

# Trends and issues in multicultural business communications in South Africa – an exploratory perspective

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## Abstract

*In South Africa we have lived in a society where separation of communities and racial groups has been the norm. Since 1994 the separation is being bridged as more individuals encounter people with different attitudes, value systems and cultural behavioural patterns in social and business environments. This leads to new avenues of understanding, but also to a wider scope for misunderstanding and unintentional miscommunication, especially in the business context.*

*The way in which people communicate in a business setting, varies from culture to culture. Such variation occurs in all stages of development and at all levels of culture, whether from one corporate culture to another, or from one region, state or country to another. Although most rules of business communication apply to the domestic business environment, intercultural business communication requires knowledge and skills that differ from those within a specific culture. It is impossible to know all the variations in business communication in a multicultural business society like South Africa, but businesspeople can and should prepare themselves for those experiences they are most likely to face in employee and customer relations when conducting business in more than one culture.*

*This article probes the possibility of diminishing business miscommunication in South Africa, by focussing on awareness of barriers to multicultural marketing and management communication. Business communication is defined as consisting of management as well as marketing communication. A pilot survey on existing business communication strategies in a large South African province is discussed. This has pointed towards a more comprehensive research project, with*

## **The basic forms of business communication**

Business communication can be described as a process of transferring meaning through written, oral and nonverbal messages, and symbols, both internally and externally, as effectively and efficiently as possible. The word process indicates that business communication is more than merely transmitting and receiving messages. It consists of a two-way link created by the transmission and interpretation of messages, as well as the responses to messages.

In the business context, communication is increasingly gaining the status of a valuable, if not indispensable management tool (Du Plessis, 1996:90). In certain cases it is accepted that every manager is a communication manager and is expected to contribute to the achievement of company objectives with his communication style, as displayed by his daily interaction with employees. In other instances, a special communication department and communication manager is appointed to handle both internal and external communication professionally. All employees share meaning when they communicate - and the transfer of meaning is one of the primary objectives of business communication.

Van Riel (1995:5) distinguishes between three main forms of business communication in an enterprise: organisational, management and marketing communications. Hugo (Du Plessis: 1996:54) takes the same view, substituting corporate communications for organisational communications. For purposes of this paper, business communications will be viewed as consisting of management and marketing communication.

'Management communication' refers to the communication between senior executives and internal stakeholder groups (employees). The successful manager will continually strive to persuade individual subordinates that the goals of the enterprise are compatible with their own goals. Communication could be called the lifeblood of an enterprise, and the communicating manager must have an adequate knowledge of the nature and role of communication in the management of people (Puth, 1994:3). Effective communication with and among employees constitutes a substantial part of the internal marketing communication of an enterprise and is crucial to its success. Internal marketing communication is the pattern of messages shared by employees and managers, consisting of tangible interaction as well as intangible communication, for example the atmosphere created by nonverbal communication and soft furnishings in the workplace.

Marketing communication can be divided into product marketing communication and corporate image communication. Product marketing communication consists mainly of those forms of communication that support the sales of particular goods or services, and primarily targets the current and potential users of those goods or services. The success of a marketing communication campaign depends on the correct combination of the elements of the marketing mix - advertising, promotion, personal selling and publicity. The flow of marketing communication can be simple or complex, depending on the parties involved.

Corporate image communication refers to all types of communication directed at the stakeholder groups with whom the company has an interdependent relationship. Information on the total company is communicated to various target stakeholder groups, for example current and potential clients, the local community, the general public, government and labour unions. The ultimate aim of corporate communication is to create and maintain a favourable mental picture or impression of the enterprise with all its stakeholder groups. This picture of a company, as perceived by its stakeholder groups, is known as the corporate image.

Lakhani (1994:24) seriously doubted the validity of multicultural communication when he implicitly stated that it does not exist. He argued that to see multiculturalism as a barrier to effective communication in an organisation, is a myth used to obscure ineffective communication skills and a tradition of using communication to exclude instead of include people into an organisation's life. This impacts heavily on both management and marketing communications.

## **The role of culture in multicultural communication**

It is recognised that the word 'culture' is too elusive to define precisely. As early as 1952, a list of more than a hundred definitions of culture was published (Kroeber & Kluckhohn), accentuating the debate surrounding the concept of culture. Fitzgerald (1997:66) however, warns against the danger of misusing and abusing the culture concept. He points out that the word culture is too often used as a trendy substitute for more precise terms, "a sloppy confusion with race or class, even an occasional metaphorical leap to look-alikes that only partially fit any anthropological definition".

