in the fairs area and outside it, offline and online, constitute by far the widest array of forms of marketing communication for company participation in fairs (Prenzel, 2010). It is not possible to list them all, yet among the most significant ones in the real world (offline) there are: press conferences, equipment demonstrations, competitions accompanying product presentations and sale, concerts, visits of prominent guests and various activities in the virtual world (online) both on own website, various services and forums as well as social media (Jinlin & Xiaoqin, 2004).

3. Methodology

Research material forming the foundation for conclusions drawn in the present article has been collected in the course of analysis of reports from fair events all over the world posted in secondary sources (both online and offline) and eight individual interviews carried out with representatives of exhibitors who participated in trade fairs in the area of analysed national cultures.

Qualitative analysis included preparation for presenting companies at fairs, scenarios of their participation in fair events and used forms of marketing communication. Due to the limits of the size of the article it presents only single examples of cultures representing a given context, fair events from this area, as well as companies exhibiting at the given fairs.

Since selected cultures are illustrated from the point of view of exhibitors at trade fairs, the popularity of exhibition events from individual countries was chosen as the criterion for selecting analysed examples. On the European market most fairs events is organized in Germany, then in Italy. While globally Germany takes third place in terms of the exhibition space (PIPT, 2013). Therefore German culture has been selected as the example of low-context culture.

With respect to the owned exhibition space high positions are taken also by (UFI, 2011) Spain (6th place world-wide) and Brazil (8th place in the above quoted listing) which at the same time represent remaining cultural contexts from Hall's model. Each of cultural contexts distinguished by Hall is represented all over the world by many national cultures. However, based on analysis using trade fairs as a marketing tool it has been assumed that examples of marketing communication will derive from Germany as a low-context culture, Spain as medium-context culture and Brazil as a representative of high-context cultures.

4. Communication forms used in the process of management of participation in fairs on culturally different markets – research results

Qualitative analysis was mostly focused on the question how communication context of a given culture impacts the character of marketing communication of an exhibitor at fairs. Examples of communication forms that were the subject of analysis include posters advertising participation of exhibitors in fairs in countries from an area of a given national culture.



Figure 1. *Invitation to a presentation at fairs in Germany – low-context culture.*

Source: http://www.lac.cz/img/pozv__nka_anglicky.jpg [accessed: 20.06.2015].



Figure 2. *Invitation to a presentation of Microsoft at fairs in Spain – medium-context culture.*

Source: <http://techcovermania.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Expo-Electronica.jpg> [accessed: 20.06.2015].



Figure 3. Poster advertising Polish Ministry of Economy at fairs in Brazil – high-context culture.

Source: http://old.mtp.pl/all/pl/news/polskie_firmy_branzy_stoczniowej_i_offshore_w_brazylii/ [accessed: 20.06.2015].

When comparing these examples, I noticed that the least direct and clear information is stated on the poster from Brazilian trade fairs. The elements identifying the Ministry, or the European Union, are presented with very small fonts and simultaneously the venue of the event is not given.⁸ The poster also has captions in Portuguese *Investimos no seu futuro* (We invest in your future) and *Vá com a gente para o mar* (Cross the sea with us) which very vaguely invites to co-operation. Full reception of the message requires concentration and engagement on the part of the audience.

The poster inviting to fairs in Düsseldorf does not provide too many elements. It simply informs where and when the given event takes place (where the exhibitor can be found) and which industry will be participating – the exhibitor did not at-

⁸ NAVAL SHORE fairs in Rio de Janeiro – exhibit event for shipyards and offshore.

tempt at any too original way of presentation and at the same time did not leave anything unclear and thus no space for imagination.

In turn when looking at the poster advertising presentation at Spanish fairs it is difficult to identify elements explicitly matching high or low context; it is medium. On the one hand there is quite a lot of unambiguous information indicating low context of the message and yet on the other one there are graphic elements giving space for imagination.

When comparing the content of the posters illustrated by Figures 1, 2 and 3 it can be noticed that exhibitors dedicate them to the recipients coming from national cultures.⁹ These are cultures which demonstrate different levels of contextuality.¹⁰ Location of fairs was the criterion for selection of the dominating context. It can be assumed that among trade visitors representatives of the local level of contextuality are in majority and the assumed criterion for selection and evaluation can be regarded as correct.

Naturally, the character of writing forms is not the only noticeable difference between participation in fairs in areas of various contexts. Similarly stands themselves can differ, as well as behaviour and look of fairs staff, and way of carrying out planned fairs activities.¹¹ It is frequently the result of individual personal qualities and not only of cultural context from which a given representative of exhibitor originates. Differences might not be easy to spot at first sight but it can be assumed that in a stressful situation, e.g. many visitors, the original qualities of personnel culture can be more observable.

Therefore it can be supposed that in German fairs, in compliance with the nature of low-context culture, the exhibition displays will be more composed than others and are more rational and orderly.¹²

The high context of Brazilian culture allows for predicting that fairs organized in Brazil will include more non-verbal forms of communication than those representing low-context cultures. When working on information materials for this kind of events one needs to remember to make them more vast and enriched with purely esthetical elements to meet the high-context expectations. It is also necessary to be aware of the fact that this culture group interprets non-verbal behaviour of the interlocutor to the greatest extent which sometimes might lead to misunderstandings.

⁹ Sometimes despite in compliance of exhibitor's cultural communication model with the location of the presentation posters prepared by the company included cultural expectations of fairs visitors.

¹⁰ Obviously, at each of the mentioned fairs there are both exhibitors and visitors from different cultures, yet as a rule participants from the cultural area of the fairs organizer form a large majority.

¹¹ In this area, changes are restricted by the visual identification of a company which does not allow full freedom with respect to this area of decision making.

¹² Nowadays when observing German exhibitors at various fairs in Poland one can notice a greater distance and more serious approach towards fairs visitors than in case of Polish exhibitors. Sometimes it is manifested also in smaller openness towards the visitors and providing laconic information what can also originate from the low context of this culture.

It may be assumed that as part of fairs presentations organized in medium cultures there will be the smallest number of activities matching extremely high or low context. One can presume that from the point of view of representatives of all cultures these events will be most acceptable for fairs visitors who even if they do not identify themselves with the culture represented at fairs, they will not, at the same time, encounter extreme behaviours which are surprising or unacceptable for them.

The above conclusions result from analysis of a narrow section of fairs reality and require confirmation in further research. However, already at this stage attracting attention to these issues in the process of management of company participation in fairs on culturally different markets will enable the companies to better prepare for these events and thus increase efficiency of their impact on exhibitor's market position.

Conclusions

The exhibitor's preparation for participation in fairs is a very complex undertaking. Literature lists a series of factors to be taken into account when planning such activity (Tanner, 2002). Currently, with the increasing the level of competitiveness on the market expectations from fairs presentation are growing too. In order to accomplish its fairs, objectives a company should comprehensively prepare for participation in fairs and include in this process a number of various aspects. The level of cultural context represented by the audience of prepared communication is one of the factors which may influence the preparations and behaviour of exhibitor at fairs.

The purpose of this article was to analyse the impact of cultural context of exhibitor on communication tools used in the process of managing their participation in fairs.

In the course of literature studies and qualitative analysis of materials obtained from online sources and directly from exhibitors it has been found that the cultural context of a given collectivity differentiates the method of communication of its representatives and tools used in the process of marketing communication. It has been noticed that communication forms used by exhibitors at trade fairs match the cultural context they are placed in.

In summary it should be assumed that in the process of exhibitor's preparations to fairs presentation cultural context, where the given fairs are placed and which is represented by the majority of fairs visitors, is a very significant element. It will substantially impact the character of preparations. Yet, professional staff of fairs stand should be able to adapt their service of visitors to their reaction and behaviour ad hoc as they show up. Nevertheless, a vast part of materials is prepared in advance and it is necessary to be able to anticipate audience reaction before they

come across these materials. Knowledge about the contextuality of recipients will be also very helpful when planning various fairs activities combined with the presence at fairs. Depending on the dominating cultural model companies may apply different tools.

The full standardization of fair presentation and communication forms used by some organizations constitutes a major threat for achieving objectives set by the company (especially in case of contact with representatives of extreme cultures from Hall's continuum). Therefore, it is required to modify fair activities carried out at different fairs. The level of changes should depend not only from differences in fairs objectives but also from the cultural context where a given event is located.

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