For purposes of this paper, culture refers to the way people understand reality or the world around them, based on the views of Hofstede (Victor, 1992) who views the essence of culture as the collective programming of the mind, and endorsed by Human (1995:9), who continues that according to this approach national

culture is the most important variable with which to understand the differences and similarities between people. Multiculturalism will be viewed as a conglomeration of existing cultures in the process of intertwining and ultimately integrating.

Multiculturalism has long been official policy in Australia. As Australia and South Africa are very different in terms of population make-up, formal recognition of cultural differences, as practised in Australia, may not work in South Africa (McAllister; 1990:72). Multiculturalism in Australia is an ideology that holds that cultural diversity is tolerated, valued and accommodated in society as well as business environments.

Previous research on the effect of cultural background on the response and memory of message content, culminate in a reader response theory which states clearly that meaning is not fixed in the text, but readers from diverse backgrounds will interpret and read differently (Machet, 1991:91). If the message content contains information that is not part of readers' culture, this leads to misinterpretation. It also affects recall, as information contrary to readers' value frameworks is not likely to be remembered accurately.

In this age of global marketing aided by transnational advertising, particularly via television, there are still geographical regions outside the reach of modern mass media. The interior of Papua New Guinea is one such region and Wokabaut Marketing is a local innovation designed to circumvent its media constraints (Thomas; 1996:77). Transnational advertising illustrates the variation in executional styles in different cultures. For example, European advertising avoids the direct-sell approach that is common in American culture. Italian-based retailer Benetton is widely known for using symbolic images in their advertising and has featured startling images like close-up photos of male and female genitalia, a black man's hand handcuffed to a white man's, and an AIDS patient and his family moments before his death (Lamb, Hair & McDaniel, 1998:508). Language barriers, translation problems and cultural differences have generated numerous headaches for international advertisers. Consider these examples:

- A toothpaste claiming to give users white teeth was especially inappropriate in many areas of South East Asia, where the well-to-do chew betel nuts, and black teeth are a sign of higher social status.
- Proctor & Gamble's Japanese advertising for Camay soap nearly devastated the product. In one commercial, a man meeting a woman for the first time immediately compared her skin to that of a fine porcelain doll. Although this ad had worked in other Asian countries, the man came across as rude and disrespectful in Japanese culture.
- Coca-Cola took out full-page ads in Greek newspapers to apologise for showing the Parthenon's white marble columns tapered like a Coke bottle. The

Greek culture has a high regard for their ancient temples, and the general secretary of the Greek Culture Ministry said, "Whoever insults the Parthenon insults Greece" (Lamb, Hair & McDaniel, 1998:113-114).

Scheibel (1995:4) points to the cultural barriers in international business communications due to the differing views of the role of woman in developed and developing countries around the world. He quotes the example of Kenia (Ferraro, 1994) where "the picture that emerges unquestionably shows women to be subordinate to men". He concludes that a multinational company faces a Hobson's choice in this regard, for accommodation of the traditional African views of woman will invariably lead to sex discrimination, whereas a policy that aims at treating the sexes with relative equality is likely to lead to personnel and communication problems due to cultural realities.

Strutton and Pelton (1997:27) state that the Chinese culture offers many insights that transcend Western business fundamentals. They developed culturally based guidelines for negotiating business conflict resolutions in China. These include the expansion of all forms of knowledge about China's history and culture, and the elimination of any misplaced cultural arrogance or ethnocentricity.

## **Barriers to multicultural business communication**

### **The absence of universal cultural norms**

International business negotiations face enormous cultural barriers, based on the lack of a universal set of cultural norms participating countries may adhere to. Cultural differences lead to misunderstanding and misrepresentation on business intentions aggravated by the effects of political uncertainties. Tittula (1991) concludes that although a certain amount of reciprocity in international business negotiations is taken for granted, the participants should orientate themselves to the conditions of mutual understanding, as inadequacy in displaying understanding can cause failure of intercultural business negotiations.

### **Barriers to gaining from experience**

In many developing countries, most businesses are of recent foundation, with no corporate memory from which to draw, while information drawn from experience elsewhere may be irrelevant. State intervention alters and distorts the rules of the business game. O'Shaunessy (1994) illustrates this view with his example of paternalistic care rather than financial incentive being the finest motivation for workers coming from tribal societies.

## **Differing time perceptions**

People in monochronic cultures usually follow a direct approach when communicating neutral or favourable information, and tend to fragment tasks into predetermined units of time that limit the length and depth of business communication. This indicates a linear time perception where time is regarded as a scarce resource and once gone it cannot be retrieved. By contrast, polychronic cultures view time as flexible. Limaye and Victor (1991) refer to a circular perception of time prevalent in many polychronic business cultures, which regards time as a renewable resource, not considered subject to waste. Consistent with this view, value systems and priorities develop that are not governed by the passage of time, resulting in misperceptions during business dealings.

## **Sociolinguistics**

Sociolinguistics involves the way dialects and accents are used to reinforce social roles within the cultural framework of a language (Victor, 1992:35). Sociolinguistic differences can affect multicultural business communication when a translator or interpreter is selected who is unable to adjust to the class level indicated by sociolinguistically determined accents and phrasing. This will inevitably lead to a businessman in a multicultural setting not fully comprehending what other parties in the communication and negotiating process easily interpret and accommodate.

## **Linguistic ethnocentrism**

According to Victor (1992:23), all people are subject to some degree of ethnocentrism, or the belief that their own culture is better than other cultures. Linguistic ethnocentrism is the belief in the superiority of one's native language to other tongues. For historical, social and political reasons, the members of certain cultures are more likely to take linguistic ethnocentrism more seriously than others (Victor, 1992:24). Economic power can also produce linguistic ethnocentrism.

## **Values and attitudes**

Different values and attitudes in the work environment may lead to miscommunication based on differences in meaning and perception. Because people perceive the same phenomenon in various ways, different people prescribe different meanings to the same stimulus. Victor (92:139) points out that the

greater the amount of knowledge, values and experience that people share, the greater the correlation in their communication and attitudes. Accommodating diverse values and attitudes becomes a comprehensive managerial process for developing a suitable corporate environment for all employees (De Beer, 1998:382).

## **Stereotypes and prejudice**

Stereotyping results when differences between people are oversimplified and categorical characteristics are artificially allocated to them. The three primary types of stereotyping that occur in the corporate world are based on age, race and gender. By contrast, the evaluation of a person on the basis of a single positive trait or experience represents the inverse of stereotyping (Puth, 1994:52). Prejudice occurs when feelings of fear, rage, uncertainty or mistrust may influence an employee's perception of his manager or supervisor, and this is often displayed in statements like 'My supervisor is prejudiced' (Du Plessis, 1996:106).

## **Cultural world view**

In low-context cultures, like the German culture, messages are conveyed in a direct verbal way, making it seem rude in the eyes of higher-context cultures, like the Japanese culture. For example, a sign in the German-speaking portion of Switzerland, was posted in three languages: German, English and French. In German the sign read 'Walking on the grass is forbidden'. The directness reflected the low context of German-speaking Switzerland. The English version read 'Please do not walk on the grass', indicating the increased importance of politeness among the more highly contexted English speakers. The final message read: 'Those who respect their environment will avoid walking on the grass'. This was the French version, presenting a softer version and a possible interpretation that an option for walking on the grass existed (Victor, 1992:156-157).

## **A South African survey**

### **Scope**

A pilot survey was undertaken in 1997 to ascertain the awareness and quality of business communication in selected multicultural corporations in one of the largest provinces in South Africa - the Western Cape, with Cape Town as its capital. A convenience sample of 20 institutions was selected, based on their

multicultural employee composite. The sample consisted of seven public or semi-public institutions, seven service companies and six manufacturers. A semi-structured questionnaire was used during on-site surveys by appointed interviewers. It covered communication between employees and management, existing internal and external communication methods, and the selection and prioritisation of target audiences for marketing communication. Personal interviews were conducted with three employees from different hierarchical levels in each respondent company.

## Results of the survey

### *Ranking of target audience*

The respondents were requested to rank the target stakeholder groups to whom their marketing communication efforts were directed, according to importance. The results for each respondent institution were combined and a weighing index implemented to calculate its ranking of stakeholder groups. The public institutions and the services sector placed current clients in the top position, while the manufacturing group selected their employees as the most important group to whom communication is directed. The results are set out in Table 1 and Figure 1.

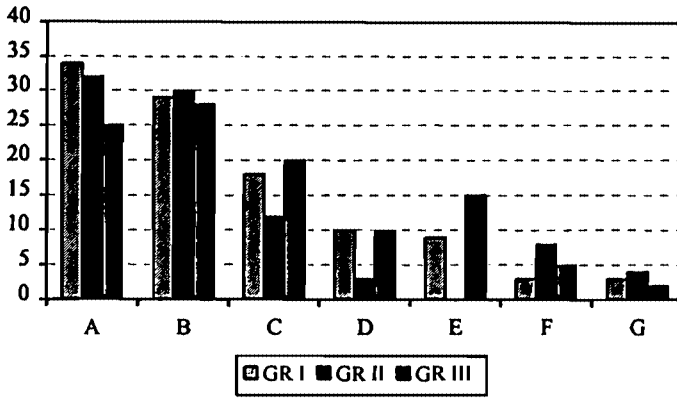
**Table 1**  
**Ranking of most important stakeholder groups**

STAKEHOLDER GROUP	GR I	GR II	GR III	TOTAL
A Current clients	34	32	25	91
B Employees	29	30	28	87
C Labour unions	18	12	20	50
D Financial stakeholders	10	3	10	23
E Suppliers	9	0	15	24
F Local community	3	8	5	16
G General public	3	4	2	9

Group I            7 respondent companies in financial services  
 Group II          7 respondent institutions in the public sector  
 Group III        6 respondent manufacturers  
 TOTAL            20 respondents



**Figure 1**  
**Target stakeholder groups to whom corporate communication is projected**



**Communication methods**

Respondents were requested to name the communication methods used to reach their two most important stakeholder groups. The companies in the financial services and the public sector made use of meetings as the most important method to reach current clients, while the total sector agreed on printed information as the most important method to reach employees. Methods used by the total respondent group to reach current clients were ranked as meetings; letters and memo's; telephonic and electronic contact; advertisements; press releases; and displays, while the methods used mostly by respondents to reach employees were ranked as printed information; audio-visual methods; memo's and letters; meetings; telephonic contact; and personal discussions.

**Different cultural perceptions**

For the purpose of surveying management communication in a multicultural enterprise in this survey, language was considered the only cultural dimension. In each organisation, respondents were selected as representative of the three main language groups of the Western Cape – Afrikaans, English and Xhosa – and interviewed on their perceptions of communicating strategies of the other groups. Perceptions of the respondents were grouped together and a profile of these language-based groupings emerged. The results are presented in Table 2. Group

A refers to Afrikaans-speaking, Group B to Xhosa-speaking and Group C to English-speaking employees.

**Table 2**  
**Perceptions of different culture groups**

<b>COMPONENT</b>	<b>GROUP A</b>	<b>GROUP B</b>	<b>GROUP C</b>
<b>KINESICS</b>	Walks briskly and tends to ignore fellow workers. Points a finger when talking. Has a serious facial expression.	Walks casually, smiles a lot, nods his head in greeting, or when he agrees. Casual dress. Tends to scratch the head when he does not understand, nods when he agrees.	Dresses with style, whether formal or informal.
<b>OCULESICS</b>	Looks his counterpart in the eyes when speaking to them.	Does not look superiors in the eye.	Retain eye contact during all discussions.
<b>HAPTICS</b>	Touches the Xhosa employee by handshakes and pat on the back.	Comfortable with touching, even holding hands. Handshake is longer and accompanied by left hand on elbow.	Firm handshaking. Few other spontaneous touches.
<b>PROXEMICS</b>	Seldom stands close to a Xhosa-speaking person.	Moves close to fellow-workers.	Maintain a distinct physical distance during meetings or discussions.
<b>PARALINGUISTIC</b>	A rough tone of voice. Speaks at a fast rate.	Speaks in low tones or stutters when under stress.	Speaks louder and clearer than Xhosa-speaking persons.
<b>PASSIVE NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION</b>	Smells of deodorants. Expects reports on time.	A flexible attitude towards time. Seldom wears deodorants.	Is meticulous on body odours. Regards punctuality as very important.

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## *Internal marketing*

In 75% of the corporations surveyed, an absence of corporate cultural norms was observed, leading to miscommunication by different cultural groups. In 25% of the corporations, traces of sociolinguistics were observed, mostly due to the Swartland regional bray. In only one case evidence of linguistic ethnocentrism was observed, partially caused by forced affirmative action programmes in the company. On average, 90% of financial resources allocated to internal management communication is spent on downward communication, while employees indicated a preference for upward communication and preferred face-to-face contact from their managers to any other technological communication method.

## **Recommendations**

- The success of internal marketing communication in a multicultural enterprise should be assessed not by measuring the communicating capacity of a target audience, but by the sensitivity of the communicator and the degree to which he has been able to rise above his ethnocentricity. For example, employees who are asked to fill in personal details should not be required to state a 'Christian name' or to answer 'if married, how many children?' as many employees may not be Christians and may subscribe to a culture that accepts children out of wedlock as appropriate behaviour.
- **Accommodate different cultural values:** Verbal communication forms only a portion of the communication that goes on in every business situation. Far more important are the silent, nonverbal communications that are unconsciously transmitted. An endless number of nonverbal cues, which are often too subtle to be conscious, may communicate more than words. These cues are projected and perceived differently by various cultural groupings. In some cases the lack of reception of silent cues complicates operations in multicultural manufacturing companies. Consequently, it is essential that a thorough understanding of different cultural values and communication styles in one organisation be constantly developed.
- **In-house training:** Multicultural aspects of management communication should be integrated into in-house workshops and training curricula. A stimulating way of doing this is to build hexaflexagons in a foreign culture. Participants are assigned one of three roles. The first role is that of international experts hired to train the citizen force of Izimto, an intensely private and collectivist society with cultural customs unknown to outsiders. The experts must train the Izimtotians to manufacture a highly valued product

called a Hexaflexagon (Morris; 1997:49). The second group of participants plays the role of the Izimtotians who undergo the training, and the third group of participants serves as anthropologists conducting research on the customs of the Izimtotians. Difficulties in coping with cultural differences are revealed as the international experts attempt to train the Izimtotians in the construction of the Hexaflexagons. Because the exercise involves a mythical culture and hypothetical training task, it can be effectively utilised to develop a perceptual sensitivity towards cultural differences in a variety of instructional settings.

- **Reaching internal stakeholders:** To reach a target audience effectively, the communication method for every stakeholder group of a company must be selected carefully. In multicultural organisations, where illiterate employees form part of the staff, regular personal contact becomes important. A valuable contemporary communication tool is industrial theatre, where professional actors convey the cultural and corporate values to different sections of employees. The message is aimed at each specific culture group in an appropriate, stimulating and interactive way.
- **An integrated multimedia approach:** Reaching external stakeholder groups will entail prior knowledge of their information and communication needs, of their environment as well as cultural concepts that support each environment. An integrated multimedia approach will ensure that messages reach the maximum number of intended recipients. Live theatre used previously in community development communications can be adapted to promote consumer products to rural markets very successfully. The question arises, however, if this is in effect in tune with the country's socio-cultural context and will meet the real needs of the specific region in the long run. According to Mukasa (1996:11), the multimedia approach should go beyond the traditional media of radio, TV, newspapers and magazines, and should include theatre, dance, songs, poetry and other forms of expression.

## Conclusions

It seems that it is not the behaviour of people from different cultures that impedes effective behaviour, but their faulty interpretation. Behaviour patterns of black persons sitting down without being asked, or of their strong handshake being too aggressive, does not impede effective communication. The barrier lies in the faulty interpretation of these actions because of a lack of awareness and understanding.

In this paper the preliminary results of a research project in progress are provided. The pilot survey indicated the need for extensive further research in multicultural

internal and external marketing communication in South Africa. It is envisaged that the cross-sectional approach of this research project will be complemented by longitudinal projects in the near future. Because of the preliminary nature of the research results at this point in time, no specific measures of analysis, validation, etc. are provided here.

In any intercultural business exchange it is advisable to learn as much as possible of the other cultures - in a multicultural business environment, knowledge of the different cultural customs and interpretations becomes imperative. Multicultural business communication is in a continuing state of evolution and improvement. As the need for multicultural business communication research and implementation in a turbulent and dynamic Southern Africa increases, effective techniques and strategies will undoubtedly be needed - and developed.

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